

Writer's Notebooks



The following excerpts have been taken from Ralph Fletcher's book titled *A Writer's Notebook – Unlocking the Writer Within You*. It's a terrific explanation of exactly what your WNB entries should (and shouldn't) be.

What is a writer's notebook, anyway? Let's start by talking about what it's not. A writer's notebook is not a diary. "Today it is raining. We have a substitute teacher named Miss Pamela. She seems very nice. We are going to have gym right before lunch." It is 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.

Writers are pretty ordinary people. They have favorite songs, favorite movies, favorite TV shows. Writers have Evil Big Sisters (and, occasionally, sweet ones). They get good or not so good grades, take vacations, paint their houses...

Writers are like other people, except for at least one important difference. Other people have daily thoughts and feelings, noticed this sky or that smell, but they don't do much about it. All those thoughts, feelings, sensations, and opinions pass through them like the air they breathe.

Not writers. Writers react. And writers need a place to record those reactions.

That's what a writer's notebook is for. It gives you a place to write down what makes you angry or sad or amazed, to write down what you noticed and don't want to forget, to record exactly what your grandmother whispered in your ear before she said goodbye for the last time.

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.

In his book, Mr. Fletcher has developed twelve different response types (we'll only use eight of them). Once you are comfortable with his various response types, perhaps you can invent and explore some types of your own.

In the paragraphs that follow, I have listed the different response types and explained a little about each one. A great deal of this text was taken directly from Mr. Fletcher's book.

ONE – UNFORGETTABLE STORIES

This response is exactly what its title suggests. To write a response of this nature you need to constantly be on the lookout for stories that move you as a person. What's interesting is that a story that moves one writer may leave another writer feeling nothing at all. One example from Mr. Fletcher's book illustrates this type of response really nicely:

October 18

Jerry Kelly told me something he heard from a young white teacher who works in an all-black school in East Harlem, New York. On Friday, the day of the Los Angeles riots, her students were afraid for her safety. After school they made a circle around her, walked her from the school to a safe place, and stayed there until she could get a taxi.

Look for stories that inspire you, fascinate you, fill you with wonder, anger you, disgust you, or make you laugh out loud.

TWO – FIERCE WONDERINGS

It's important to pay attention to what haunts you, what images or memories keep running around in your mind even when you try not to think about them. Mr. Fletcher gave an example from his childhood. His mother warned him not to swim in a certain pond – she told him it was *bottomless*. The idea of anything going on and on forever really stuck in his mind and made him wonder what it would be like if something truly had no end to it. This kind of writing often deals with grand, open-ended questions that have no easy answers. Fierce wonderings are ideas that are on your mind when you are daydreaming or when you wake up in the middle of the night. They are the questions that nag at you in the last moments before you fall asleep – the big questions that are hard to think about for too long a time because they will give you a headache! **With this kind of entry, it's important to know that you don't just list one question after another without thinking about possible answers to those questions. If you pose a question in your entry, stick with it and develop some answers to share with us.**

THREE – WRITING SMALL

This response type requires you to write down the important little details that you notice about a situation. Look at the following example from Mr. Fletcher's book. A fifth-grade student wrote the following entry in his writer's notebook:

"Cape Cod is the best! I had tons of fun there and I can't wait to go back!"

We definitely get the idea that this kid loved Cape Cod. But this entry was not specific enough to give us an image in our heads. Mr. Fletcher asked the student to be more specific and to *write small*, including all of the little details that make Cape Cod special to him. His next effort looked much better:

“Most nights we ate dinner right on the beach. We’d stay up late and I’d fall asleep still wearing my bathing suit. In the morning the first thing I felt when I woke up was my cat licking the salt off the soles of my feet.”

Notice how this second effort puts a sharp and funny image in our minds. Writing small adds the details to a scene that make that scene come to life. And finally, one last example from Mr. Fletcher’s book is a great example of writing a small:

October 2

Bonnie told me a story: I taught for twelve years on the island of Guam in the South Pacific. Every year around the first of November a box would arrive in the mail. It always felt light as a feather when I picked it up, but I knew what it was: leaves. Colored autumn leaves. My sister, who lived in Pittsburgh, used to send me a box of lovely fall leaves every year. I opened the box, dumped them out, and spread those leaves all over the living room. They looked so beautiful, and then I’d start to cry.

When you “write small”, **you are telling the reader a little story** (beginning, middle, and end) that has a lot of really specific detail. This one looks a lot like a “mind picture”, but there is a difference. Writing small is a complete story. A “mind picture” is a snapshot, a single frame of a movie, a still moment that you’re describing using a ton of detail. Mind pictures are not complete stories.

FOUR – SEED IDEAS

In his book, Mr. Fletcher compares ideas for new writing to fragile chicken eggs. He explains that unprotected chicken eggs will be destroyed unless they are placed in an incubator, a safe, warm place where they can develop until they turn into chicks. A writer’s notebook can be used in the same way. If you get an idea for a piece of writing, whether it’s a poem, a short story, a play, or a novel, you can write that idea down in your writer’s notebook and keep it for later. Sometimes these seed ideas will turn into a piece of writing and sometimes they won’t. It’s good to get in the habit of saving those little flashes of inspiration before they disappear.

FIVE – MIND PICTURES

I will let Mr. Fletcher describe this particular entry since he does it so well:

Pay attention to your world. Wherever you are, at all hours of the day, try to drink in the world through your five senses, all of which are incredibly important tools for a writer. And when something strikes you that you want to remember, make time to scribble at least a quick description of it in your notebook.

Step one: Pay attention. Be ready. Keep your senses peeled.

Step two: Write down what you notice before you forget.

Step three: Later, go back and reread your entry to see if you might want to write more about it.

