

# THE HONORS COLLEGE Oklahoma State University

This page must be filed with The Honors College Office along with a copy of the Senior Honors Thesis [Report] and a one-page abstract of findings. The deadline for filing is the day before grades are reported for the applicable semester or summer session.

This is to certify that the Senior Honors Thesis [Report] of

McCall Wilson  
Name

Education  
Undergraduate College Awarding Student's Degree

Secondary Education - English  
Major Department for Thesis [Report]

Fall 2013  
Semester and Year

has been examined by the faculty members whose signatures appear below and has been found acceptable for the senior creative component in the department specified above for the Departmental [College] Honors Award.

12/5/2013  
Date of Successful Oral Defense

12/5/2013  
Date of Public Presentation

[Signature]  
Thesis/Report Director Signature

[Signature]  
Second Faculty Reader Signature

[Signature]  
College Honors Program Director Signature

12-11-13  
Date Thesis [Report] Filed with  
The Honors College Office

Oklahoma State University

**Implementing a Writer's Notebook into the Secondary Classroom**

*"Don't be afraid to live like a writer. Writers explore. There are two whole universes for you to explore-the one on the inside, and the physical one on the outside. Take your choice; inner or outer. Or best: both."*

*-Ralph Fletcher*

McCall Wilson

Honors Thesis

5 December 2013

I. Introducing the Notebook

II. Implementing the Notebook

III. Using the Notebook as a Transition into Formal Writing

IV. Assessing the Notebook

V. Final Thoughts

## Abstract

### **Implementing a Writer's Notebook into the Secondary Classroom**

Student: McCall Wilson

Major: Secondary Education English

Year: Fall 2013

Implementing a journal, or writer's notebook, into the Secondary Classroom is more beneficial now than ever. A writer's notebook is an academic journal that bridges the gap between formal and informal writing. Common Core Standards demand more writing, and writer's notebooks can help students become more comfortable with the wide variety and different stages of writing. The notebook helps students practice writing while also building their writing confidence and sense of class cohesion. It also prevents teachers from doing too much of the work for their students, and allows for the stimulation of several different types of learning intelligences. Becoming a better writer makes students better readers, and the notebook has the ability to decrease stress associated with formal writing.

This presentation explicitly outlines why the writer's notebook is beneficial, how to introduce it into the classroom, how to implement it with the rest of the curriculum, how to transition informal notebook writings into formal papers, and, finally, how to assess the notebook.

## **I. Introducing the Notebook**

### **A. Nomenclature**

*“Writer’s notebooks have been written about extensively and called by many different names: scrapbooks, life books, journals, and day books. It’s not the name that unifies these but rather the principle behind their use. A writer’s notebook creates a place for students (and writers) to save their words—in the form of a memory, a reflection, a list, a rambling of thoughts, a sketch, or even a scrap of print taped on the page. A notebook can become whatever the writer makes it to be” (Buckner, 2005)*

One of the first issues to consider when introducing a writer’s notebook into your classroom is deciding what you would like to name the project. Using the title “Journal” typically creates an unwanted parallel association to the concept of keeping a diary. I have learned this from personal experience. My dad, a tax consultant for a local bank, finds comfort in numbers. He only writes when he has to, and the idea of writing for fun deeply confuses him. So, the first time he saw me pull out my notebook and begin writing, he awkwardly blurted, “I didn’t know you kept a diary...?” He must have sensed my inward mortification, and quickly backpedaled, “Uh, I mean, journal? Notebook? Um...” I have come to realize this initial reaction to the notebook from my father was very telling of the reactions of most people I encountered while writing. Friends, family, and even peers associate a certain frivolousness with the idea of keeping a journal. I do not see why this would be any different with my students. This is why I am personally partial to using the term “writer’s notebook.” After all, that is what it is: a notebook in which we practice our writing. While students may use the notebook as a sort of diary in part, this concept is limiting to the student’s own potential. Teachers should encourage the notebook to be a place designated to push one’s writing and thinking further than a mere

recalling of events. Practicing writing creatively is one of the major goals of the notebook, and for some writers, drawing upon previous memories or experiences is the easiest way to start this process, which is great. What you choose to call the notebook is up to you as the teacher, but a “writer’s notebook” is one of the more common nomenclatures I have encountered, and is more specifically indicative of the project’s actual purpose.

### **B. The Physical Notebook**

*“What does a writer’s notebook look like? There’s really no right answer for this except that your writer’s notebook should reflect your personality” (Fletcher, 1996).*

Letting the students choose their own notebooks is not only cost-effective for the teacher, but students will appreciate the fact that you gave them a choice in the matter. Picking out an individual notebook for themselves will also give them a sense of ownership to the project.

