

Look Inside:

composition

Making Writers' Notebooks
More Authentic

With contributions from Tracey Baptiste, Christine Hartman Derr, Josh Funk, Karina Yan Glaser, OluGbemisola Rhuday-Perkovich, Elly Swartz, and Linda Urban; edited by Melissa Guerrette, NBCT

August, 2026

How can I make writers' notebooks an even more authentic tool for the developing writers in my classroom?

Can I help students increase their ownership of the writing notebook and its contents, rather than seeing their writing notebook as an assignment?

How do professional writers use notebooks in their real writing lives? What wisdom is there to glean from their practice?

We asked some of our favorite writers:

**What does your writer's notebook look like?
How do you use it?**

Bullet Journal

General notebook



Project notebooks



Freewriting notebook



Tracey Baptiste



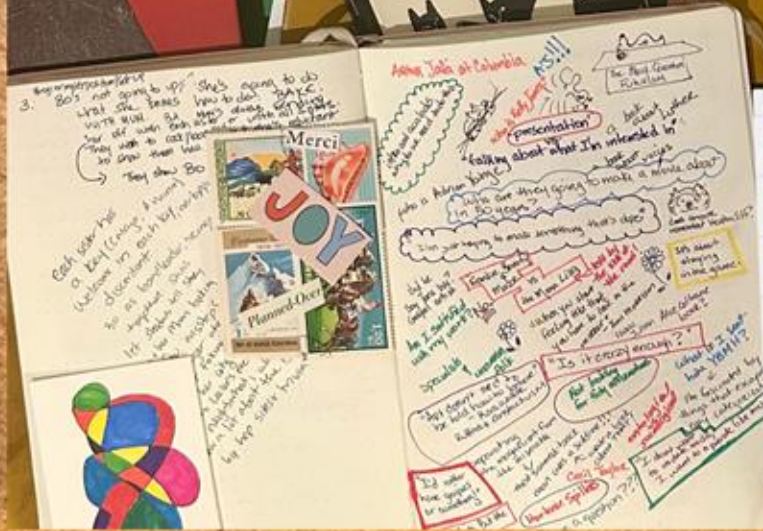
I use several notebooks to capture different creative ideas and keep myself organized. I have a general notebook for jotting down ideas, meeting notes, and other random items. I keep a bullet journal to use as a calendar, for really important notes, reading tracker, book reviews, scrapbook, and various other things. Then I have a notebook for daily freewriting which helps me work out new concepts, project ideas, and anything that's on my mind. And last, I have project-specific notebooks because most of my stories begin longhand.



Oluwbemisola
Rhuday-Perkovich



I've been keeping notebooks for as long as I can remember, and I carry at least one with me at all times. I still get excited when I open a fresh one; it's like a door opening, inviting my imagination in to do whatever it likes. I have "organizational" notebooks, usually bullet journals, where I make plans, and lists; sometimes I jot down random thoughts and to-dos that I'll then organize into other notebooks later. I have tiny ones that I have on hand while I'm out - for random observations, little notes and doodles that I may transfer to a different notebook when I get home. I have notebooks for each of my book projects; I write almost all of my first drafts in longhand, it helps me organize my thoughts, add little notes to self, go off on tangents, experiment, etc. Sometimes the notebook cover design or theme ends up being perfect for a story idea, or sometimes the cover has an image from another story that inspires me to be creative. I do a lot of doodling, sometimes writing in different colors, while I'm brainstorming or taking notes. I write down quotes that inspire me, song lyrics, questions for myself, and story scraps that pop into my head. I like to collage and doodle when I'm "stuck"; after a few minutes of that, I relax and get back into the writing, and sometimes it gives me a new idea!



Cherokee - Nida, Yung, Washburn
Sopha, Scratches

I am go' closer than ever
except the maybe
Maybe she was sick
I didn't go be at
about w/ the?

✓ Prologue

Closing Credits / but not
yet to black / this is not
the end / just the end of
a day / I forget everything
w/ heartbeats / something
about being a mosaic

scrap up, Andy (at last) (grief)
create dialogue tags?

Cherokee Words for Glossary

tsalagi
tsalagi
tsalagi
tsalagi
tsalagi

Donadagohi
overlook - home
watcher - snow

Heh, her name is tiny girl ~~now~~
whose offspring is this? ~~now~~
wait this is a child now
grace We are finished.

from the
west / 185

Books mentioned:

- Christine Day looks
- Deb - A Snake Falls
- Leather Manter Series
- We are water protection
- Be a good ancestor
- We are garden
- When we gather
- Chooch helped
- Red Bird Danced

July 2005

Wishes / Raven, Rising Edit

✓ 1/30 Clarity R says hall bath
(downstairs) + AC has a
in the primary bedroom

✓ 1/31 day has a hole bag
✓ 1/31 content box?

