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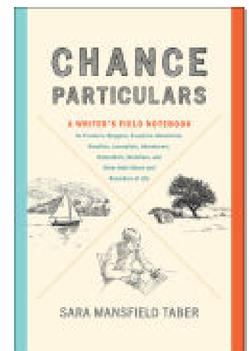

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CHANCE PARTICULARS

A WRITER'S FIELD NOTEBOOK

for Travelers, Bloggers, Essayists, Memoirists, Novelists, Journalists, Adventurers, Naturalists, Sketchers, and Other Note-Takers and Recorders of Life

SARA MANSFIELD TABER

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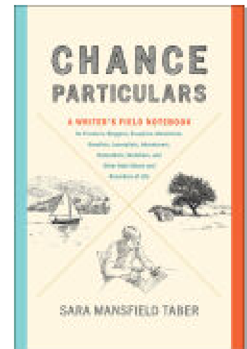
Contents



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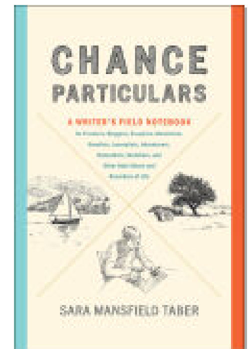
CHANCE

PARTICULARS

Introduction



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INTRODUCTION

Alastair Reid, in *Whereabouts: Notes on Being a Foreigner*, describes the zest of the traveler on arrival in a new country:

> In a foreign country, the pattern of days is less predictable—each one has its character, and is easier to remember. So, too, the weather; and so, too, the shape and feel of newspapers, the sound of bells, the taste of beer and bread. It is all rather like waking up and not knowing who or where one is. . . . Quite ordinary things take on an edge; one keeps discovering oneself miraculously alive.

The goal of the writer—whether traveler, memoirist, journalist, novelist, or one who keeps a log just for himself—is to live with the keenness of the foreigner, to experience, wide-eyed, the sensations aroused and the events offered up by his peculiar surrounds and then to evoke them so brightly on the page that the reader, too, experiences the foreigner's frisson: discovers him- or herself invigorated, transported to another full and miraculous life. A time-honored way this may be accomplished is through the keeping of a field notebook: through the faithful recording of the this-and-that of life; the atmospheres and incidents; the bells, the beer, the bread.

For many years I have welcomed adults into my writing seminars—wonderful people writing of their travels, their explorations of cattlemen or the KGB, their childhoods, their fictional characters, their complex, rich lives. Often they arrive with bundles of journals and letters, sheaves of collected writings, and rubber-banded stacks of torn envelopes and newspaper corners scribbled with notes they want to turn into vivid memoirs, essays, travel pieces, literary journalism, or stories. Each and every person who enters my room has unique tales to tell and wisdom to impart.

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The one thing they too often lack is adequate notes on the very people and places they want to write about. Their notes—and consequently their writings (at least initially)—have a fundamental flaw: an insufficiency of concrete and sensory detail with which to build flavorful, satisfying stories. They haven't made notes at the level of precision that causes a time, place, scene, person, or emotion to quicken on the page. They lack sufficient rich description in their field notebooks—whether those "notebooks" be index cards, computer files, paper-clipped scraps of jottings, or classic black books.

When traveling, gathering bits of the past for a memoir, assembling material for a novel or reportage, or keeping a journal or blog, it is difficult to hold in the mind the many aspects of an experience to record—the very details that would make the experience come to life on the page. I have composed this "field notebook for field notebook keepers" to rectify the situation—to ensure that the holder will keep a notebook so bountiful that the writing, and the essays and stories that may later come from the jottings, will fall off the page like ripe plums.

To me, the two words *field notebook* are among the most romantic in the language. They conjure: Charles Darwin hunching on Galápagoan rocks describing finches; Margaret Mead filling a book with the antics of Samoan girls; Virginia Woolf penning her diary after a day's tramp through the downs; George Orwell huddled in a Barcelona café reporting on the Spanish Civil War.

Muddy-boot biologists, mosquito-slapping naturalists, war reporters, diarists, novelists, voyagers, literary journalists, urban bloggers, ethnographers, and myriad other explorers and watchers—I can see them all clearly in my mind's eye, jotting *in situ* their observations of the world. What these varied scribblers all have in common is the impulse and the need to keep bright notes on life's offerings—to keep a field notebook.

