

THE PRENTICE HALL GUIDE FOR  
*College Writers*

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This painting by Edouard Manet shows Monet's love of painting in the outdoors where he could capture the natural outdoor light. In this chapter, the journal exercise on page 12 invites you to consider on what occasions you enjoy reading, writing, or painting outdoors.



Edouard Manet  
*Monet Painting in His Floating Studio* (1874)  
Bayerische Staatsgemaldesammlungen, Munich

## chapter

## 1

## Writing Myths and Rituals

**F**or me, the most effective writing ritual is to gather up all of my stuff—legal pad and pencil, notes, dictionary, and thesaurus—and get on my bike, ride to campus, and set myself up in the art lounge in the student center. During the week, I'll do this in the evening after dinner. On a weekend, I go any time from 10 A.M. to midnight. I don't write effectively at home because there are always distractions. Some people will be moving around and I'll go see who they are and what they're doing, or I'll go get a cup of coffee or a piece of toast, or I'll snap on the TV, ignoring that tiny voice inside saying, "Get busy—you have to get this done!" So what makes the art lounge better? Simple—no distractions. I can lay out all of my stuff, get a cup of coffee, and go to work. All around me people are doing the same thing, and somehow all of those hardworking people are an encouragement. The art lounge is always quiet, too—quieter than the library—and it doesn't smell like the library.

**O**ne myth about writing I have believed my whole life is that "good writers are born, not made." My attitude when beginning this writing course was one of apprehension and dread. I wondered if I *could* improve my writing, or if I was destined to receive B's and C's on every essay for the rest of my life. This writing class has given me concrete examples and suggestions for improvement—not just grammar or essay maps. The freewriting is such a great help that whenever I'm stuck, I immediately turn to my ten-minute freewriting to open up blocked passages. Once I get past my writer's block, I see that I can be a good writer.



*“A writer is someone who writes, that’s all.”*

—GORE VIDAL,  
NOVELIST AND SOCIAL  
COMMENTATOR

*“I’ve always disliked words like inspiration. Writing is probably like a scientist thinking about some scientific problem or an engineer about an engineering problem.”*

—DORIS LESSING,  
AUTHOR OF ESSAYS AND  
FICTION, INCLUDING  
THE GOLDEN  
NOTEBOOK

*“I always worked until I had something done and I always stopped when I knew what was going to happen next. That way I could be sure of going on the next day.”*

—ERNEST  
HEMINGWAY,  
JOURNALIST AND  
NOVELIST, AUTHOR OF  
THE OLD MAN AND THE  
SEA

**A**S YOU BEGIN A COLLEGE WRITING COURSE, YOU NEED TO GET RID OF SOME MYTHS ABOUT WRITING THAT YOU MAY HAVE BEEN PACKING AROUND FOR SOME TIME. DON'T ALLOW MISCONCEPTIONS TO RUIN A GOOD EXPERIENCE. Here are a few common myths about writing, followed by some facts compiled from the experiences of working writers.

*“I work at my writing as an athlete does at. . . training, taking it very seriously. What is important is the truth in it and the way that truth is expressed.”*

—EDNA O'BRIEN,  
NOVELIST AND  
PLAYWRIGHT

### BACKGROUND ON MYTHS

Discussing myths about writing is the first step in probing how your students translate plans into writing. The whole point of teaching “writing process” is to shift from responding only to written products to responding to how writers’ plans and intentions translate into written documents. Discussing writing myths at the beginning of the course, discussing writing and revision plans during a workshop, and reviewing writing in postscripts are all strategies to help students translate plans into written discourse.

**MYTH:** “Good writers are born, not made. A writing course really won’t help my writing.”

**FACT:** *Writers acquire their skills the same way athletes do—through practice and hard work.* There are very few “born” writers. Most writers—even professional writers and journalists—are not continually inspired to write. In fact, they often experience “writer’s block,” the stressful experience of staring helplessly at a piece of paper, unable to think or to put words down on paper. A writing course will teach you how to cope with your procrastination, anxiety, lack of “inspiration,” and false starts by focusing directly on solving the problems that occur during the writing process.

**MYTH:** “Writing courses are just a review of boring grammar and punctuation. When teachers read your writing, the only thing they mark is that stuff, anyway.”