Here are a few things to consider:

- Do you want lined or unlined pages?
- How many minimal pages should there be?
- Is there a size minimum (Recommended: at least 8x5in)?
- How much extra design is allowed, such as colored pages, pictures, quotes, etc.?

(Buckner, 2005)

What the physical notebook needs to look like should simply reflect a combination of the student and the teacher needs for the project. Students are creatively stimulated in different ways, and their notebooks should be allowed to reflect this. Pasting in magazine clips, poems, images or quotes that inspire them is an excellent, nonthreatening jumping-in activity for the notebook. The notebook should be flexible in order to maximize the creativity and comfort of the writer. For example, students who enjoy sketching should look into unlined notebooks. The teacher

should notify their students of tips and tricks such as these before letting them loose to make their purchase. Decorating the cover of the notebook in class is another neat way to begin the project.

### **C. Notebook Content**

In the beginning, it will not be easy. You will expect brilliant and insightful pieces from students who most likely have never been given this sort of freedom in writing before, and it scares them. It is vital that you as the teacher specifically provide ideas and different topics students may write about to inspire them and help improve their writing through *practice*. The key word here is practice. As their time with the notebook progresses, students will need less external stimulation, and will learn how to write successful pieces on their own. This is the goal of the writer's notebook. I will discuss more examples of how to do this in a moment.

Another topic to discuss explicitly with your students is that of grammatical standards within the notebook. Like many concepts within the notebook, this policy may vary from teacher to teacher, but because the notebook is meant to be a creative outlet, loose grammatical standards are encouraged. In her novel *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott calls this the process of “shitty first drafts” (Lamott, 1994). The notebook is meant to develop as a place where students should feel comfortable bleeding their thoughts out in whatever formats suit them best, without having to worry about split infinitives or misspelling a word. These entries are merely ghosts of rough drafts, and grammatical rigidity often squelches creativity. Grammatical editing should be a focal activity later in the writing process.

### **D. Introducing Quick Writes**

The first experience students have with the notebook should be fun *and* indicative of its long-term purpose. Quick writes are short, timed writings beginning with a teacher-delivered

prompt. Kicking off the notebook with a simple quick write is both fun and maps out an activity that students will use regularly throughout the writing process. In her book *Notebook Know-How*, Aimee Buckner divides writing in the notebook into three sections: regularized quick writes, students writing on their own time, and for practicing new writing processes explicitly learned in class (Buckner 2005). Topics for quick writes can be anything: describing dreams, quotes, snatches of dialogue, lists of favorite words, titles, goals, favorite foods and why, things that irritate you, anything! In order to reap fully the classroom cohesion aspect of the journal, the teacher should encourage students to share their quick write entries aloud; however, I do not believe this should be required. Initially, it will be awkward, and not many will share. You as the teacher will often need to share first. But, as the students' comfort with their teacher and their peers increases, they will slowly but surely open up and become more comfortable with sharing their writing. Being comfortable enough to share one's work aloud is a huge accomplishment for a student's confidence, and is something the notebook can help achieve.

Teachers should consider these procedures regarding quick writes:

1. You are not allowed to put your pencil down.

This will force students to ramble, if necessary, and that is good! This policy forces students to write, which is the goal of the notebook in general. It also helps perfectionists move on instead of nit picking over their first sentence the entire allotted time.

2. Do not worry about spelling, proper grammar, or even complete sentences. Quick writes are creative writing, and therefore must be loosely structured. Students may start with listing if they desire (Lamott, 1994).

3. Respond in whatever format you want to respond.

Lists, poetry, third person, first person, song lyrics...just write.



### **E. Organizing the Notebook and the Introductory Letter to Self**

Having some sort of organizational system for the notebook is a good idea because it marks the notebook as an academic project, even though it is loose and creative in its nature. How the teacher wants to organize the notebook is up to them. One option is to create a table of contents that is a mixture of the teacher's required content areas and the student's own selected areas. This also helps with assessment. Aimee Buckner has her students write daily, self-selected topics from the front of the notebook to the back, and notes from lessons, such as revision strategies, grammar notes, and editing strategies, from the back to front (Buckner, 2005). Notebook organization can be developed as they go, but for the final submission of the notebook it must be cataloged in some manner for proper assessment. Dating and organizing entries also helps the students refer back to their own writing easily.