To take time in the midst of, or at the conclusion of, a long day of immersion, to set down that experience in ink in a notebook, is the writer's primary and most basic method for capturing and recording the stuff of life. The proper keeping of a field notebook is key. To me, it is not only one of life's chief joys but a sacred practice.

Besides its practical and romantic purpose—to trap in print that Monarch butterfly that is life on the page—the words *field notebook* also connote hard work. I know the labor well from my own anthropological and literary journalistic field researches for books on the lives of people in Argentina and France, as well as from my forays into memoir and essay. The discipline and devotion required to plunk oneself down at the end of a day of interviewing, hanging out with shepherds, observing the effects of war, or visiting friends to inscribe in ink for all time those events is not to be belittled.

The first field notebook I ever kept was for a field study of Patagonian right whales, my second for a study of Argentine sheep ranchers, and, hooked, I have kept up the practice since, for sundry other writing endeavors.

The practice of the field notebook was, to me, a revelation, as portable paint and easel must have been for the nineteenth-century discoverers of painting *en plein air*. It was also a revolution—a way to grab the spindly leg of life as it flickered by and pin it forever to the page. More, it was a way to live—and to savor that lived life. It offered the chance to live life thrice—at the point of experience, at the point of note-taking, and at the point of reviewing the observations and setting them into a structured tale. Think of the field notebook as a writer's sketchbook.

But why the need for this book: a field notebook for field-notebook keepers? Isn't note-taking an obvious, easy sort of thing—one we all mastered in high school if not before? No, it is not at all easy, especially not to do well.

I have experienced its failings myself. I arrived home from my first year and a half in Patagonia, for instance, having not recorded a single conversation with the ranchers I afterward yearned to write about. I was granted the opportunity of returning to right this negligence and to undertake systematic fieldwork, but such luck is rare. Years later, this time with memoir-writing in mind, when I went to my carton-filled basement to excavate my supposedly rich archive of youthful journals, I had a similar shock: there was nothing in those pages and pages of pennings worth using in a sentence, much less in a book-length memoir. Most of the writing was generalizing and caterwauling on the page. (This is not to belittle the emotional benefit of journal-as-release, but it's advantageous, for the writerly sort, if the journal can serve simultaneously another fruitful purpose.) In my diaries there was no mention of the croquettes eaten or account of the intense conversations my friend Ali and I had about how to catch a boy—the specifics that might have brought those eighth-grade years back in full color. The truth is, it is rare for untutored journal writers and travelers to actually record more than generalities like "Had a delicious meal last night with James and Charlotte," or "The countryside was beautiful." Most record-keepers forget the very details—the beef stew with pickles, the bounding yellow fields of rape, the encounter with a gypsy, the ponderings about beauty—that would cause the experience to live in the reader's mind.

In her beloved novel *Out of Africa* Isak Dinesen evoked for all time the beautiful landscape and wise Kikuyu people of Kenya. Here she recreates an encounter she had after a flight with her friend Denys Finch-Hatton:

> Once, when Denys and I had been up, and were landing on the plain of the farm, a very old Kikuyu came up and talked to us:

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> “You were very high to-day,” he said, “we could not see you, only hear the airplane sing like a bee.”
>
> I agreed that we had been up high.
>
> “Did you see God?” he asked.
>
> “No, Ndwetti,” I said, “we did not see God.”
>
> “Aha, then you were not up high enough,” he said, “but now tell me: do you think that you will be able to get up high enough to see him?”
>
> “I do not know, Ndwetti,” I said.
>
> “And you, Bedâr,” he said, turning to Denys, “what do you think? Will you get up high enough in your aeroplane to see God?”
>
> “Really I do not know,” said Denys.
>
> “Then,” said Ndwetti, “I do not know at all why you two go on flying.”