✓ 1/32 - before Confirm R says he
was a language learner

✓ 1/33 new note inserts

✓ 1/35 should AC meet L + H at
Kitchen table?
+ AC Cherokee usage

✓ 1/34 remind about AC's job

p. 123 - look for where I can explain
what happened to cause L
to find gazette



Christine
Hartman Derr



- My notebook houses all the chaos my brain cannot contain. This includes lists on varying topics, such as Cherokee language words to include in a glossary, to-do lists made from edit letters, my notes on what to fix in the next pass, character descriptions, and more. This is where I keep all the details that make my stories consistent. My writing takes place on my computer, as I can type faster than I can hand-write. Where I play, explore, and discover characters happens in the writing itself. Notebooks keep me organized so that I can play within my writing.

9 DECEMBER 2025

↑ 30°
↓ 23°

Gave the dogs an early walk because I have a school visit today. It will be my third time at PS 183 → Martin's school! The first time I was there, the city experienced some kind of storm and all of the subways flooded. AMME was supposed to be there but she couldn't get out of Brooklyn!

It might snow tomorrow!

Am sick! Missed bowling yesterday and is missing school today.

A group of crows is called a murder.

Crows have regional accents.

Crows are thought to be one of the most intellectual of the birds.

They have been spotted using tools. They put walnuts on the road so cars can crack them.

Why do all animals look so adorable in scarves?

Sea otters have some of the densest fur - 1 million hairs per square inch!

They eat 25-30% of their body weight daily.

They use tools.

They sleep & rest in groups called rafts.

They are the smallest marine mammal.

They can close their nostrils & ears to prevent water from getting in when they dive.

They spend half the day grooming to keep their fur insulated and waterproof.



Karina Yan Glaser



I keep a journal that serves as a memory keeper. Inside are my drawings, my thoughts and goings-ons from the day, quotes I want to remember from books or articles I'm reading, interesting facts, ticket stubs, handwritten letters from friends, and other odds and ends. In this particular page from my journal, I had been learning more about birds for a book I was working on.

What would it help me to understand about this project today?



TIME → this project is still in its infancy. It is okay to give it time to learn to walk on its own.

When you start something new it can be really tempting to believe that a **GOOD** or **GREAT** idea should flow unimpeded, without effort or second guessing.

INTERESTING HOW
"second guessing"



→ reminds me of the RIDDLE from the Batman TV show.

But writing is NOT a riddle. There is a tricky, but correct answer.

ACKNOWLEDGES THAT EVEN THE "FIRST" PART WAS A GUESS.

KEEP ASKING "WHYS!"
This is what your writer friends need to hear most!

And so, here it is! You get to tell the story that feels right AT THIS MOMENT.
- The story you're imagining

AND
- The story of the process and what she is capable of
BOTH are open for you to explore. Nothing is fixed.

HERE IS AN EXAMPLE

THIS IS WHAT I NEED THE SECOND CHAPTER TO SAY, TOO!



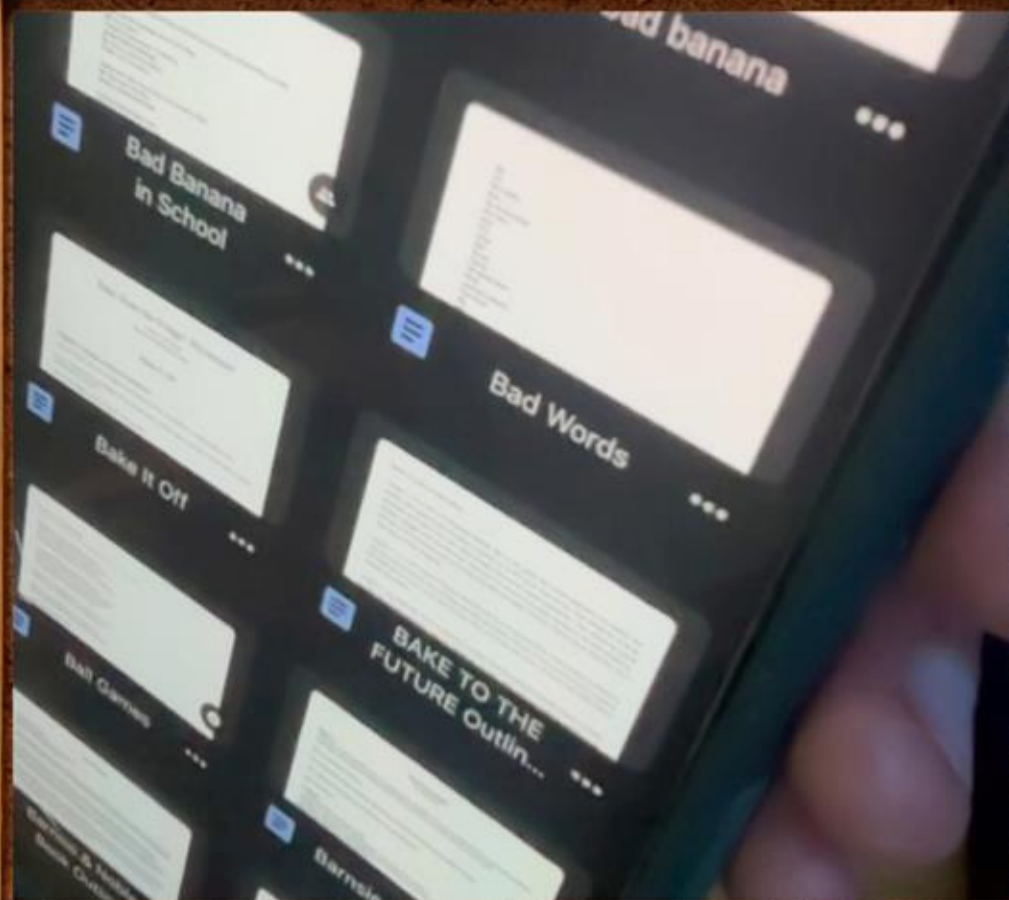
ALWAYS, there are **ANSWERS** and the only way to find the "right" one is by really going deep and answering the questions honestly for yourself... and then acting from that feeling of "rightness"... and acknowledging that the feeling may be temporary. BUT STILL VALUABLE