In addition to requiring some sort of organizational system, one of the first writing assignments should be for the students to write a letter to themselves in the beginning of the notebook. This is their goal statement for the project. What do they seek to get out of writing in their writer's notebook? What types of writing would they like to improve? How do they feel about the project presently? After writing an introductory letter, students should write a follow up letter at the end of the term to reflect on how their writing and perceptions of writing have changed (Buckner, 2005). This reflection would also make a good essay prompt.

### **II. Implementing the Notebook**

This section presents a few examples of activities you could implement into the notebook that connect to your classroom as a whole while also maintaining relevancy throughout the year.

[Note: This is neither a required nor an extensive list; it merely provides an idea of what connecting to the curriculum through the notebook might look like.]

### **A. Reader Responses**

Reader responses are an excellent and easy initial activity to show how the writer's notebook will be incorporated into various classroom activities. Have the students pull out their notebooks, and each write a list of anything they define as a form of writing. Once it looks like most students have completed this list, ask for some examples. More than likely, these will lean towards the academic. Show and encourage them to expand their list to include informal writing as well—such as grocery lists, obituaries, sticky note memos, Twitter or Facebook posts, etc. As you share, discuss, and expand on the question of “What is writing?”, write an official and extensive list of “Types of Writing” on the board, and have students copy it as well.

Next, inform students that you will come to a class consensus on how to rank each type of writing by its difficulty level (the fewer numbers the better; 1-3 is good). For example:

Obituary: 2

Short story: 3

Side flap introducing a novel: 2

Sticky note memo: 1

Students can then use this list the rest of the year for creating their written reader responses to works of literature read in class. Instead of simply having students summarize articles, novels, plays, etc. they have read in class throughout the year, they may consult this list and respond with any of these types of creative writing they prefer. You may want to have their points must add up to an established minimum number, and set some parameters on the 1's (possibly requiring at least 3 sticky note memos versus 1), but this is a creative way to practice different forms of writing. It is up to you as the teacher how you want to shape this, and whether or not you would like to have the reader responses written in the actual notebook or separately.

Either way, this is an excellent jump start activity for the notebook and for the class curriculum development as a whole.

### **B. Gardener's Multiple Intelligences**

Have students take the Gardener's test, then have them write in their notebooks about results (and, of course, the results themselves for future reference)—possibly implementing a before and after reflection. Ask them: what was expected? Unexpected? This notebook tie-in is good for an early on activity, because students will easily have many opinions on how the exam went. Having students write about themselves is one of the easiest ways to get the writing habit started (Lamott, 1994). The test in itself is also beneficial to know how each of your students learn. Have them print off their results so you can have them on record. Taking these results and making a graph per class reflecting the numbered results would be extremely beneficial for future notebook and classroom activities.

### **C. Making Curriculum Connections through Quick Writes**

I have compiled a list here of simple quick writes that could easily transfer into a larger writing lesson or assignment. Using a quick write as a lead-in to a lesson is one of the easiest ways to utilize the notebook and encourage inductive thinking.

#### **1. The Five Senses**

“Imagine that you have been transported to this location. LIST everything you SEE, HEAR, SMELL and TASTE while you are there. Describe what you are thinking and feeling in this moment.”

This is an excellent introductory five senses quick write. You may supply a picture, or, even better, go outside for stimulation. The next activity or quick write could be taking that list and making it into a more solid piece of writing: a poem perhaps!

## 2. Walk in Another's Shoes

“Choose a character, and write a “thoughtshot” that would let readers know what caused you to react the way you did when the photo was taken.”

Another good quick write for visual learners, this prompt makes a good tie in to studying characterization.

## 3. The Importance of Diction

“Write about a dream you had this week. CATCH: You may only use one adjective per noun.”

Using strong descriptors, rather than overloading a sentence with bland adjectives, is a writing concept every student should learn to practice, and the writer's notebook is the perfect place to do so. When students initially begin writing in their notebooks, try not to become discouraged if the writing does seem bland. This is the purpose of the notebook—to bolster their writing skills and confidence! If when students are sharing their responses they seem overly general or adjective happy, a diction exploring notebook activity such as this may help.

When providing prompts, make sure they themselves advocate a honed-in focus. Ask them to focus on the specific, not the general, and give them examples. The five senses quick write should help with this as well.

### **III. Using the Notebook as a Transition into Formal Writing**

This section looks at taking informal entries and writing strategies within the notebook and transitioning into specific formal writing assignments. Having the students explore/consider their paper topic through quick write activities alleviates the pressure of formal writing and helps students organize the goals of their piece.

#### **A. Expanding/Exploring Topics (Buckner, 2005)**

Much like the reader responses listing activity, this pre-writing activity has students list memories, places, events, equipment, etc. that relate to their paper topic. Listing helps the writer break down the topic and lay bare all its possibilities. This prompt would obviously vary depending on what you are assigning, but if the students have some sort of opinion piece written before beginning a new project, it proves to them they do have an opinion on the matter, and they can, and already did, write about it (even if informally)!