**FACT:** *Learning and communicating—not grammar and punctuation—come first in college writing courses.* Knowledge of grammar, spelling, punctuation, and usage is essential to editing, but it is secondary to discovering ideas, thinking, learning, and communicating. In a writing course, students learn to revise and improve the content and organization of each other’s writing. *Then* they help each other edit for grammar, punctuation, or spelling errors.

**MYTH:** “College writing courses are really ‘creative writing,’ which is not what my major requires. If I wanted to be another Shakespeare and write poetry, I’d change my major.”

**FACT:** *Writing courses emphasize rhetoric, not poetry.* Rhetoric involves practicing the most effective means or strategies for informing or persuading an audience. All writing—even technical or business writing—is “creative.” Deciding what to write, how to write it, how best to get your reader’s attention, and how to inform or persuade your reader requires creativity and imagination. Every major requires the skills that writing courses teach: exploring new ideas, learning concepts and processes, communicating with others, and finding fresh or creative solutions to problems.

**MYTH:** “Writing courses are not important in college or the real world. I’ll never have to write, anyway.”

**FACT:** *Writing courses do have a significant effect on your success in college, on the job, and in life.* Even if you don’t have frequent, formal writing assignments in other courses,

writing improves your note-taking, reading comprehension, and thinking skills. When you do have other written tasks or assignments, a writing course teaches you to adapt your writing to a variety of different purposes and audiences—whether you are writing a lab report in biology, a letter to an editor, a complaint to the Better Business Bureau, or a memorandum to your boss. Taking a writing course helps you express yourself more clearly, confidently, and persuasively—a skill that comes in handy whether you’re writing a philosophy essay, a job application, or a love letter.

The most important fact about writing is that you are already a writer. You have been writing for years. A writer is someone who writes, not someone who writes a nationally syndicated newspaper column, publishes a bestseller, or wins a Pulitzer Prize. To be an effective writer, you don’t have to earn a million dollars; you just have to practice writing often enough to get acquainted with its personal benefits for you and its value for others.



### WARMING UP: FREEWRITING

Put this book aside—right now—and take out pencil or pen and a piece of paper. Use this free exercise (private, unjudged, ungraded) to remind yourself that you are already a writer. Time yourself for five minutes. Write on the first thing that comes to mind—*anything whatsoever*. Write nonstop. Keep writing even if you have to write, “I can’t think of anything to say. This feels stupid!” When you get an idea, pursue it.

When five minutes are up, stop writing and reread what you have written. Whether you write about a genuinely interesting topic or about the weather, freewriting is an excellent way to warm up, to get into the habit of writing, and to establish a writing ritual.

### TEACHING TIP

Students often don’t believe that writing skills are necessary in their majors. Two activities may change that attitude. First, discuss typical essay questions from other classes (see the appendix “Writing Under Pressure”). Second, invite an instructor in history, business, animal science, or engineering to speak to your class for ten minutes about the importance of writing in his or her discipline. Ask this instructor to bring some examples of good and poor writing to illustrate the importance of effective writing.

“My idea of a prewriting ritual is getting the kids on the bus and sitting down.”

—BARBARA  
KINGSOLVER  
AUTHOR OF PRODIGAL  
SUMMER

## Writing Fitness: Rituals and Practice

Writing is no more magic or inspiration than any other human activity that you admire: figure skating at the Olympics, rebuilding a car engine, cooking a gourmet meal, or acting in a play. Behind every human achievement are many unglamorous hours of practice—working and sweating, falling flat on your face, and picking yourself up again. You can’t learn to write just by reading some chapters in a textbook or

“Writing is [like] making a table. With both you are working with reality, a material just as hard as wood. Both are full of tricks and techniques. Basically very little magic and a lot of hard work are involved. . . . What is a privilege, however, is to do a job to your own satisfaction.”

—GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ,

NOBEL PRIZE—WINNING  
AUTHOR OF *ONE  
HUNDRED YEARS OF  
SOLITUDE*

### TEACHING TIP

A ritual is a ceremonial behavior performed not for its own sake but for some other goal. Fastening a car seat belt is a habit, but it becomes a ritual if we regularly use that act to remind us to drive defensively. In writing, even avoidance rituals—sharpening pencils, fixing coffee, cleaning your desk—can lead to successful writing. Have students freewrite about the specific rituals they use to help them write or get their homework done.

by memorizing other people’s advice. You need help and advice, but you also need practice. Consider the following parable about a Chinese painter:

A rich patron once gave money to the painter Chu Ta, asking him to paint a picture of a fish. Three years later, when he still had not received the painting, the patron went to Chu Ta’s house to ask why the picture was not done. Chu Ta did not answer but dipped a brush in ink and with a few strokes drew a splendid fish. “If it is so easy,” asked the patron, “why didn’t you give me the picture three years ago?” Again, Chu Ta did not answer. Instead, he opened the door of a large cabinet. Thousands of pictures of fish tumbled out.

