



7-11-2012

## Feed Your Writer's Notebook This Summer

Julie Patterson

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### Recommended Citation

Patterson, Julie. "Feed Your Writer's Notebook This Summer." Indiana Partnership for Young Writers, 2012. Available from: [http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/iypw\\_articles/17](http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/iypw_articles/17)

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July 11, 2012

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Click here to download [Sandra Cisneros' story "Eleven"](#) that Julie mentions.



### For more notebook strategies:

Read/re-read our article ["Julie's 5 Most Frequently Used Notebook Strategies."](#) originally published in September 2011.

**Julie's 5 most frequently used Notebook Strategies**

By Julie Patterson

People always ask, "How do you come up with ideas for writing?" So I analyzed my writer's notebook and identified my most frequently used strategies for recording, nurturing and thinking about story content. Here's what I found:

- 1. Photographs**

I'm long thought of and talked about my writing as a response to the world around me. It's the capture of that actual experience - and writing about them - in my writer's notebook. I choose photos that have significance to me in my other, outer and existing worlds along Dakota Beach or the way from the dock at Lake Umbagog to my husband's office at sunset. Typically, the writing about these photos in my notebook begins with a brief, personal description of what I saw. As my perspective evolves, the text around the photo grows more abstract and begins to include details not visible in the original photograph. In this way, these notebook entries help my memory and reveal "story worthy" material.
- 2. Conversations**

My notebooks are peppered with short entries of dialogue. Sometimes I write down what I hear in a conversation because they help me identify details or topics that might connect with readers like the young woman I heard talking about her summer job. "I'm 28. I'm being market value. I've got to take more classes," she said. "But this is what you should have done," she said. "Who's house would you live in, anyway?"
- 3. Close observations**

These entries are much like my writing about photographs, except instead of studying a picture, I'm looking at the world around me. Generally, I clearly observe and record something that catches my curiosity. Once I write a page entry about a subject, I usually return to it in a few days. "Who's the Year's Table? I don't know what it is for. It's a table that the summer meeting for another 15 or 20 people. They spend their money spending about who'd give her the table entry."
- 4. Close observations**

My close observations are not always objects. Sometimes they are scenes I witness that lead to think more about them. One time I sat next to a young man in a bus stop. He was reading a newspaper and on a bus stop seat. In my notebook, I wrote a short description of the bus, how it was crowded against the door and another person stared with no one around.

**Julie Patterson** is associate director and writer-in-residence at the Indiana Partnership for Young Writers. Her poems, essays and articles have appeared in literary journals, magazines and newspapers throughout the U.S. She has a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing from Lesley University.

Dear Teachers and Writers,

Summer is a great time to tend to your writer's notebook. You can "stock up" on notebook entries that will support your mini-lessons during the school year. Not sure what to write? Here are some notebook strategies to help fuel your inspiration.

Julie Patterson  
IPYW writer-in-residence

**Pick a fight. Take a stand.** My writer's notebook often serves as a "safe place" where I can say things I wouldn't necessarily say aloud to anyone. That doesn't necessarily mean secrets, though. My notebook is also a great place for me to rant or flesh out my opinions and reactions to controversial things I experience.

I invite you to try it, too. What have you heard someone say, read in the newspaper or seen on TV recently that honked you off? Try "talking back" to someone in your notebook. Pick a fight, especially if it's over a big societal issue.

## Birthdays

I have a summer birthday, so this time of year is inextricably linked to birthdays in my mind. On top of that, I recently studied Sandra Cisneros' "Eleven" (a short story about an embarrassing 11th birthday, attached at left) with a group of middle and high school students *and* I'm anxiously anticipating the birth day of my first child, so it's probably no surprise that I've been writing about birthdays in my notebook.

What birthday(s) stand out in your memory (your birthday or someone else's)? As you write about it/them, try to not only "report" what happened but also to think deeply about why those particular memories stick with you. Think about the extremes of birthdays-what was the best one? Worst? What's your stance on birthdays-are they to be celebrated or ignored/hidden? What does your birth date (or time, location) say about you? What "family legends" surround your birth? (For example, legend has it that my brother cried for weeks when he found out I was a girl. "I already have a sister," he wailed, asking Mom and Dad if I could be returned to the hospital and exchanged, like a duplicate Christmas gift.)

You don't need to answer *all* of these questions about birthdays, of course, but do some thinking about them in your notebook. See if you uncover any "story worthy" material.

## Stare.

"The writer should never be ashamed of staring. There is nothing that does not require his attention." - Flannery O'Connor

O'Connor's *Complete Stories*, a collection of short stories, won the National Book Award for Fiction in 1972 and is still widely circulated today. "Staring" may very well have inspired many of her stories since she is known not only for her attention to detail (sometimes describing an object with specific details that foreshadow larger events to come in the story) but also for well developed characters that are often "morally flawed." I can't help but believe she spent a lot of time people watching.

Let O'Connor's wisdom feed your muse. Go to the park (or the mall if the temperature climbs too high) and people watch (or dog watch or flower watch). Eavesdrop. Stare. Try to really get to know someone. Record your observations in your notebook. Your notes may inform a fictional character or poem that you create some day!