Linda Urban



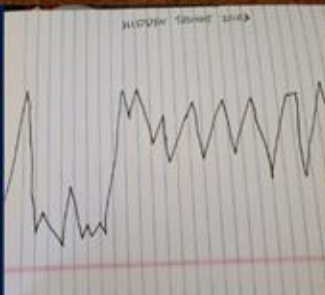
One of the most helpful things about my notebook is that it doesn't "count" — which makes it a low-stress, easy on-ramp to the writing that does. Before I focus on my work-in-progress, I open my notebook and doodle or write in response to a focused prompt like What would it help me to understand about today's work? Or What feels like the next important action to take on this project? Often, the answer to this question will flow right into the project I'm working on. So many of my notebook pages begin with a prompt response that seamlessly shifts into the point of view of my novel's main character.



Josh Funk

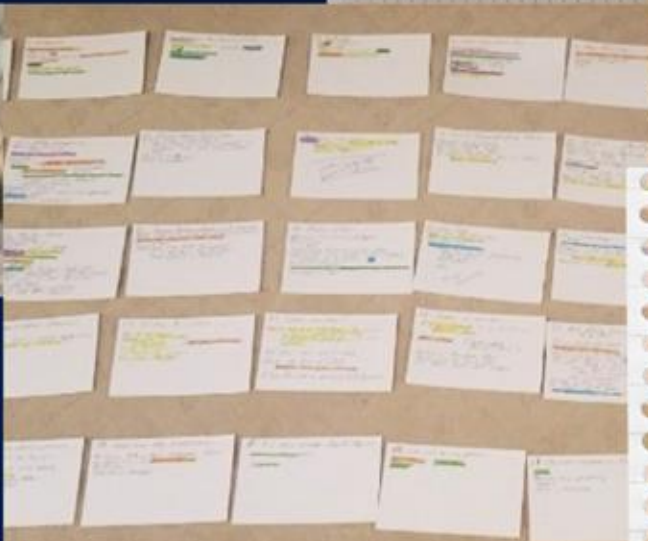


I use the my phone as a writer's notebook to jot down any and all ideas that i have. Sometimes I open a new doc when I think of an idea for a picture book. Other times, I jot down individual lines or phrases I'd like to use in a future book. And some nights I wake up with idea after idea keep opening and closing my phone so I don't forget them.



Dear Elly,

Sincerely,
Your Main Character



Elly Swartz



My process is less one thing and more the entire toolbox. I do use a writer's notebook, but not solely a writer's notebook and maybe not in the traditional way. I use my notebook as a space to interview my characters, have them write me letters and tell me secrets, draw a map of the town where my story takes place, and create graphs of the escalation points in the story. I use photos to capture my characters and their pets. Index cards to follow the different story lines to be sure I never lose a thread as the story unfolds. Emojis to track my character's emotional arc so they are feeling all the feels. I use anything to get unstuck (hint: Twizzlers). I use my computer when the words are flowing. Walk my pups when I need brain space. And dance to celebrate a great idea, a great word, a great writing day. With every book, what I need changes. The only constant is believing in myself and my readers.

October, 2026

Thoughts for my writing classroom from the experiences of professional writers:

- Refresh the definition of what "writing" in a notebook looks like. Holding a whole draft start to finish isn't common.
- Encourage writers to use more than one notebook, like one that travels back & forth from home to school and stores ideas (in addition to the one in our classroom). Maybe incorporate more shorter notebooks for some writing projects.
- Make a wide variety of tools available to writers to use to explore & communicate their thinking- colored pens/markers, stickies, tape & glue...
- Support students with writing to explore thinking. How does playing in their notebook help them uncover what they want to say?
- Model some of these other uses for notebooks with my own notebook keeping. Open my notebook to students to see.