

Julie's 5 most frequently used Notebook Strategies

By Julie Patterson

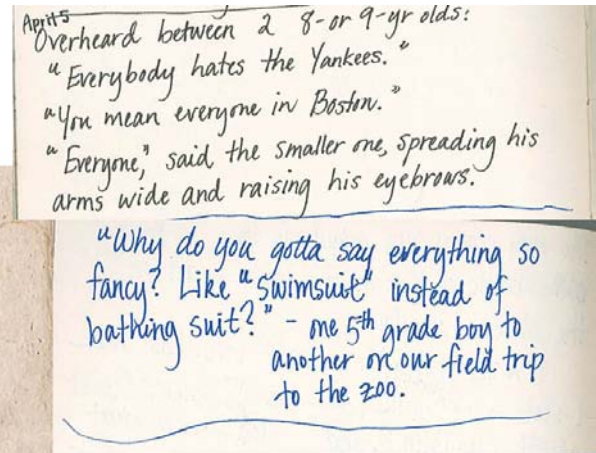
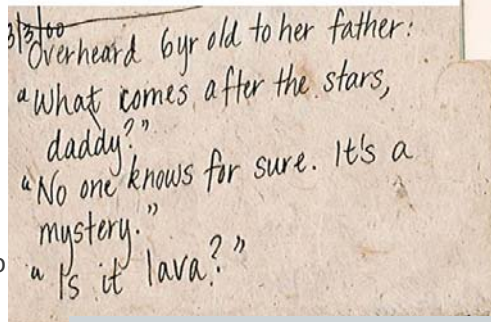
People always ask, "How do you come up with ideas for writing?" So I analyzed my writer's notebook and identified my most frequently used strategies for recording, nurturing and thinking about story content. Here's what I found:

1. Photographs

I've long thought of (and talked about) my writing as snapshots of my life and thinking, so it is no surprise to find actual snapshots—and writing about them—in my writer's notebook. I choose photos that have significance to me: my brother, sister and I collecting seashells along Daytona Beach or the view from the dock at our lake cabin as my husband fishes at sunrise. Typically, the writing about these pictures in my notebook begins with a literal physical description of what I see. As my pen keeps moving, the text sometimes grows more abstract and begins to include details not visible in the original photograph. In this way, these notebook entries help jog my memory and reveal "story worthy" material.



A photograph of the author's grandmother as a young mother (this one reappears twice in the author's notebooks, a clue she hasn't yet figured out what she has to say about it).



Examples of dialogue the author overheard and recorded in her notebook.

2. Eavesdropping

My notebooks are peppered with short entries of dialogue (sometimes just one line!) that I've overheard in public. Sometimes I've recorded these because they help me identify stories or topics that might resonate with readers (like the young woman I heard telling a business colleague, "I'm 28. I'm losing market value. I've got to date more often.") And sometimes I'm just trying to capture the "sound" of a potential character (like the 4-year-old who asked her mom, "Who's those weird noises, mommy?")

I love using dialogue in stories because it accomplishes much in a small space, helping develop characters *and* move a story forward at the same time. So of course my notebook reflects this love. I'm collecting ten times as much dialogue as I will likely ever use!

Julie Patterson is writer-in-residence at the Indiana Partnership for Young Writers. You can follow her blog at www.juliepatterson-writer.com.

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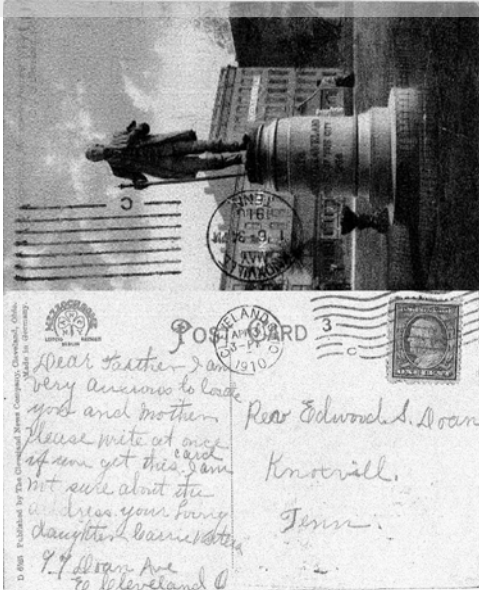
3. Close observation

These entries are much like my writing about photographs, except instead of studying a picture, I'm looking at the real thing as I write.

Generally, I closely observe and record anything that strikes my curiosity. I once wrote a 4-page entry about a woman who walked into a diner wearing a "Wife of the Year" t-shirt. I described the t-shirt for ½ a page, described the woman wearing it for another 1 ½ pages, then spent 2 more pages speculating about who'd given her the shirt and why.

My close observations are not always objects. Sometimes they are scenes I witness that I want to think more about. Once I saw a blind man's walking stick abandoned, stashed between newspaper stands on a busy city street. In my notebook, I wrote a short description of the stick, how it was propped against the blue and white *Boston Globe* stand with no one around.

An antique postcard that piqued the author's interest. The person writing this card isn't sure where her father and mother live. "I'm anxious to locate you," it says.



I included a couple of questions that puzzled me about the sight: Why was it there? What happened to the owner? Was he kidnapped? Or was he only *pretending* to be blind?

Another entry is about a homeless man feeding the pigeons a loaf of bread in a dilapidated housing complex. Again, the entry begins with exactly what I saw but then goes on to include all the questions it aroused in me. Did this man see his act as charity? Did he feel a kinship to the hungry pigeons that most city-dwellers despise or did he feel superior to them? Was this feeding somehow an act of communion, a gesture of faith?

As soon as I saw each of these vignettes, I knew I had to get the details scribbled in my notebook so I wouldn't forget. These are moments I want to revisit, to think more about. They're likely to feed different genres of work, the "Wife of the Year" or the blind man imposter may become characters in a work of fiction some day, while the man feeding the pigeons is likely to be fodder for a personal essay about my own feelings about charity, poverty and/or faith.

4. "I remember..." fast writes

I need to write a lot to figure out what I want to write *about*. So I have lots of "fast writes" in my notebook. These are like brain dumping sessions. I set a kitchen timer and write as fast as I can, without picking up my pen, for 15 or 20 minutes (I used to do just 5 or 10, but as my stamina for writing has grown, so has my fast write interval). I notice that lots of these entries begin with "I remember..." and then go off on ten different tangents. Fast writes almost never remain on topic; they go wherever my brain goes. I found a few that start with variations like "What I can't remember is..." or "I wish I could remember..." These entries, I know, are influenced by my frequent re-reading of Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones*, a great resource that many writers keep within reach of their writing desks. What all these fast writes have in common is that generally, by the time I reach the last sentence or two, I've uncovered something truly worth saying that I didn't even know I thought.

5. Curiosities

Just like a little boy who stuffs things that pique his interest into his jeans pockets (acorns, shiny pebbles, a frog), I stuff curiosities into my writer's notebook: greeting cards, notes from other writers, fortune cookie sayings, comics, newspaper headlines, advertisements, seed packets, bumper stickers, prayer cards, antique postcards, napkins, maps (published or hand-drawn). I found one or more of each of these things in my notebooks. Few of these artifacts have appeared in any recognizable form in texts that I've written for publication, but I know they are important components of my writerly life. They feed my curiosity, and curiosity—wanting to understand things more deeply—is what writing is all about!

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Map of the author's childhood home with potential stories identified.