### **B. Try Ten (Buckner, 2005)**

With this quick write, students are asked to write ten potential titles for the paper they are currently assigned; you could also do “grabber” sentences, or thesis statements. Ten is not the magic number, and for younger students this number may need to be adjusted. Once students have written their ten, they may partner up and discuss which ones they do and do not like, which ones make the most sense, which ones would be easiest to format into a paper, etc. This is an enlightening activity for students, because they realize there is more than one way to write a good paper.

### **C. K-N-T Chart (Buckner, 2005)**

K-N-T: What I Know, what I Need to know, and what I Think. Students label one page each with these headings and plug in the information they currently have on their papers. While the Try Ten activity is geared towards the beginning stages of writing a paper, the K-N-T Chart helps students who may have lost direction or have become overwhelmed mid-paper. Creating a K-N-T chart within the notebook is an easy way to keep students focused and organized within developing their papers. It is also a good way for the teacher to check-up quickly and easily on the students’ writing process, and what their current needs are.

## **IV. Assessing the Notebook**

Assessing the notebook is something that is predominantly up to you as the teacher. What do *you* value in your classroom, and in your notebook? What is most important for you that your students get out of this project? These answers will reflect the structure of your notebook assessment.

**A. Rubric** (*See handouts page*)

With such an unstructured project as a writer's notebook, it is important to provide students with clear and specific expectations from the beginning. Using a chart or a rubric is recommended because it clearly reflects what amount and type of effort receives an A, B, C, etc. Although I have provided a few examples, this rubric, again, should reflect what you personally value in your classroom.

**B. Required Entries Outside of Class**

A certain number of notebook entries must be required, or some students will never write outside of the in-class activities and quick writes. These required entries may be as specific or general as you want them to be. Because students will largely do these assignments outside of class, teachers should allow them to be more creative in nature. Writing assignments focusing on grammatical structure or topic sentences, for instance, should be done together as a class. The point of the notebook is to have students writing more freely and, hopefully, for fun. You might have them write about their favorite song, or write a haiku about something they did that day. This grading category could also expand to include the reader responses. They can do these at their own leisure as long as a certain amount of entries will be due by each teacher-selected checkpoint for evaluation.

**C. Check Points**

How often you check on the notebooks is up to you. Once a month, once every other week, or once a semester depends on a variety of factors, such as age and the class's comfort level with the project. It is essential to make it clear before students begin writing in their notebooks how and when you will approach these checkups. One strategy to consider is giving your students a way to keep some notebook entries private. This student describes a blocking strategy her teacher chose:

*"I had a teacher in middle school who taught me all of the beauty and excitement of journaling with daily prompts. The feedback she gave me encouraged me to write. Of course, there are things you won't write when you know a teacher is watching and she let us fold back pages that we wanted to keep private as long as she could see that some text was peeking out of the left margin, she would respect that"* (Davis, 2013).

Giving students some degree of privacy further promotes personal use of the notebook itself.

#### **D. Self-Evaluations** *(See handouts page)*

Having students write self-evaluations about their notebook writing is an enlightening activity for the teacher, as well as the writers themselves. Additionally, students are practicing valuable self-reflection skills. One easy way to do this is by asking students to tab a couple entries of which they are most proud, or one they think best represents their progression or what they have learned as a writer (Buckner, 2005). Then, they write about why they chose those specific entries. Self-evaluations are an excellent opportunity for students to notice patterns in their own writing.

#### **V. Lingering Thoughts**

A. If you choose to implement a writer's notebook into your class, do your research. Look into notebook tips geared towards your classroom's specific demographic—there

are plenty to choose from! For example, *Writing on the Bus* by Richard Kent focuses entirely on a writer's notebook for athletes!

B. Again, depending on your classroom demographic, you may want to consider additional or alternative modes with which to write. If your students connect best with technology, perhaps their notebooks should take the form of a blog. If your students are highly visual learners, implement quick writes that stem from pictures. Writing in Evernote or a on a coffee filter has just as much potential for creativity and writing growth as anything else. Learn how your students learn best, and accommodate them.

C. Keep your own notebook, and participate in the notebook activities. You will gain respect from your students and have a blast connecting with your class in this unique way!



