



By Joe Byerly

There are several great articles ([here](#), [here](#), or [here](#)) about the importance of writing for publication, but what about the importance of writing for yourself? From [Marcus Aurelius](#) to [George Patton](#) and [Leonardo da Vinci](#) to [Bill Gates](#), these leaders and inventors kept personal notebooks or notecards where they captured quotes, maxims, ideas, or anything else they found of interest. As we look back now into their private writings, we find evidence of the intellectual growth that made them successful. For instance, Patton copied down insights at West Point that would eventually become his fighting style decades later. So let's explore why keeping a notebook is so important to our personal growth.

There are numerous benefits to writing things down in a notebook (mine are typically green). Notebooks allow us to capture our thoughts, experiences, or nuggets of wisdom that we might come across in books, podcasts, or the work place. Second, the act of transferring

our thoughts from the mind onto a piece of paper can drive us to reflect on and process our experiences. Finally, our notebooks can become a springboard for connecting disparate thoughts and observations to create new ideas, innovations, and grow as individuals.

## Capture

Notebooks are perfect for helping us remember passages in a book, notes from a meeting, capture lessons learned or [to break down a task into a to-do list of items to accomplish](#). Think of a notebook as an external hard drive for the brain. Writing things down enable us to capture those memories or thoughts, and download them onto the page for future reference. [Research even suggests](#) that “taking notes by hand forces the brain to engage in some heavy “mental lifting,” and these efforts foster comprehension and retention”.

Typically when I finish a book, I will return to it and transfer my margin notes, highlighted passages, or additional reading (footnotes and endnotes are great for this) into my notebook. This extra step takes about thirty minutes, but it is worth it. I now have a single source that is packed with wisdom from professional reading.

From a practical standpoint, I find my notebook especially helpful with staying on top of tasks at work. One of my personal goals is to be able to eat dinner every night with my family. While not always successful, one of the ways in which I’ve been able to achieve this is by writing down everything I leave uncompleted so that it’s the first thing I read when I come into work the next day. And it is the last thing I do before I walk out of the office. On more than one occasion, I would have forgotten the task completely if it wasn’t for the list sitting in my notebook.

I also believe that we cannot overstate the importance of capturing lessons learned from training events, work failures/successes, and any major project that we undertake outside of work. If you think about it, we worked hard to achieve (insert your achievement here) and more than likely we’re going to forget most of what we learned months or years later. If you write it down, you will find that when you come up against a similar problem in the future, you will have written yourself notes to help you think through it much faster.

## Process

Writing things down in a notebook help us to process experiences or what we read and pull lessons from them. While experiences and reading are great for leader development, it is not what happens to us that matters the most, it is [how we interpret those events that shape what we will take from them](#). Numerous researchers have echoed this fact, such as Dr.

David Kolb, who included the step of reflection in his [adult learning model](#).

For instance, if we take the time to think through a successful experience (or a failure) and jot down our thoughts, we might find that the [root of that outcome was not what we thought on the surface](#). We might see that our successful rating period wasn't the result of our own brilliance, but those of a hard working subordinate, which means we need to work harder on our shortcomings. The act of processing our experiences is a critical component to our development. Dr. Morgan McCall, author of [High Flyers: Developing the Next Generation of Leaders](#) argues that by reflecting on our failures *and* our successes, we are less likely to develop toxic tendencies as we move up the organizational ladder.

Earlier in this post I discussed how I capture what I read in my notebook. The simple act of transferring a quote or passage from a book, article, or podcast into our notebooks actually [forces us to process what we read](#). I have found that this is where I get those “aha” moments. And if I don't capture these fleeting insights, I know that they will get lost in the daily grind that is life.



Captain Paul Guzman's Notebooks

### **Connect and Create**

Once we have processed and captured our thoughts in our notebooks, we open the door for creativity to take over. When we start connecting unrelated entries, we can develop new ideas, key insights, and make our organizations and ourselves better.

In the book, [\*The Innovator's DNA\*](#) by Christensen, Dyer, and Gregersen, the authors highlight how successful innovators typically connect disparate elements to create something new. For example, Larry Page connected academic citations with web searches and came up with the idea of Google. When we capture ideas in our notebook, we open ourselves up to the same creative muse that drove Page, Jobs, and other “innovators” to make something new.

When we go back and reflect on past notes, we might connect a passage we read last week with an experience or something else you read from a few years ago, and develop a new insight. When I read a study about [sleep deprivation](#) and reflected on my notes from a 2015 rotation at the National Training Center, I thought about some controls I could put into place to ensure that my organization did not suffer those same effects. Or when I read [\*The Last Place on Earth\*](#), a book about Arctic exploration, and compared those notes with the ones I took from Clausewitz' [\*On War\*](#), I developed some [new insights](#) on friction and war.

### **Grab a Notebook and Start Writing!**

The act of writing things down in a notebook helps us to capture what is important, process our experiences, and connect and create new ideas. It is one of those practices that require very little investment (5-10 minutes a day) and provides a huge payoff.

### **Further Reading**

For more on the importance of keeping a notebook, check out:

[The Pocket Notebooks of 20 Famous Men](#)

[How and Why to Keep a Commonplace Notebook](#)

[The Life-Changing Habit of Journaling \(Why Einstein, Leonardo da Vinci, and Many More Great Minds Recommend it\)](#)

[Writing in a Journal has Helped me Create My Future and Achieve My Goals](#)

[3 Scientific Links Between Handwriting Your Notes and Memory](#)

[A Learning Secret: Don't Take Notes with a Laptop](#)

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