

How to

Assess Writers' Notebooks



Writers' notebooks are like snowflakes—no two are exactly alike. This fact sometimes makes teachers and administrators uncomfortable—how can you assess notebooks if they are as varied as the students who create them?

Keeping the following fundamentals of notebooks in mind, you can create a rubric to evaluate notebooks during each unit of study. Teachers may wish to pay special attention to writers' notebooks during the launch unit, as this unit sets classroom expectations and establishes writerly habits that will inform the rest of the year.

Variety

Notebooks are containers for writers' thinking, and the most productive thinking is often non-linear, even "messy." Writers' notebooks are not overly organized; they contain a mixture of ideas and styles. Entries will vary in length, subject matter and/or level of development. Even though we may see "writing territories" or themes that frequently recur, the entries will be different from one another, evidence that the writer is working through his ideas, making sense of something, figuring out what he has to say.

We may find personal stories, photographs or drawings, newspaper headlines, odd facts, quotes from published texts, questions or wonderings, lists, "fast writes," reflections or artifacts that have inspired the writer's thinking. Some entries should be try-its from whole class mini-lessons or individual conferences, and some should be wholly student-created, evidence that the student is thinking about her writing

projects outside of the class' designated workshop time.

Volume

Notebook pages are full, even though the length of the entries will vary. Writing will even spill into margins. Since white space is minimal, there may be multiple entries on one page separated only by date or ink color. But you'll find some very long, multi-page entries, too.

There should be no blank pages between entries, and no pages will be torn out. Work may be taped inside, adding to the notebook's bulk. There will be multiple entries about the same topic or that support the same project -- again, evidence that the writer is thinking deeply about the subject matter, perhaps even allowing it to "percolate." Entries such as fast writes or brainstormed lists may wander off topic, but in time, entries should move beyond superficial responses to questions and read like a natural progression of thoughts or a conversation. There should be evidence of increasing

stamina -- a growing ability to write for many pages on a single topic in one sitting.

Care & Maintenance

Notebooks should be used frequently and, as a result, can show increased wear and tear as the year progresses. Successful writers make needed repairs to keep the notebook functional--using packing tape or duct tape to fix broken spines or reattach personalized decor to the covers, for example.

Notebooks are reserved for thinking about writing projects, not a place to take notes for history class or practice math problems. Again, no pages are torn out. Students may continue to personalize notebooks as the year progresses, adding photos, drawings, stickers, quotes or other appropriate "flair" to the covers. Writers may be allowed -- perhaps even encouraged -- to take their notebooks home to collect writing ideas whenever and wherever they come to mind, but writers must also recognize

the importance of having their notebooks with them at every class meeting; notebooks can't go home and stay at home.

Identity & Reflection

Notebooks should also contain evidence that the writer is thinking about her own emerging writing process. You may find quotes from favorite mentor authors, quotes about the writing process that resonate with the notebook's owner. There may be entries in which the writer lists his own strengths and weaknesses, sets goals for himself or plans for future story ideas. A writer may pause and reflect, in writing, on a recently completed project --what challenges arose in creating it and how he overcame them, perhaps even ruminating about what he still hasn't quite figured out.

A Tool for Teachers

Students write in their notebooks every day in writing workshop, so notebooks are a great tool for assessing student progress. But notebooks are also a great way for teachers to assess their own *teaching*.

For example, if you notice that students are not demonstrating



increased stamina for writing -- that is, perhaps, their entries are just a few sentences long even after several units of study -- you can begin to think about how you might support them differently in achieving this goal. Do you need to protect writing workshop time to be sure they are getting practice daily? Do you need to shorten your mini-lessons so that students get at least twenty-five minutes of uninterrupted writing time? Do you need to show students more of your own notebook entries to demonstrate

what kinds of things they might think and write about? Do you need to teach a mini-lesson on elaborating?

As containers for writers' thinking, notebooks are valuable tools that *not only* help writers develop their texts *but also* help teachers see how to support writers' growth.

ABOUT US

The Indiana Partnership for Young Writers, a program of the Butler University College of Education, provides ongoing and in-depth professional development in the teaching of reading and writing to teachers in grades K-8. The Partnership is committed to inquiry-based workshop teaching that sustains students' lifelong academic and workplace success.

Learn more at www.indianayoungwriters.org.

