

# Have notebook, will travel

Keeping pen and pad at the ready, this writer has cultivated a unique view of the world

I teach a course in personal-essay writing through my local adult-education program. On the first night of class, I present each student with a small notebook. A gift. Free of charge. Comes with the price of admission. Handing them out to my students, I quote Henry James: A good writer is “one ... on whom nothing is lost.”

I ask the students to carry their notebooks with them always. I ask them to notice: the warm blue November sky; the briny smell of the Atlantic; the balding man with the blue argyle socks sitting outside the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Mass., and staring up at the bronzed statue of Samantha Stephens of *Bewitched* with such melancholy that you'd think the TV witch had been his betrothed.

The notebooks only cost 39 cents each. It's a negligible investment on my part. But my students are thrilled with their gifts.

“We haven't even done anything yet,” one protested.

“Will you inscribe mine?” another student requested.

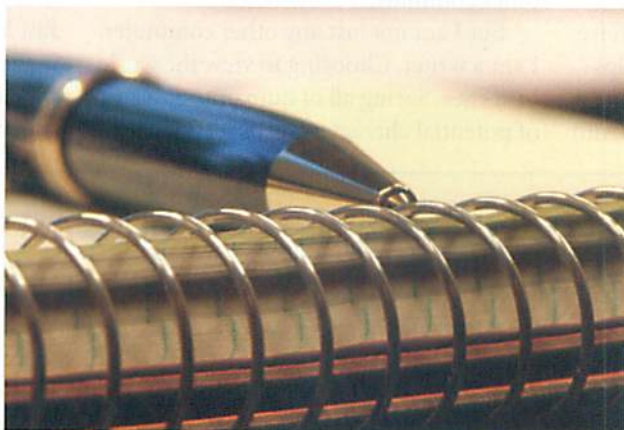
“Ideas come in odd places and at strange times,” I warn my students. “You've got to be ready for them.”

I share some of my own scribbles with the class. For example, I recently ate dinner with my husband at a local restaurant. At the salad bar, as I dipped into the lettuce bowl and plucked tomatoes from underneath the sneeze guard, I noticed that I was the only woman there not carrying my purse. I had left it, unattended, at my table. When I got back to said table, I took my notebook from said purse and wrote, “Do you take your purse to the salad bar?”—a reference to a compare-

and-contrast essay that could begin like this: “The world is divided into two types of women: those who take their purses to the salad bar and those who throw caution to the wind and leave them right there for the taking.”

Like any writer, I love language. I once wrote “use the word ‘slake’” in my notebook after hearing an NPR anchor talk about slaking the public's hunger for justice after the Wall Street crash.

I recently discovered the word “limn,”



**“Ideas come in odd places and at strange times,” our writer says. “You’ve got to be ready for them.” That’s why she advises her students to always carry a notebook.**

and I fell in love with it instantly. To me, its sound was silky, its meaning precise, and, being a monosyllable, it was very economical. I inscribed it right away in my notebook. I soon used it in a query letter, as in “the attached essay limns the fine balance between grief and gratitude.” Since the essay was accepted for publication in record time, I considered my new word something of a lucky charm as well.

About a month after my discovery, *The Baltimore Sun* ran a headline with the word limn in it. This created quite a

brouhaha as, apparently, readers did not like having to look up the word. I, on the other hand, was devastated. My secret was out. With all of the news coverage, my newfound honey of a word was now known to millions. John E. McIntyre, self-described language maven and night content production manager at the *Sun*, said of the limn controversy: “Now that you know what it means, it is yours forever.” Yeah, mine and about 200,000 other *Sun* readers. I may just have to cross that word out of my notebook.

I know a married couple, both writers. They have an agreement. When they are out together for the evening and hear a particular gem of dialogue, whoever says “dibs!” first gets to use it in his or her next piece.

I have a similar agreement with the members of the writing group I've belonged to for more than 10 years. The other night we were discussing the pervasiveness of texting. One member recalled seeing a family of four sitting in a theater waiting for the play to begin, all texting away. “We've become our own parody,” she mused. “Dibs!” I called and wrote it down right away. It has since become the title for a recent blog post.