Most writers develop little rituals that help them practice their writing. A ritual is a *repeated pattern of behavior* that provides structure, security, and a sense of progress to the one who practices it. Creating your own writing rituals and making them part of your regular routine will help reduce that dreaded initial panic and enable you to call upon your writing process with confidence when you need it.

## PLACE, TIME, AND TOOLS

Some writers work best in pen and ink, sprawled on their beds in the afternoon while pets snooze on nearby blankets. Others start at 8 A.M. and rely on hard chairs, clean tables, and a handful of number 2 pencils sharpened to needle points. Still others are most comfortable with their keyboards and word processors at their desks or in the computer lab. Legal-sized pads help some writers produce, while others feel motivated by spiral notebooks with pictures of mountain streams on the covers. Only you can determine which place, time, and tools give you the best support as a writer.

The place where you write is also extremely important. If you are writing in a computer lab, you have to adapt to that place, but if you write a draft in long-hand or on your own word processor, you can choose the place yourself. In selecting a place, keep the following tips in mind:

- **Keep distractions minimal.** Some people simply can’t write in the kitchen, where the refrigerator is distractingly close, or in a room that has a TV in it. On the other hand, a public place—a library, an empty classroom, a cafeteria—can be fine as long as the surrounding activity does not disturb you.
- **Control interruptions.** If you can close the door to your room and work without interruptions, fine. But even then, other people often assume that

you want to take a break when they do. Choose a place where you can decide when it's time to take a break.

- **Have access to notes, journal, textbooks, sources, and other materials.** If the place is totally quiet but you don't have room to work or access to important notes or sources, you still may not make much progress. Whatever you need—a desk to spread your work out on, access to notes and sources, extra pens, or computer disks—make sure your place has it.

The time of day you write and the tools you write with can also affect your attitude and efficiency. Some people like to write early in the morning, before their busy days start; others like to write in the evening, after classes or work. Whatever time you choose, try to write regularly—at least three days a week—at about the same time. If you're trying to get in shape by jogging, swimming, or doing aerobics, you wouldn't exercise for five straight hours on Monday and then take four days off. Like exercise, writing requires regular practice and conditioning.

Your writing tools—pen, pencil, paper, legal pads, four-by-six-inch notecards, notebooks, computer—should also be comfortable for you. Some writers like to make notes with pencil and paper and write drafts on computers; some like to do all composing on computers. As you try different combinations of tools, be aware of how you feel and whether your tools make you more effective. If you feel comfortable, it will be easier to establish rituals that lead to regular practice.

Rituals are important because they help you with the most difficult part of writing—getting started. So use your familiar place, time, and tools to trick yourself into getting some words down on paper. Your mind will devise clever schemes to avoid writing those first ten words—watching TV, balancing your checkbook, drinking some more coffee, or calling a friend and whining together about all the writing you have to do. But if your body has been through the ritual before, it will walk calmly to your favorite place, where all your tools are ready (perhaps bringing the mind kicking and screaming all the way). Then, after you get the first ten words down, the

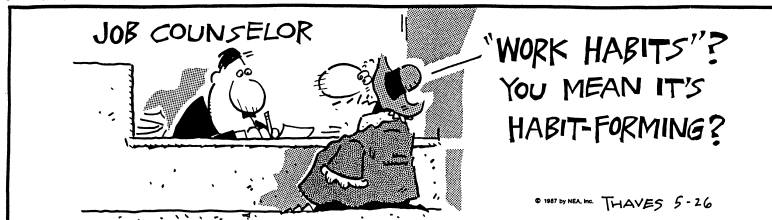
“Writers are notorious for using any reason to keep from working: overresearching, retyping, going to meetings, waxing the floors—anything.”