Mr. Fletcher described a white VW bug that was overturned on the side of the road and that was so overgrown with weeds and vines that he hadn't noticed it even though he'd walked past it about forty or fifty times on his daily walk! To him, the vehicle looked like an unlucky beetle that had been flipped onto its back and didn't know how to right itself. This entry goes hand in hand with *writing small*. The key point to this entry? Be alert...opportunities for WNB entries surround you 24 / 7. *Seize those opportunities!* Remember, writing small is a *complete story* and a mind picture is a snapshot or a postcard. There is no story – just rich description.

SIX – SNATCHES OF TALK

Writers are fascinated by talk, obsessed with what people say and how they say it, how they interrupt themselves, the words they repeat, the way they pronounce or mispronounce certain words. The way we talk says a ton about who we are. My notebooks are filled with dialogue: snatches of talk or arguments between strangers, relatives, and friends:

Mom describing a restaurant: The place was so clean you could've eaten off the floor.

My brother Tom putting tons of black pepper on his scrambled eggs: I want it to look like a coal miner sneezed on it!

Try this. Go to a public place and sit quietly. After a few minutes, people will ignore you and start talking again as if you're not there. Listen. Listen to the cadences of ordinary talk, the rhythms of everyday speech. Later you can write down any memorable lines you heard.

SEVEN – MEMORIES

Memories just may be the most important possession any writer has. As much as anything else, our memories shape what we write. Memories are like a fountain no writer can live without. I believe that my best writing springs from that fountain.

Memories can often be the springboard to writing. When you are recalling memories, definitely try to remember the emotions attached to those memories. If you are having trouble recalling a memory, Mr. Fletcher suggests describing the *place* connected to the memory. Sometimes having the setting in mind can help bring more of the memory into the light.

EIGHT – WRITING THAT SCRAPES THE HEART

This might be the most difficult type of entry to write. The reason it's so difficult is because this kind of writing is unflinchingly honest. It often gets into topics that can be quite personal and uncomfortable to explore. Since I will be looking at these entries, you should only write about topics that you want to share with me. If you have something very personal that you would like to explore on your own, it would be a very good idea to have another separate journal in which you keep the private details of your life. Writing like this can be good for your soul – it can free trapped feelings.

You can use your writer's notebook to write a letter to anyone, even if it is a letter you will not – or cannot – send. Billy Krause, a fourth grader, wrote the following letter in his notebook:

Dear Dad,

Why did you leave? You said that mom asked you to leave, but she said you just left.

Where are you right now? I'd send you this letter but I don't know where you are. I

don't know whether to like you or not. I don't know who to believe. I don't trust anyone

anymore. I thought you were good to us. But now I'm wondering. If mom asked you to

leave I know why. Because you never leave money in the bank. Right now was the worst

time to leave.

Powerful stuff. You can see why this kind of notebook writing might be a little scary.

It's important to note here that even though this particular entry is written in the form of a letter, these entries do not typically take that form. Ninety-five percent of the time they are written in standard paragraph form. This writer was inspired to talk to someone, but you're not supposed to use a letter as a recipe or typical format for this kind of writing.

NINE – IN THE NEWS

Part of taking in the world around you is staying current with what's happening in the news. Because we are the most technologically advanced civilization ever, we are bombarded daily with news events. Scan the news for inspiring stories that could be used as a springboard to a story. Medical advances, scientific breakthroughs and events, big pop culture moments, countries and their dealings with one another...there are thousands of possible ideas floating around the Internet each day. Look at those ideas and pose the question *what if?* What if...two very powerful words for writers!

TEN – WRITING THAT INSPIRES

Just like it sounds, this entry is all about finding and writing down passages that inspire you. By reading and thinking about writing that is of excellent quality, you'll help raise the quality of your own writing. I could almost copy every line of every Billy Collins poem that I've read because that man is a genius! But I love many novelists as well. Below is a passage from Frank Herbert's *Dune*:

The sun dipped lower. Shadows stretched across the salt pan. Lines of wild color spread over the sunset horizon. Color streamed into a toe of darkness testing the sand. Coal-colored shadows spread, and the thick collapse of night blotted the desert. Stars!

I love that passage! A toe of darkness testing the sand? Brilliant! And Frank Herbert does this throughout the entire novel. It's an amazing science fiction story. Any time you come across writing that makes you jealous, copy it into your writer's notebook. Be sure to record the author's name and the name of the book! 😊

ELEVEN – POETRY

If you have a penchant for poetry, this is your place to formally explore it. Because I write poetry so often, I tend to look at things through that lens. Sometimes it just comes as a mind picture, but other times, poems come to me almost fully formed. I love those days. These do still have to conform to the 100-word limit! If the poem itself is only seventy-five words long, then be sure to include at least 25 words of explanation to tell me about where the poem came from. Your best bet? Don't count words. Write until the poem is done. If you want to include an explanation, please add one. I love to see what inspires writers. If you don't want to include one, you don't need to.

Check out this amazing little poem by one of my heroes – Billy Collins:

China

I am an ant inside a blue bowl
on the table of a cruel prince.

Battle plans are being discussed.
Much rice wine is poured.

But even when he angers
and drives a long knife into the table,

I continue to circle the bowl,
hand-painted with oranges and green vines.

TWELVE – CREATE YOUR OWN TOPIC

Once you get good at writing WNBs, you might get to the point where you have a subject that you'd like to write about but it doesn't seem like there is a category that fits your idea. That is where this response type comes in! You can create your own category. BUT, BEFORE YOU CREATE YOUR OWN CATEGORY, YOU HAVE TO RUN IT PAST ME AND GET IT APPROVED. I just want to make sure that your idea doesn't already match one of the categories described above and that it is a topic worth writing about.