

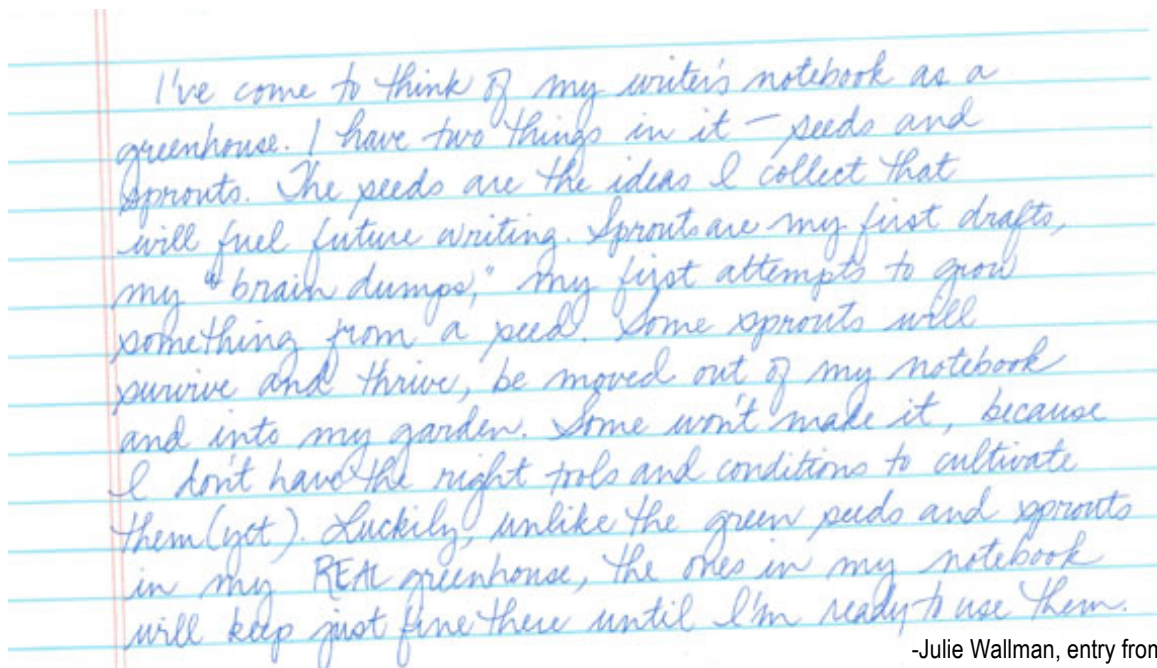
Introduction to Writing Notebooks

A writer's notebook is like that ditch—an empty space you dig in your busy life, a space that will fill up with all sorts of fascinating little creatures... You'll be amazed by what you catch there...

What is a writer's notebook anyway? Let's start by talking about what it is not. A writer's notebook is not a diary: "Today it is raining. We have a substitute teacher named Miss Pamapnella. She seems very nice. We are going to have gym right before lunch." It's not a reading journal in which your teacher tells you to summarize the main idea of a book, or write a letter to a character. A writer's notebook is different from any journal you've ever kept before...

A writer's notebook gives you a place to live like a writer, not just in school during writing time, but wherever you are, at any time of day.

- Ralph Fletcher, *A Writer's Notebook: Unlocking the Writer Within You*



I've come to think of my writer's notebook as a greenhouse. I have two things in it - seeds and sprouts. The seeds are the ideas I collect that will fuel future writing. Sprouts are my first drafts, my "brain dumps," my first attempts to grow something from a seed. Some sprouts will survive and thrive, be moved out of my notebook and into my garden. Some won't make it, because I don't have the right tools and conditions to cultivate them (yet). Luckily, unlike the green seeds and sprouts in my REAL greenhouse, the ones in my notebook will keep just fine there until I'm ready to use them.

-Julie Wallman, entry from her writer's notebook

Collecting Seeds

A seed is any small snippet or memento that inspires you, something you think you can write a lot about when you have more time. Seeds are quick snapshots of things you want to remember (or *can't* forget, no matter how hard you try).

Cultivating Sprouts (aka Nurturing a Seed Idea)

Sprouts are typically longer entries, more detailed. Sprouts are "thinking on paper," perhaps more deliberate and intense thinking about an earlier seed entry.

There's a fine line between seeds and sprouts, ideas and beginnings, and most professional writers would group them all together as "notebook entries."

What to put in your writer's notebook: Strategies for Collecting and Cultivating Ideas

- Record snippets of conversations you overhear between strangers.
- Gather family photographs and photographs of places important to you.
- Save take-out menus, napkins with logos, matchbooks from restaurants, hotels, etc.
- Make very close observations of everyday things.
- Gather family recipes (and list the occasions and other foods you eat/ate with them)
- Write down quotations that intrigue you from music, movies, books, etc.
- Look through a telephone book and mix and match first and last names to create potential character names. List them in your notebook.
- Gather paint swatches with names you like and/or colors that remind you of something specific you've seen. Tape them in your notebook.
- Jot down the rules and procedures of a game you played when you were a kid.
- Gather old letters, postcards, birthday cards, Christmas cards...ones actually sent to you or ones belonging to strangers that you scavenge at antique stores and flea markets.
- Make timelines (real or fictional).
- Record plot ideas inspired by news stories.
- Sketch people, places, things.
- Write down family stories (yours or anyone else's) that you never want to forget.
- Describe anything you wish you had taken a photograph of but didn't/couldn't.
- List interesting facts or statistics that you stumble upon (or know by heart).
- List potential titles, even (especially) if you have no idea what story goes with them.
- Jot down notes about a dream that scared or puzzled you.
- Gather maps (published) or draw your own.
- Go someplace that your character would go and behave like him/her. What would he notice? How would she react? What would he/she order off the menu?
- Do a "fast write," dumping all of your thoughts, reflections, reactions to your seed idea in your notebook as an egg timer ticks away.
- Go on an observation walk or sit quietly someplace. Write what you hear, see, smell, taste and feel. Write whatever happens.
- People watch. Draw conclusions about someone based on what they do, say, wear, carry with them, etc. Imagine the smallest details of their lives.
- Eavesdrop. What is each person thinking that he/she is not saying to the other?
- Make a big list of things you remember or things you don't remember. Things you're good at. Things you're not good at. Things you know. Things you don't know.
- Interview someone who plays a key role in your story or a relevant expert.
- Do "character research" like an actor would...learn a skill that your character already knows, shadow someone with same career as your character.
- Think like a detective as you live your everyday life. What happened just before you entered? Who was there before you?

Sources: Calkins, L. (1994). *The Art of Teaching Writing*. Heinemann; Fletcher, R. (1996) *A Writer's Notebook*. HarperTrophy; Grant, S. (2007) *Notebook Know-How*. Indiana Partnership for Young Writers Summer Institute; Ray & Laminack (2001) *The Writing Workshop*. NCTE

"Everybody walks past a thousand story ideas every day. The good writers are the ones who see five or six of them. Most people don't see any." – Orson Scott Card