—GLORIA STEINEM,  
FORMER EDITOR OF  
MS. MAGAZINE

### ESL TEACHING TIP

If you have ESL students in your class, be sure to talk to your program director about support services available for you and your students. Many schools have composition classes designed for ESL students. Other schools prefer to integrate ESL students in regular composition classes. For an overview of ESL teaching practices and theory, see Ilona Leki, *Understanding ESL Writers: A Guide for Teachers* (1992); Dana Ferris and John S. Hedgcock, *Teaching ESL Composition* (1998); Linda Harklau, Kay M. Losey, & Meryl Siegal, *Generation 1.5 Meets College Composition* (1999); and Tony Silva and Paul Kei Matsuda, *On Second Language Writing* (2001).

FRANK AND ERNEST © by Bob Thaves



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“*I am by nature lazy, sluggish and of low energy. It constantly amazes me that I do anything at all.*”

—MARGARET  
ATWOOD,  
WHO HAS MANAGED  
TO PRODUCE  
NUMEROUS BOOKS OF  
FICTION AND POETRY

“*Since I began writing I have always played games. . . . I have a playful nature; I have never been able to do things because it is my duty to do them. If I can find a way to do my duty by playing a game, then I can manage.*”

—MARIA IRENE  
FORNES,  
OBIE AWARD-WINNING  
PLAYWRIGHT

mind will say, “Hey, this isn’t so bad— I’ve got something to say about that!” And off you’ll go.

Each time you perform your writing ritual, the *next* time you write will be that much easier. Soon, your ritual will let you know: “*This is where you write. This is when you write. This is what you write with.*” No fooling around. Just writing.

## ENERGY AND ATTITUDE

Once you’ve tricked yourself into the first ten words, you need to keep your attitude positive and your energy high. When you see an intimidating wall starting to form in front of you, don’t ram your head into it; figure out a way to sneak around it. Try these few tricks and techniques:

- **Start anywhere, quickly.** No law says that when you sit down to write a draft, you have to “begin at the beginning.” If the first sentence is hard to write, begin with the first thoughts that come to mind. Or begin with a good example from your experience. Use that to get you going; then come back and rewrite your beginning after you’ve figured out what you want to say.
- **Write the easiest parts first.** Forcing yourself to start a piece of writing by working on the hardest part first is a sure way to make yourself hate writing. Take the path of least resistance. If you can’t get your thesis to come out right, jot down more examples. If you can’t think of examples, go back to brainstorming.
- **Keep moving.** Once you’ve plunged in, write as fast as you can—whether you are scribbling ideas out with a pencil or hitting the keys of a typewriter or a computer. Maintain your momentum. Reread if you need to, but then plunge ahead.
- **Quit when you know what comes next.** When you do have to quit for the day, stop at a place where you know what comes next. Don’t drain the well dry; stop in the middle of something you know how to finish. Make a few notes about what you need to do next and circle them. Leave yourself an easy place to get started next time.

One of the most important strategies for every writer is to *give yourself a break from the past and begin with a fresh image*. In many fields—mathematics, athletics, art,

engineering—some people are late bloomers. Don't let that C or D you got in English back in tenth grade hold you back now like a ball and chain. Imagine yourself cutting the chain and watching the ball roll away for good. Now you are free to start fresh with a clean slate. Your writing rituals should include only positive images about the writer you are right now and realistic expectations about what you can accomplish.

- **Visualize yourself writing.** Successful athletes know how to visualize a successful tennis swing, a basketball free throw, or a baseball swing. When you are planning your activities for the day, visualize yourself writing at your favorite place. Seeing yourself doing your writing will enable you to start writing more quickly and maintain a positive attitude.
- **Discover and emphasize the aspects of writing that are fun for you.** Emphasize whatever is enjoyable for you—discovering an idea, getting the organization of a paragraph to come out right, clearing the unnecessary words and junk out of your writing. Concentrating on the parts you enjoy will help you make it through the tougher parts.
- **Set modest goals for yourself.** Don't aim for the stars; just work on a sentence. Don't measure yourself against some great writer; be your own yardstick. Compare what you write to what *you* have written before.
- **Congratulate yourself for the writing you do.** Writing is hard work; you're using words to create ideas and meanings literally out of nothing. So pat yourself on the back occasionally. Keep in mind the immortal words of comedian and playwright Steve Martin: "I think I did pretty well, considering I started out with nothing but a bunch of blank paper."

