



Writer's Notebook: A Place to Dream, Wonder, and Explore

Between the Ideal and the Real World of Teaching

Ideas for the Classroom from the NCTE Elementary Section
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The Writer's Notebook

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I always tell kids that the most important book I've written is one that will never be published: my writer's notebook. As the TV commercial used to say, I don't leave home without it! But the notebook has relevance for students, too. In this issue we look at practical ways you can bring this exciting idea to young writers. The writer's notebook provides conditions that are necessary for students to grow into strong writers.

A Place to Live the Writing Life

When we teach the language arts, we aren't satisfied with reading and writing as mere frills or adornments. We want reading and writing to become an integral part of our kids' lives. It's great when our kids read during reading time, but it's not enough. We want them to be reading all the time.

The same thing is true for writing. It's not enough for kids to be writing once a day. We want them to see themselves as writers. The writer's notebook can make this happen. A student who keeps a notebook can begin to live like a writer—noticing, paying attention, listening, collecting, musing, wondering, playing with language, taking

pleasure in her own words. And because the notebook is portable, it encourages kids to write not just during the workshop but at all hours of the day.

A Place to React

"Writers react," Don Murray says in his article "The Writer's Habits." This is important. Many of our students adopt a passive stance toward their learning. No wonder they do—curriculum often feels like a one-way conversation to these students. The writer's notebook nudges students to become more active learners. It gives them a place to react to their world, to make that all-important personal connection. And the notebook provides a safe place—no grades, no one correcting their grammar.

A Place to Experiment

Our writers need to write for a specific purpose. But they will also grow by fooling around with ideas, words, images, phrases. I believe that this kind of language play is crucial. Unfortunately, it is being squeezed out of the school day by high-stakes tests and curriculum mandates. As writing-for-the-fun-of-it becomes an

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endangered species, the writer's notebook becomes that much more valuable.

The writer's notebook gives kids a place where they can enjoy language for its own sake. One student began a list of favorite words in his notebook—*hanky panky, gobbledygook, nincompoop*. Another child discovered that no word exists for the space between thumb and forefinger, so she invented a new word! She found this to be so much fun that she created a list in her notebook of other words she invented.

My notebook has an Adrienne Rich poem about a swan; the piece is shaped like a swan and its reflection in the water. The idea of the poem, and its execution, is breathtaking. It inspires me.

The writer's notebook is not a new idea. Writers have been scribbling notes and sketching in day-books for hundreds of years. And it's important to remember that the writer's notebook is nothing more than blank pages bound together. But with your guidance, and through your own example, these blank pages have enormous potential to spark young writers. Listen to this poem by John Mihaltses, a fifth grader from Long Island, New York.

It's a Place

Why am I keeping this notebook?

Because it's a place where I can keep track of my life.

It's a place where I can observe closely

And where I can store little pieces of strength.

It's a place where I can keep the elements of Life

(lightning, fire, ice, time and space) and Writing

(poetry, words, eyes).

It's a place where tales weave.

All in all

It's a place for ME.