And here, M. F. K. Fisher, inveterate traveler and gourmande extraordinaire, sets before the reader, in *The Gastronomical Me*, a buffet of the meals she enjoyed during a 1936 voyage on a Dutch passenger-freighter:

> I don’t remember much about the food, except that it was very different from the almost lavish cuisine of the other freighter we knew, the Italian one. It was dull, good, heavy food, but there were many vegetables and salads all the way to England. The coffee was fine, and this time we could afford to drink Dutch beer when we wanted it, and quite a lot of delicate Rhine wine.
>
> The baker had a fight with the chef soon after we left port, and the barber took over all the pastry making . . . or so we heard. We had cake twice a day, in many different shapes but always the same. It was almost like cold omelet, as if it were made of hundreds of egg yolks stirred with a lot of sugar and a little flour and then baked. It was usually in thin solid pieces, like small bricks, elaborately topped with glacéed fruits and always served with flavored whipped cream.
>
> We often had a thick green soup, in the colder seas, filled with cabbage and potatoes and leeks and always with slices of link-sausage floating in it.
>
> And there was one unattractive but delicious thing, a kind of sludge of different vegetables flavored with ham, which the waiter called Udgie-pudgie. I finally saw on a menu that it was Hodgepodge. The captain said the crew loved it, and it was indeed good, in a simple crude way that might offend or bore sophisticated palates.

What if Isak Dinesen had simply written, “Met an old Kikuyu”? and if M. F. K. Fisher had simply noted, “The food was variable onboard ship”?

I have assembled this manual so that, when you are writing in your diary, or dashing off sentences in your travel journal, or recording your field notes for your book of literary journalism, or composing your blog or memoir or novel, you will have a ready reference that will prompt you to record the kinds of details and observations and stories that make for evocative records and tales of life. So

that you will summon the sensory detail you need; record the conversations, gestures, and habits of the people you meet; and describe the land with such richness that the people and places you are trying so valiantly to capture spring from the page. And so that, later, when you return to your notes in order to reexperience those times or to turn them into finished pieces of writing, you will have there, in your notebook, the very accounts and stories and details you need and will only have to pluck and arrange.

In this book I set forth lists of all the kinds of material to record while you are traveling or gathering material, while you are blog- or journal-keeping or assembling your (memoir-writing) trip back in time: so that you will not omit some vital aspect and kick yourself later, as I so often have. You will inevitably forget some choice tidbits, but I intend, through the use of this guide, to shorten the list of the forgotten.

When I set out on my large, sprawling book-writing projects—my immersion in the lives of the sheep ranchers of Patagonia and my inquiry into the making of a French village bread loaf—compulsive that I am, I compiled a two-inch, three-ring binder's worth of questionnaires and lists of the aspects of life I wanted to ask about—from inventories of household goods and mental health protocols to queries about money, friendship, and my informants' philosophies of life. I made lists of the kinds of observations I wanted to make of the landscape, street interactions, meals eaten. . . . Over time I threw out the formal questionnaires and boiled my list down to just the sorts of details that could, when later reread at home base, lend themselves to the re-creation and recollection of a people and place. I offer the revised list to the reader here. Despite the deletions, the list still casts a wide net, and its suggestions may seem simple or obvious. When it gets to the actual work in the field, however, it is not so easy to remember to take the time to describe the teacup your sea captain drank from as he recounted his shipwreck in the Falkland Islands—and that teacup may end up the vital metaphor for the entire piece. You never quite know ahead of time what form your final piece of writing will take, so as much detail as you can get down in the field will be money in the bank. I guarantee you will never regret a single extra jotting you made. Instead, you will gloat over your treasures.

I've conceived this guide to be useful for any kind of writing from life: for those, such as voyagers or travel essayists, traveling through a place; for those, like literary journalists, who immerse themselves in a place and systematically collect interview and observational material; for bloggers and diarists; for those working from memory; or for novelists wishing to summon a real place to the page. The book may be a useful reminder to any who strive to recreate a time and place, create vivid portraits, keep a record of their own life's

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events, or paint a picture of a particular landscape or culture or locale.

There are many fine writing guides that instruct the reader about how to describe a landscape, fashion a portrait, and craft a scene. What this book offers is the assurance that you will have the material with which to write those memorable descriptions, portraits, and scenes. I see this as an old-fashioned handbook or primer, a reminder in the form of lists of what to take notes on while wandering and sojourning in new spots, while reflecting on your life, and while composing and recreating a time, a set of people, and a place. Given that each project is unique, I invite you to add to and personalize this list using the space I have left for that purpose.

The book begins with a review of the elements of fine writing, a reminder, through an example of lively prose, of what it is built of. Then follow eleven sections, each of which spotlights a different kind of material that may be included in a field notebook and that, when accumulated, may yield a satisfying, rich, and thorough coverage of life experience.

