

The Cook's Notebook

by Elsa Pla

First thing you need to know about writers: most of us keep writer's notebooks. Notice I wrote notebooks, plural. As you develop as a writer, you will discover that one notebook doesn't cut it. Not enough space. But don't worry; you'll begin your writing life by having just one (or two).

A writer's notebook is simply the place where you gather thoughts and ideas for and about your writing and also where you keep your works-in-progress. Your notebook(s) should reflect your personality and style.

Let me begin by telling you about my notebooks:

- 1- I have a huge, bulging binder full of resources I've gathered from writing classes, conferences, and workshops.
- 2- I have two binders (one for poetry and the other one for fiction) where I keep an ever-growing list of ideas and short works-in-progress.
- 3- I have separate binders for longer works (novels and collections).
- 4- I have a journal where I write about my feelings and observations about the world.
- 5- I have a wonderfully messy notebook where I scribble thoughts, ideas, plans, and "to do" lists.
- 6- I have a small notebook, which I keep in my purse, where I jot down "noticings" and ideas that occur to me when I'm not at home.
- 7- I have a notebook where I keep track of all the books I read.

8- I have many of the stuff that's in my notebooks also typed and saved in my computer.

9- I keep lists of memories, favorite words and phrases, and useful writing checklists in my computer.

10- I have an index card box full of writing tips.

See what I mean? After a while, one measly notebook just doesn't cut it. But one thing is certain: most writers start with at least one. So...

Step Number 1- Obtain a notebook that suits your personality. I recommend a one-inch binder so you can keep all kinds of stuff inside and are able to move things around and toss what you no longer want. What kind of paper do you prefer? Lined, blank, colored? My daughter likes to use graph paper because it helps her keep her writing neat and organized (especially her poems), and because it's great for doodling. Again, it's entirely up to you.

Step Number 2- Personalize your notebook. Decorate it and add a few photographs, perhaps a favorite quote. Make it uniquely yours.



Step Number 3- Write your name and a phone or address so your notebook can be returned to you in case it gets misplaced.

Step Number 4- Keep a small pocket notebook or a few folded notebook papers with you at all times, so you can jot down ideas and "noticings" when you don't have your regular notebook with you.

Step Number 5- Fill your notebook with all kinds of wondrous things. Here are some possibilities:

- 1- Lists of ideas for poems, stories, and essays
- 2- Sensory descriptions of places and characters, real or imagined
- 3- Pictures of places and characters, real or imagined
- 4- Maps, real or imagined
- 5- Interesting words/phrases, figurative language, favorite quotes
- 6- Memories
- 7- Observations
- 8- Feelings, thoughts, and musings
- 9- Questions and wonderings
- 10- Quirky names and titles
- 11- Intriguing clippings and/or photos
- 12- Writing checklists and resources
- 13- Dreams, goals, and plans
- 14- Unusual facts



15-Works-in-progress

One important thing to remember: Writer's notebooks (like diaries and journals) are never ever totally private. Chances are someone (perhaps a family member!) will find your notebook and read it. Therefore, DO NOT write stuff in your notebook that would cause you to want to run away and hide in a cave if somebody -- especially a family member -- read it.

By now you've probably realized that keeping a writer's notebook is totally cool and exciting and lots of fun. In the words of Ralph Fletcher, author of *A Writer's Notebook - Unlocking the Writer Within You*, "A writer's notebook gives you a place to live like a writer." *To live like a writer. Wow. As far as I'm concerned, it doesn't get any better than that.*