**Works Cited**

- Buckner, Aimee. (2005) *Notebook Know-How: Strategies for the Writer's Notebook*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Davis, Vicki. (2013, April 23). 9 Fine Reasons to Keep a Journal (and how to help kids do it too) [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://coolcatteacher.blogspot.com/2013/04/9-fine-reasons-to-keep-journal-and-how.html>
- Fletcher, Ralph. (1996) *A Writer's Notebook: Unblocking the Writer Within You*. New York:HarperCollins Publishers.
- Kent, Richard. (2011) *Writing on the Bus: Using Athletic Team Notebooks and Journals to Advance Learning and Performance in Sports*. Now York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Lamott, Anne. (1994) *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. New York: Anchor Books.

**BENEFITS TO THE WRITER'S NOTEBOOK CHART (on Prezi)**

Center circle: Why journal?

Extending squares:

**Class Cohesion**

By sharing and writing with each other

**Bell Work with Purpose**

To get students focused or to act as a lead-in activity

**Becoming a Better Writer Makes You a Better Reader**

So write, write, write!

**Removes the Temptation to Do Too Much of Your Students' Writing**

By over-editing or over-teaching

**Removes Stress Associated with Formal Writing**

By practicing and getting comfortable with writing itself

**Common Core Demands More Writing**

**Acts as a Springboard into Other Writing Projects**

And helps with classroom fluency

**May Increase Writing Pleasure**

Writer's Notebooks can be an excellent personal outlet or confidence booster

References:

Buckner, Aimee. (2005) *Notebook Know-How: Strategies for the Writer's Notebook*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

Lamott, Anne. (1994) *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. New York: Anchor Books.

[http://prezi.com/-tcclfdkcj3a/present/?auth\\_key=o857khl&follow=ixzal15qowxa](http://prezi.com/-tcclfdkcj3a/present/?auth_key=o857khl&follow=ixzal15qowxa)

Midyear Self-Evaluation from *Notebook Know-How* by Aimee Buckner

Name \_\_\_\_\_

As a community of writers, we understand the tremendous energy it takes to write thoughtfully, to dig deep in our gut and get the story out. Sometimes our energy is zapped from our system and it takes a lot of concentration to write just one paragraph. It's a hard life—the life of a writer.

Our writer's notebooks are filled with good writing and some not-so-good writing. Use your notebook to help you think about yourself as a writer. Reread your writer's notebook and comments on how you use the notebook and your commitment to it. (Do you write regularly? Do you write thoughtful entries? Is it a place you use to figure out the world around you? etc.)

---

---

---

---

---

**Midyear Evaluation Part 2**

**Make Your Own Decision**

Part of a writer's job is making decisions about his or her own writing. Use your notebook and what you know about writing to make the selections below. Follow the directions carefully. Cross out each direction after you have finished it.

- Select two entries from your notebook you think best demonstrate that you are an original thinker. Mark them with sticky notes for copying. Attach the copies to this evaluation.
- Select two entries showing that you understand the qualities of good writing. Put sticky notes on these entries for copying. When you get the copies back, explain how these entries demonstrate good writing. Write your comments on the back of each copied entry. Attach them to the evaluation.
- Reread the entries you have selected and what you wrote about yourself as a writer. Then respond to the following questions.

1. From your rereading, selecting, and reflecting on your writing, what have you learned about yourself as a writer?

---

---

---

---

---

2. What topics do you tend to write about? (What are your writing patterns?)

---

---

---

---

---

3. Think about yourself as a writer from the beginning of the year to now. How have you changed as a writer this year?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

4. What would you like to improve about your writing? Set a goal for yourself and write it below.

---

---

---

---

---

---

Additional Comments:

### Writer's Notebook Evaluation Rubric

Grade	A	B	C	D
Flexibility and Fluency	Most entries are completed. Writer uses a variety of strategies and topics	Many entries are completed. Writer uses strategies from class and shows some topic variety.	Entries are left unfinished. Topics and strategies may vary.	Entries are undeveloped. Little or no variety in writing strategies.
Thoughtfulness	Entries are thoughtful and reflective, revealing new insights to the writer's thinking. Writer practices proper grammar, usage, mechanics, and spelling (GUMS).	Entries tend to be thoughtful. They may reveal new insights to the writer's thinking. A pattern of topics develops over a number of entries. Writer practices proper GUMS.	Entries resemble a diary format or bed-to-bed type stories. Little or no reflective thinking is evident. Writer does not give attention to GUMS.	Entries are difficult to read due to handwriting and/or GUMS. Writer does not demonstrate reflective thinking.
Frequency	90 percent of required entries.	80 percent of required entries.	74 percent of required entries.	70 percent of required entries.

Adapted from Notebook Know-How: Strategies for the Writer's Notebook by Aimee Buckner (Stenhouse Publishers)