PURPOSE OF THE NOTEBOOK

Here, I invite you to set down your initial aims and questions—practical, personal, and intellectual—as you take up your field notebook.

CHANCE PARTICULARS

In this section I urge you to attend to, and make note of, your sensory impressions and record concrete details of your world with specificity and precision. This practice, applied across all the kinds of material I suggest you collect, makes writing shine.

PLACE

I list in this section the many aspects of place you may wish to record, from landscape and botany to architectural features and street scenes.

PEOPLE

Here is where I direct you to put in print your interviewees' gestures and hairpins along with their conversation, and I urge you to take the time to jot down chance encounters with firemen, bakers, and artists, as well as to make note of your own activities.

FACTS, HISTORY, AND CULTURE

In this section I prompt you to gather the basic information that undergirds your story: population, historical events, sociology, and other background. In addition I suggest that you get on paper your noticings about how people in this particular culture (even if it is your own) eat pie or greet one another.

TECHNICAL AND OTHER PERTINENT INFORMATION

Here I suggest that you record the procedures for curing warts or producing newspapers—whatever may be germane to your interests and objectives.

CHRONICLE

I urge you, in this section, to get down the incidents of ordinary daily life and the inviting aroma of those artichoke tarts you grab when hunger strikes,

as well as the names of the fleabag or luxurious hotels you may stay in while traveling.

PERSONAL RESPONSES

The recording of personal, emotional responses to events is a critical part of any field notebook. I advocate that you capture them here. They are what make the record truly yours—unique and authentic.

COMMONPLACE NOTES

This section serves as a reminder to register perspectives and quotations from scholars and experts in your field of interest and to copy down lines from writers you love. Make notes, too, as you visit museums and wander alleys to capture the omnivorous noticings of your peculiar mind. Any of these may well come in handy and stir your own reflections or provide bolstering evidence or the perfect fillip, when, at long last, you read your notebook to mine its wisdom or when you seek to compose a finished work through the harvest of your notebook.

ASSOCIATIONS AND FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

In this section I invite you to release your mind, like a horse from the paddock, and allow your imagination to gallop and play. Let the associations fly in metaphors that allow your prose, like Pegasus, to take wing.

REFLECTIONS

Finally, not to be forgotten are your intellectual reactions to your experiences. Just as important as the observations and interactions themselves are the thoughts and reflections you have in response to them.

To conclude the book, I supply, in "Writing Notes," a list of key elements of the writer's craft as an easy reminder while you write your field notes and construct drafts of essays, blog posts, memoirs, journalism, and so forth on their basis. There, as a handy reference, I list the building blocks of elegant writing, the tools of the trade.

A NOTE ON THE COMPOSITION OF THE SECTIONS OF THE BOOK

Each section opens with an excerpt that pertains to its particular focus. For instance, the passage for the section "Purpose of the Notebook" comes from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. It is meant to exemplify the sorts of ponderings and motives that may propel a person to keep a field notebook and to show how, if recorded, they may find their way into text. The opening passages in each section are designed to stir the reader's imagination and nourish the inclination to make similar recordings.

I have selected the excerpts from significant literary nonfiction—travel pieces, books of literary journalism, memoirs, diaries, letters, and so on—to provide you with examples of fine landscape description, characterization, or dialogue, which may spur you to write your own. Obviously, I have not been

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able to be comprehensive as I intend this book to be compact, but I hope to have provided sufficient citation to inspire. I have selected a mixture of classics and more recent work, work of women and men writers, and writings from both far and near.

Following the opening quote for each section, I point to the literary strengths of the chosen passage and then offer a practical list of the kinds of notes to take, as well as a set of directions for doing so, so that you may amass material on the wide array of aspects of experience: for instance, impressions of people and places, details of your daily life, and notes on local history. In the "People" section, for example, I ask you to make notes on an individual's physical appearance, voice, gestures, quirks, habits, passions, and so forth, so that you may assemble the makings of a full and rounded portrait.

