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
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 daybooks 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.

On the first day of school in September, my students are excited and a little unsure about how they will use their notebooks. They want to know if I will tell them what to write, if their writing will be graded, and “does spelling count?” I explain that they are in control of what goes into their notebooks and that only published writing will be graded. Spelling is important, but shouldn’t keep them from writing freely and using hard-to-spell words. I explain that they will learn ways to edit their work so that readers will be able to read it with ease, and that when writing “comes out of the notebook” it will need to be carefully polished. They happily decorate their notebook covers and listen as I talk to them about collecting ideas, researching questions, and capturing moments.

I see excitement in some eyes, skepticism in others, and I realize that for notebooks to take hold in my classroom, I’ve got to be committed to them. I’ve got to get kids thinking, wondering, observing, and caring deeply about expressing their ideas. And I’ve got to dedicate the precious time it takes to let them do it.

When kids begin writing, I move among them, listening as they read entries to me, asking questions, naming techniques they may have used, and noticing entries that can serve as models for others. Most students are happy to allow me to make overheads of their entries to share with classmates. In this way, my students enrich each other’s notebook writing.

There are many ways to promote variety and foster creativity in the writer’s notebook. Try having students write after sketching, bringing in an important object from their own lives, or taping a photograph, picture, quote or article into their notebooks. Teach them to create lists, conduct interviews, and observe closely.

If some of my students are dealing with writer’s block and need help gathering ideas, I might conduct an activity using prompts like “My favorite per-

pass the cards and repeat the process. These quick-writes are fun and provide students with “seed ideas” to return to at other times.

Eventually, my students are given a homework assignment. They read carefully through their notebooks, looking for an entry that feels important or interesting enough to become their first writing project. Next, I begin to teach them strategies to help them stretch or extend their writing and thinking. One such strategy is called “lifting a line.” The writer selects a line from the chosen entry and writes it at the top of a clean