### KEEPING A JOURNAL

Many writers keep some kind of notebook in which they write down their thoughts, ideas, plans, and important events. Some writers use a journal, a private place for their day-to-day thoughts. Other writers create weblogs, or "blogs," a more public place for their ideas. Both journals and blogs can be a "place for daily writing." If you choose a private, written journal, you can later select what you want others to read; if you use your blog, your thoughts and ideas are there for others to read and respond to. Whatever medium you choose, use it as part of your daily writing ritual. In it can go notes and ideas, bits and pieces of experience, or responses to essays or

*“I carry a journal with me almost all the time . . .”*

—NTOZAKE SHANGE,  
AUTHOR OF THE PLAY  
FOR COLORED GIRLS  
WHO HAVE  
CONSIDERED SUICIDE  
WHEN THE RAINBOW  
IS ENUE

*“The most valuable writing tool I have is my daybook. . . . I write in my lap, in the living room or on the porch, in the car or an airplane, in meetings at the university, in bed, or sitting down on a rock wall during a walk. . . . It is always a form of talking to myself, a way of thinking on paper.”*

—DONALD MURRAY,  
JOURNALIST, AUTHOR  
OF BOOKS AND ESSAYS  
ABOUT WRITING

### TEACHING TIP

If you choose to assign blogs rather than journals in your class, be sure to have the class discuss the issues of privacy. Students need to know that blogs are much more public than their journals: teachers will read them, their parents might read them, and whatever they write might still be accessible online when they are 25 or 35 or 55 years old. So, while blogs have an important advantage of teaching students about audience, they also have drawbacks if students treat them as a private diary.

books you're reading. Sometimes journals or blogs are assigned as part of your class work. In that case, you may do in-class, write-to-learn entries, plans for your essays, postscripts for an essay, or reflections on a portfolio. Your journal or blog can be a place for formal assignments or just a place to practice, a room where all your "fish paintings" go.

As the following list indicates, there are many kinds of journal entries. They fall into three categories: *reading entries*, *write-to-learn entries*, and *writing entries*. Reading entries help you understand and actively respond to student or professional writing. Write-to-learn entries help you summarize, react to, or question ideas or essays discussed in class. Writing entries help you warm up, test ideas, make writing plans, practice rhetorical strategies, or solve specific writing problems. All three kinds of journal writing, however, take advantage of the unique relationship between thinking, writing, and learning. Simply put, writing helps you learn what you know (and don't know) by shaping your thoughts into language.

### Reading Entries

- **Prereading journal entries.** Before you read an essay, read the headnote and write for five minutes on the topic of the essay—what you know about the subject, what related experiences you have had, and what opinions you hold. After you write your entry, the class can discuss the topic before you read the essay. The result? Your reading will be more active, engaged, and responsive.
- **Double-entry logs.** Draw a line vertically down a sheet of paper. On the left-hand side, summarize key ideas as you reread an essay. On the right-hand side, write down your reactions, responses, and questions. Writing while you read helps you understand and respond more thoroughly.
- **Essay annotations.** Writing your comments in the margin as you read is sometimes more efficient than writing separate journal entries. Also, in a small group in class, you can share your annotations and collaboratively annotate a copy of the essay.
- **Vocabulary entries.** Looking up unfamiliar words in a dictionary and writing out definitions in your journal will make you a much more accurate reader. Often an essay's thesis, meaning, or tone hinges on the meanings of a few key words.
- **Summary/response entries.** Double-entry logs help you understand while you reread, but a short one-paragraph summary and one-paragraph response after you finish your rereading helps you focus on both the main ideas of a passage and your own key responses.

## Write-to-Learn Entries

- **Lecture/discussion entries.** At key points in a class lecture or discussion, your teacher may ask you to write for five minutes by responding to a few questions: What is the main idea of the discussion? What one question would you like to ask? How does the topic of discussion relate to the essay that you are currently writing?
- **Responses to essays.** Before discussing an essay, write for a few minutes to respond to the following questions: What is the main idea of this essay? What do you like best about the essay? What is confusing, misleading, or wrong in this essay? What strategies illustrated in this essay will help you with your own writing?
- **Time-out responses.** During a controversial discussion or argument about an essay, your teacher may stop the class, take time out, and ask you to write for five minutes to respond to several questions: What key issue is the class debating? What are the main points of disagreement? What is your opinion? What evidence, either in the essay or in your experience, supports your opinion?