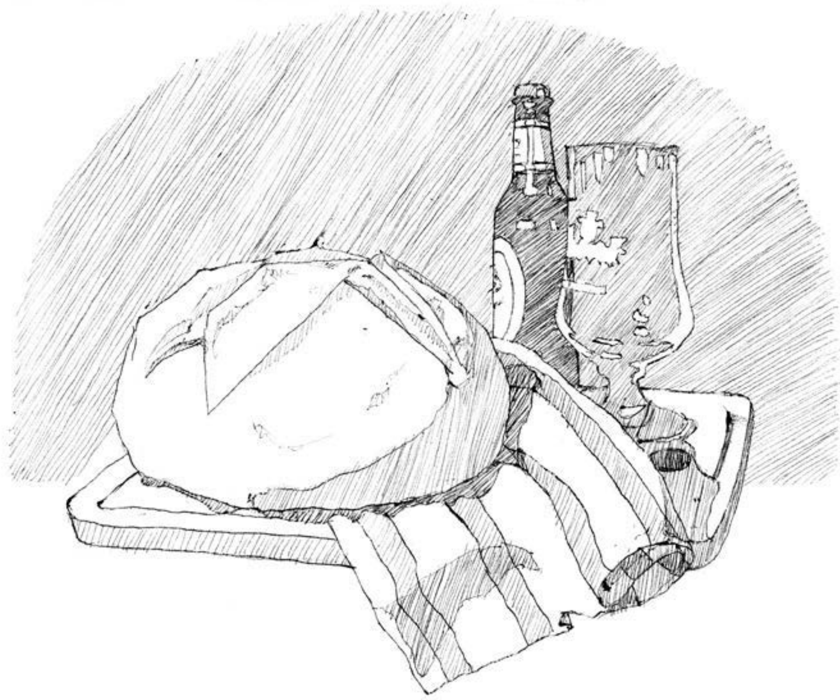
The book may be read through from cover to cover, or it may be used as a reference while recording field notes. I have designed it, most particularly, for the latter purpose. My vision is this: of an evening in Provence or Tibet, or at home while settling in to work on a field notebook or journal or memoir, or while sketching in a field or tapping in a blog, the possessor will think to her- or himself, *Hmm . . . I have described the hotel and the street in Lhasa . . .* or *I have written about Peterkin's Drugs back home in Omaha . . . Now what else do I need to make sure to describe?* And he or she will open this small book and be prompted to record, too, the stink of the butcher shop down the street or the playground on the square where drunken Uncle Jim threw up.

In *A Book of One's Own: People and Their Diaries* Thomas Mallon points to the great boon that may result if you collect in your notebook your own unique details and observations. Here he issues a warning to David Gascoyne, the writer whose Paris journal he is in the course of discussing:

> Just look back to May 13:
> Last night we sat alone in the Place Dauphine, under chestnut trees. It was so warm, the sky so blue and clear. A perfect May night. (Even the *pissoir* nearby sounded like a fountain playing in an Italian piazza!) The white steps of the Palais de Justice glimmered like a more romantic balustrade in the background.—We were silent most of the time. Some people went by with their dog. We were there for perhaps an hour. I shall never forget it.
>
> You certainly seem to have forgotten it by September. It's a good thing you'll have this book to bring it back to you. Anyone who's sat in that little square can tell you it's still just like that—the benches, the chestnut trees, the white steps. But someone else's reminders won't do. Someone else's chestnut trees aren't your chestnut trees; and his white steps aren't yours, either. You want the ones you had on May 13, 1938. Above all you want

the detail of that dog going by, and the jokey way you were struck by the pissoir—chance particulars that will really let it come back to you, that will let you open the diary forty, fifty years later and hear it playing your song.

It is those "chance particulars" that I hope this field notebook for field-notebook keepers will help you to catch, so that your writing—whether travel account, novel, journal, blog, literary journalism, or memoir—will play your own rare song.



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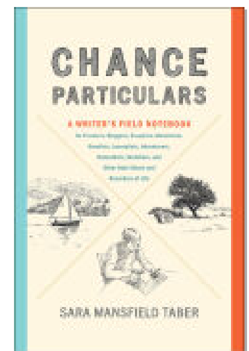
Elements of Fine Writing



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ELEMENTS OF FINE WRITING

Before embarking on the field notebook proper, it is useful to review the features of elegant writing. Here is an episode from Bruce Chatwin's book of travels, *In Patagonia*, an example of fine prose assembled from field notes:

> I took the night bus on to the Chubut Valley. By next morning I was in the village of Gaimán, the centre of Welsh Patagonia today. The valley was about five miles wide, a net of irrigated fields and poplar windbreaks, set between the white cliffs of the barancas—a Nile Valley in miniature.
>
> The older houses in Gaimán were of red brick, with sash windows and neat vegetable gardens and ivy trained to grow over the porches. The name of one house was Nith-y-dryw, the Wren's Nest. Inside, the rooms were whitewashed and had brown painted doors, polished brass handles and grandfather clocks. The colonists came with few possessions but they clung to their family clocks.
>
> Mrs. Jones's teashop lay at the far end of the village where the bridge crossed over to the Bethel. Her plums were ripe and her garden full of roses.
>
> "I can't move, my dear," she called through. "You'll have to come and talk to me in the kitchen."
>
> She was a squat old lady in her eighties. She sat propped up at a scrubbed deal table filling lemon-curd tarts.
>
> "I can't move an inch, my darling. I'm crippled. I've had the arthritis since the flood and have to be carried everywhere."
>
> Mrs. Jones pointed to the line where the floodwater came, above the blue-painted dado, on the kitchen wall. "Stuck in here I was, with the water up to my neck."
>
> She came out nearly sixty years ago from Bangor in North Wales. She had not left the valley since. She remembered a family I knew in Bangor and said: "Fancy, it's a small world."

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> "You won't believe it," she said. "Not to look at me now you won't. But I was a beauty in my day." And she talked about a laddie from Manchester and his bouquet of flowers and the quarrel and the parting and the ship.
>
> "'And how are the morals back home?" she asked. "Down?"
>
> "Down."
>
> "And they're down here too. All this killing. You can't tell where it'll end." Mrs. Jones's grandson helped run the teashop. He ate too much cake for his own good. He called his grandmother "Granny" but otherwise he did not speak English or Welsh.
>
> I slept in the Draigoch Guest House. It was owned by Italians who played Neapolitan songs on the juke box late into the night.

Perusal of this brief passage from Chatwin's book reveals some of the ingredients that make this author's writing a pleasure to read.

USE OF THE SENSES

Chatwin calls on all the senses to evoke his experience of a particular person and place, in this case Mrs. Jones's Patagonian teashop: sight (*red brick, ivy, grandfather clocks*); taste (*plums, cake, lemon-curd tarts*); smell (*roses*); touch (*polished brass handles, floodwater*); sound (*Neapolitan songs*).

SPECIFICITY AND CONCRETE DETAIL

Notice how Chatwin selects a few tangible details that summon a picture of the Patagonian village. He takes care to record the actual name of one of the dwellings and includes description of both the interior and exterior of the house to which he pays a visit:

> The older houses in Gaimán were of red brick, with sash windows and neat vegetable gardens and ivy trained to grow over the porches. The name of one house was *Nith-y-dryw*, the Wren's Nest. Inside, the rooms were whitewashed and had brown painted doors, polished brass handles and grandfather clocks.

QUALITY OF LANGUAGE

Check the rhythm, phrasing, and lengths of Chatwin's sentences. Observe his syntax, word choice, and use of alliteration:

> Mrs. Jones's teashop lay at the far end of the village where the bridge crossed over to the Bethel. Her plums were ripe and her garden full of roses.

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Note how Chatwin uses simile, metaphor, and symbol to enrich his work. The town was "a Nile Valley in miniature," the dwellings, by implication, were like wrens' nests.

UNIQUE VOICE

Chatwin harnesses his own particular sensibility and personality, his own peculiar observations, accents, phrasings, thoughts, and judgments in the expression of his unique voice:

> Mrs. Jones's grandson helped run the teashop. He ate too much cake for his

> own good. He called his grandmother "Granny" but otherwise he did not speak English or Welsh.

SENSE OF PLACE

In a very few sentences the writer offers a rich sense of place, from the inner chambers already mentioned to the hawk's-eye view:

> The valley was about five miles wide, a net of irrigated fields and poplar windbreaks, set between the white cliffs of the barancas.

INTERESTING, MULTI-FACETED CHARACTERS

Chatwin captures Mrs. Jones's sweetness, industriousness, and no-nonsense forthrightness in his description of her. Note how the dialogue, especially, brings the Welsh woman to life:

> "I can't move, my dear," she called through. "You'll have to come and talk to me in the kitchen."
>
> She was a squat old lady in her eighties. She sat propped up at a scrubbed deal table filling lemon-curd tarts.
>
> "I can't move an inch, my darling. I'm crippled. I've had the arthritis since the flood and have to be carried everywhere."
>
> Mrs. Jones pointed to the line where the floodwater came, above the blue-painted dado, on the kitchen wall.
>
> "Stuck in here I was, with the water up to my neck."