Sometimes I know just where a reaped word or phrase will go. Other times, the words can sit for months or years in my notebook before finding a home. I had never heard the words “mercy meal” until recently, when a friend described the luncheon she'd attended after the funeral of a colleague who had died suddenly. I copied the words into my notebook, hoping she didn't notice me taking out my pen. I know I will use them someday.

I keep my notebook next to me when I



drive, too. Listening to the radio, watching scenery, observing my fellow commuters, I always manage to eke out at least one useful observation on my way to or from work. I grab my notebook and pen, do my best to keep my eyes on the road, and jot away, all the while aware that there ought to be a law against writing and driving for people like me.

I believe that I do see the world differently because I am ever ready to capture it on the page.

Just the other day I was driving over the Route 95 bridge on my way to work. I glanced at the side of the road and noticed the construction work on the Chain Bridge off to my right. Two huge cranes were perched on either side of a great

versations for subtext, ear to the regional ground, alert for local flavors of dialogue. And that, in the end, is the real gift to my students, not *some* 39-cent notebook. It's that unique view of the world that all writers share.

Indeed, I am not the first writer to see the value of getting out from behind our desks and into the world with a fresh eye. In the July 2011 issue of this very magazine, Tom Wolfe said, "If you spent 30 days in any place in this country, ... you would come up with material you never knew existed before."

I don't think you need 30 days. I think you just need to be that person that Henry James described: the one on whom nothing is lost. Oh, and carry a notebook.

### Carolyn Roy-Bornstein

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## I am a writer. Choosing to view the world in scenes. Seeing all of humanity as a cast of potential characters.

As the writing course moves on, my students share their notebook entries.

"You old sly boots," one had copied down, listening to a story on the radio.

"I got my idea for this piece from writing in my notebook," another announced excitedly, after reading her essay aloud.

I haven't lost my enthusiasm for my notebook, either. I try to write every morning before I leave for work. I believe it opens up a lens in my mind and helps me to see the world as a writer. Looking for opportunities, subjects and ideas. And

divide where the guts of the bridge had been wrenched apart. At that moment, the cranes appeared to be immersed in some kind of dance or mating ritual. I scribbled the scene down in my notebook, pretty sure that if I had not been writing earlier that morning, that scene would have just passed me by, like any other commuter.

But I am not just any other commuter. I am a writer. Choosing to view the world in scenes. Seeing all of humanity as a cast of potential characters. Prospecting con-

## 7 tips for keeping a notebook that feeds your work

**I HAND OUT** inexpensive notebooks to my writing students and suggest they use them in the following ways to develop their observational skills as well as story ideas:

**Take a bus ride or a train trip.** It doesn't matter where. Jot down snippets of overheard conversation. (The "quiet car" won't do!) Be alert for local accents or unusual turns of phrase.

**Head to wherever your story takes place.** (OK, if it's set in Paris, this may be difficult.) But if your characters are 20-somethings, take in a rock concert. Is your protagonist a crotchety old man? Visit a local nursing home and get some of the residents talking.

**Get comfortable with new words.** When reading a book or newspaper, write down every word you don't know the meaning of. Look up their definitions. (Warning: This exercise may start a love affair between you and a particular word!) Use one of your new words in your next piece.

**Shake up your routine.** Being stuck in a rut can dull your

senses. Take a different route to work one day this week. The change of scenery will sharpen your powers of observation. When you get where you're going (don't write and drive like I do!), take a few moments to write down all the new sights you passed.

**Keep a running list of character habits.** Whether you're writing fiction or nonfiction, characters with unique quirks, habits and mannerisms are more round and memorable than flat, cookie-cutter protagonists. Capturing and cataloging friends' and strangers' ticks and eccentricities will give you an armamentarium of literary traits to draw on as needed.

**Use quotation marks and cite sources.** That way you won't inadvertently plagiarize someone else's work.

**Color-code your notes to keep them organized.** Before I file away a notebook, I color-code it with brightly colored markers: Yellow for essay ideas. Orange for short-story ideas. Blue signifies items I might be able to use in my novel. Pink highlights unique words or phrases that can go anywhere. Customize your color key for your own needs.

—C.R.