## Writing Entries

- **Warming up.** Writing, like any other kind of activity, improves when you loosen up, stretch, get the kinks out, practice a few lines. Any daybook or journal entry gives you a chance to warm up.
- **Collecting and shaping exercises.** Some journal entries will help you collect information by observing, remembering, or investigating people, places, events, or objects. You can also record quotations or startling statistics for future writing topics. Other journal entries suggested in each chapter of this book will help you practice organizing your information. Strategies of development, such as comparison/contrast, definition, classification, or process analysis will help you discover and shape ideas.
- **Writing for a specific audience.** In some journal entries, you need to play a role. Imagine that you are in a specific situation, writing for a defined audience. For example, you might write a letter of application for a job or letter to a friend explaining why you've chosen a certain major.
- **Revision plans and postscripts.** Your journal is also the place to keep a log—a running account of your writing plans, revision plans, problems, and solutions. Include your research notes, peer responses, and postscripts on your writing process in this log.

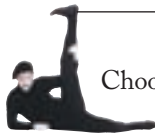
## TEACHING TIP

Teachers should help students learn and practice each of these three kinds of journal entries. Since students are likely to be unfamiliar with prereading journal entries, write-to-learn entries, and making revision plans and postscripts, be sure to model and practice these kinds of entries with your own class.

## TEACHING TIP

Teachers may prefer to assign one or two journal suggestions from the Warming Up exercise that relate to an upcoming class discussion. The students' responses to suggestion 2 will provide a good lead-in to a discussion of writing processes; suggestion 3 may point to problems that students have—or think they have. Suggestion 4 is vital: Do students think all essays have five paragraphs? Should students use big words, write in complicated sentences, and avoid using "I"? Ask each student to bring in one piece of "good" writing so that the class has specific examples of various styles, purposes, and genres of writing to illustrate their preconceptions or preferences.

- **Imitating styles of writers.** Use your journal to copy passages from writers you like. Practice imitating their styles on different topics. Also, try simply transcribing a few paragraphs. Even copying effective writers' words will reveal some of their secrets for successful writing.
- **Writing free journal entries.** Use your journal to record ideas, reactions to people on campus, events in the news, reactions to controversial articles in the campus newspaper, conversations after class or work, or just your private thoughts.



### WARMING UP: JOURNAL EXERCISES

Choose three of the exercises below and write for ten minutes on each. Date and number each entry.

1. Make an “authority” list of activities, subjects, ideas, places, people, or events that you already know something about. List as many topics as you can. If your reaction is “I’m not really an *authority* on anything,” then imagine you’ve met someone from another school, state, country, or historical period. With that person as your audience, what are you an “authority” on?
2. Choose one activity, sport, or hobby that you do well and that others might admire you for. In the form of a letter to a friend, describe the steps or stages of the process through which you acquired that skill or ability.
3. In two or three sentences, complete the following thought: “I have trouble writing because . . .”
4. In a few sentences, complete the following thought: “In my previous classes and from my own writing experience, I’ve learned that the three most important rules about writing are . . .”
5. Describe your own writing rituals. *When, where, and how* do you write best?
6. Write an open journal entry. Describe events from your day, images, impressions, bits of conversation—anything that catches your interest. For possible ideas for open journal entries, read the following essay by Roy Hoffman.
7. Look again at the chapter opening work of art by Edouard Manet, *Monet Painting in His Floating Studio*. If you have taken an art class, have you drawn or painted outdoors, as Monet is depicted? What are the advantages

or disadvantages of painting outside versus in a studio? Similarly, as a writer or student, can you read or write effectively while sitting outside, or do you need to be inside, in a work environment? Does it depend on what you are reading or writing? Explain.



## PROFESSIONAL WRITING

### ON KEEPING A JOURNAL

Roy Hoffman

*In a Newsweek On Campus essay, Roy Hoffman describes his own experience, recording events and trying out ideas just as an artist doodles on a sketch pad. Your own journal entries about events, images, descriptions of people, and bits of conversation will not only improve your writing but also become your own personal time capsule, to dig up and reread in the year 2020.*

Wherever I go I carry a small notebook in my coat or back pocket for 1  
thoughts, observations and impressions. As a writer I use this notebook as  
an artist would a sketch pad, for stories and essays, and as a sporadic jour-  
nal of my comings and goings. When I first started keeping notebooks,  
though, I was not yet a professional writer. I was still in college.