MEMORABLE SCENES

In a short scene Chatwin captures an individual's experience of a violent era in Argentine history:

> ". . . All this killing. You can't tell where it'll end."

LIKABLE NARRATOR

Via just one word, the word "down," in the following dialogue, Chatwin shows the reader his rapport with his informant:

> "And how are the morals back home?" she asked. "Down?"
>
> "Down."
>
> "And they're down here too . . ."

Through this and by way of the empathic and sensitive choices he makes in characterization, he establishes himself as an appealing and interesting guide, a narrator whose viewpoints both entertain and inspire the reader's identification and interest.

COMPELLING SENSE OF STORY

In this tiny section from his chronicle Chatwin both offers up a ministory of a transplanted Welsh woman and whets the reader's appetite for the next entry. In a few words he simultaneously pins the turning point in the Welsh woman's youth:

> "You won't believe it," she said. "Not to look at me now you won't. But I was a beauty in my day." And she talked about a laddie from Manchester and his bouquet of flowers and the quarrel and the parting and the ship.

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VIVID, THOUGHT-PROVOKING EXPLORATION OF A PLACE, QUESTION, THEME

In this episode Chatwin gives the reader a sip of what it means to be a Welsh immigrant in “the village of Gaimán, the centre of Welsh Patagonia today.”

FASCINATING FACTS (HISTORY, SOCIOLOGY, CULTURE, POLITICS, ART . . .)

In the same section, Chatwin provides a sense of the history of the Welsh immigrants and their isolation:

> I took the night bus on to the Chubut Valley. By next morning I was in the village of Gaimán, the centre of Welsh Patagonia today. . . . She came out nearly sixty years ago from Bangor in North Wales. She had not left the valley since. She remembered a family I knew in Bangor and said: “Fancy, it’s a small world.”

INTRIGUING INSIGHTS AND REFLECTIONS

Chatwin seizes one treasured object as a metaphor for the Patagonian Welsh and their values:

> The colonists came with few possessions but they clung to their family clocks.

HONESTY AND IDIOSYNCRASY

In the final sentence of this episode Chatwin lets the reader in on his wide-ranging tastes: his appreciation for high-spirited young men who live in the moment, as well as aged, hard-working, time-conscious Welsh women. One can imagine him, saturated with lemon tarts, afterward singing arm-in-arm with the young Italians:

> I slept in the Draigoch Guest House. It was owned by Italians who played Neapolitan songs on the juke box late into the night.

ELEMENTS OF FINE WRITING

As you write up your field notes, try to keep in mind these aspects of strong prose:

- Use of the Senses
- Specificity and Concrete Detail
- Quality of Language:
  - word choice
  - phrasing
  - rhythm
  - sentence length
  - syntax
  - alliteration
- Figurative Language:
  - simile and metaphor
- Unique Voice
- Sense of Place
- Interesting, Multi-faceted Characters
- Memorable Scenes
- Likable Narrator
- Compelling Sense of Story
- Vivid, Thought-Provoking Exploration of a Place, Question, Theme
- Fascinating Facts
- Intriguing Insights and Reflections
- Honesty and Idiosyncrasy

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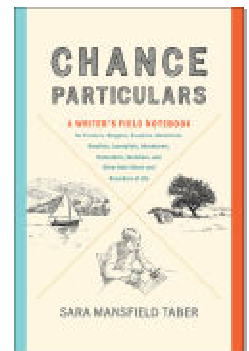
Purpose of the Notebook



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PURPOSE OF THE NOTEBOOK

Naturalist Henry David Thoreau planted himself in the forest of Concord, Massachusetts, and recorded his experiences and thoughts in the American classic *Walden:*

> I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

Thoreau kept his famous journal, as he says, in order to live "deliberately." To live deeply, richly, maximally is perhaps the reason, at its most basic, that any of us keeps a log, but there are as many purposes for keeping a field notebook as there are human beings. Indeed, one human being may have multiple aims in writing. Essayist and memoirist Terry Tempest Williams listed more than seventy reasons in her little essay on the subject—from "I write as a witness to what I have seen," to "I write because you can play on the page like a child left alone in sand," to "I write out of my nightmares and into my dreams."

In *The Shadow of the Sun* journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski described the focus of his collage-portrait of Africa—a book drawn from years of field notes—this way:

> I lived in Africa over several years. . . . I traveled extensively, avoiding official routes, palaces, important personages, and high-level politics. Instead I opted to hitch rides on passing trucks, wander with nomads through the desert, be the guest of peasants of the tropical savannah. . . . This is therefore not a book about Africa, but rather about some people from there—about encounters with them, and time spent together.

Literary journalist Ronald Blythe collected the life stories and outlooks of all the residents of an English village

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in a group portrait. He noted at the beginning of *Akenfield,* "This book is the quest for the voice of Akenfield, Suffolk, as it sounded during the summer and autumn of 1967."

Novelist and poet Michael Ondaatje described the propulsion for his memoir *Running in the Family*—another book composed of various kinds of field note-taking—as "running to Asia":

> But it was only in the midst of this party among my closest friends, that I realized I would be traveling back to the family I had grown from—those relations from my parents' generation who stood in my memory like frozen opera. I wanted to touch them into words. . . . In my mid-thirties I realized I had slipped past a childhood I had ignored and not understood.

Travel writer Jan Morris wrote in her memoir *Pleasures of a Tangled Life:*

> I told an acquaintance of mine that I was writing a book about Pleasure. . . . I am merely out to show once more, by the examples of my own life and taste, out of my peculiar circumstances, what a pleasure pleasures are. . . .
>
> They include, indeed, many pleasures ordinary enough, pleasures generic and particular, of place and of fancy, sustained and momentary pleasures, pleasures tart and pleasures rather sickly, pleasures of eating, reading, listening to music and being Welsh. . . . I can pin it down to specific emotions, of the pleasure that the world in general gives me in the second half of my life; pleasure which, like my life itself, seems to be at bottom a yearning for unity—"the desire and pursuit of the whole."

This "pursuit of the whole" is a common impetus behind notebook-keeping. In her essay "A Sketch of the Past," novelist Virginia Woolf wrote that "the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer." In the essay she elaborates:

> A shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not, as I thought as a child, simply a blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me.

Sculptor Anne Truitt, too, wrote to find wholeness. In the beginning of *Daybook: The Journal of an Artist,* she recorded that she wrote to find and confirm her artist self. By years of pouring herself into her art, she felt she had become less visible to herself:

> This anguish overwhelmed me until, early one morning and quite without emphasis, it occurred to me that I could simply record my life for one year and see what happened. So I bought a brown notebook like the ones in which I made lecture notes in college, chose a special day (the first of a visit to a friend to Arizona), and began to write, sitting up in bed every morning and writing for as long as seemed right. The only limitation I set was to let the artist speak. My hope was that if I did this honestly I would discover how to see myself from a perspective that would render myself whole in my own eyes.

To live deliberately, to witness, to play, to escape nightmares, to follow dreams, to record time spent with foreigners, to create an oral history of a community, to understand one's past, to record one's pleasures, to transform hurts, to make oneself visible, to find wholeness—these are among the multitudinous purposes a person might have for keeping a field notebook. I can imagine many others: the wish to record the birds one sights each day and ponder their place in the universe, to note the stages in the building of a boat, to track a three-week cooking extravaganza, to chronicle the changes in one's grandchildren, to salve a grief, to scribble thoughts that occur while sketching. The reasons for, and benefits of, field notebook-keeping are gloriously infinite.

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GOAL, QUEST, STORY

Record here your thoughts and intentions—your goal, quest, and/or story—as you begin your field notebook.

INITIAL GOAL	Set down your aims, desires, and aspirations as you start your field notebook. Perhaps you have a particular story you wish to pursue. Note it here.

STARTING QUESTIONS	List the questions you would like to answer.

PERSONAL QUEST	Make note of the personal insights you hope to gain by keeping this notebook. Perhaps there are internal conflicts or questions you wish to sort out.

HYPOTHESES AND ASSUMPTIONS	Log your hunches about what you will discover, your thoughts and expectations.

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PLANS	Outline your plans now, at the outset of your work. Docket the places you want to visit, the people you hope to see.

AGENDA	Sketch out a rough schedule for yourself or your project.

EVOLUTION IN FOCUS	Record the changes in your focus as your work expands.

REVISED QUESTIONS	Track the new questions that arise as you go deeper into the work.