I made my first notebook entries . . . just after my freshman year, in 2  
what was actually a travel log. A buddy and I were setting out to trek from  
our Alabama hometown to the distant tundra of Alaska. With unbounded  
enthusiasm I began: "Wild, crazy ecstasy wants to wrench my head from my  
body." The log, written in a university composition book, goes on to chron-  
icle our adventures in the land where the sun never sets, the bars never close  
and the prepipeline employment prospects were so bleak we ended up tak-  
ing jobs as night janitors.

When I returned to college that fall I had a small revelation: the world 3  
around me of libraries, quadrangles, Frisbees and professors was as rich  
with material for my journals and notebooks as galumphing moose and  
garrulous fishermen.

These college notebooks, which built to a pitch my senior year, are 4  
gold mines to me now. Classrooms, girlfriends, cups of coffee and lines of

poetry—from mine to John Keats’s—float by like clouds. As I lie beneath these clouds again, they take on familiar and distinctive shapes.

Though I can remember the campus’s main quadrangle, I see it more vividly when I read my description of school on a visit during summer break: “the muggy, lassitudinal air . . . the bird noises that cannot be pointed to, the summer emptiness that grows emptier with a few students squeaking by the library on poorly oiled bicycles.” An economics professor I fondly remember returns with less fondness in my notebooks, “staring down at the class with his equine face.” And a girl I had a crush on senior year, whom I now recall mistily, reappears with far more vitality as “the ample, slightly-gawky, whole-wheat, fractured object of my want gangling down the hall in spring heat today.”

When, in reading over my notebooks, I am not peering out at quadrangles, midterm exams, professors or girlfriends, I see a portrait of my parents and hometown during holidays and occasional weekend breaks. Like a wheel, home revolves, each turn regarded differently depending on the novel or political essay I’d been most influenced by the previous semester.

Mostly, though, in wandering back through my notebooks, I meet someone who could be my younger brother: the younger version of myself. The younger me seems moodier, more inquisitive, more fun-loving and surprisingly eager to stay up all night partying or figuring out electron orbitals for a 9 A.M. exam. The younger me wanders through a hall of mirrors of the self, writes of “seeing two or three of myself on every corner,” and pens long meditations on God and society before scribbling in the margin, “what a child I am.” The younger me also finds humor in trying to keep track of this hall of mirrors, commenting in ragged verse.

*I hope that one day  
Some grandson or cousin  
Will read these books,  
And know that I was  
Once a youth  
Sitting in drugstores with  
Anguished looks.  
And poring over coffee,  
And should have poured  
The coffee  
Over these lines.*

I believe that every college student should attempt to keep some form of notebook, journal or diary. A notebook is a secret garden in which to dance, sing, muse, wander, perform handstands, even cry. In the privacy of this little book, you can make faces, curse, turn somersaults and ask yourself if you're really in love. A notebook or journal is one of the few places you can call just your own.

. . . Journal writing suffers when you let someone, in your mind, look over your shoulder. Honesty wilts when a parent, teacher or friend looms up in your imagination to discourage you from putting your true thoughts on the page. Journal writing also runs a related hazard: the dizzying suspicion that one day your private thoughts, like those of Samuel Pepys or Virginia Woolf, will be published in several volumes and land up required reading for English 401. How can you write comfortably when the eyes of all future readers are upon you? Keep your notebooks with the abandon of one who knows his words will go up in smoke. Then you might really strike fire a hundred years or so from now if anyone cares to pry.

By keeping notebooks, you improve your writing ability, increasing your capacity to communicate both with yourself and others. By keeping notebooks, you discover patterns in yourself, whether lazy ones that need to be broken or healthy ones that can use some nurturing. By keeping notebooks, you heighten some moments and give substance to others: even a journey to the washateria offers potential for some off-beat journal observations. And by keeping notebooks while still in college, you chart a terrain that, for many, is more dynamically charged with ideas and discussions than the practical, workaday world just beyond. Notebooks, I believe, not only help us remember this dynamic charge, but also help us sustain it.

Not long ago, while traveling with a friend in Yorktown, Va., I passed by a time capsule buried in the ground in 1976, intended to be dug up in 2076. Keeping notebooks and journals is rather like burying time capsules into one's own life. There's no telling what old rock song, love note, philosophical complaint or rosy Saturday morning you'll unearth when you dig up these personal time capsules. You'll be able to piece together a remarkable picture of where you've come from, and may well get some important glimmers about where you're going.

