



## *Before Papers Come Paragraphs*

### Introductory Unit: Page One—The Very Beginning

#### Lesson 1: Picking Up the Pen—The Writing Notebook

The Denim *Beret*  
Writing Program

## Unit Introduction

In the acclaimed musical *The Sound of Music*, Maria sings joyfully about her favorite things. We all have our favorite things, and one of mine is fresh starts. You have been writing since you first learned your letters, but this is a new opportunity for you. Whether you have already mastered some writing skills or not, consider this lesson your fresh start with writing. Step by step I will teach you the skills, techniques, and habits that you should know to become an excellent writer. They are ones that professional writers use in their own work, and no one becomes an excellent writer without them.

Different teachers have different approaches to writing instruction, and all of them have value. This program, however, is designed to help you master the art of writing methodically, one concept at a time. Periodically, you will complete special unit assessments and projects that pull the concepts together. With each lesson you'll also complete assignments that must be up to certain standards before you can move on to the next lesson. This is called a "mastery-learning" approach. It will help ensure that you are ready for each new lesson as it comes, for it will always build directly on the one before it.

Let's begin!

Supplies: This will be discussed in the lesson.

Goal: to understand and prepare the writing notebook as a learning tool

Suggested time: 2 sessions

Resource credits: *Notebook Know-how: Strategies for the Writer's Notebook*, by Aimee Buckner; *The Artist's Way*, by Julia Cameron

# SESSION 1

## Introduction

You may not be interested in becoming a “real” writer. You may just want to learn what you need to know to write decent academic papers—and as quickly as possible! Or, maybe you enjoy writing and want to learn as much as you can about it. Either way, a writing notebook can be a powerful tool you can borrow from the professional literary world.

A writing notebook is to a writer what a laboratory is to a scientist. Within its pages are beakers, chemicals, Bunsen burners, test tubes, and microscopes—of a sort, anyway. With your notebook you can experiment, test, and create new inventions that can affect not only yourself but the world around you. Never underestimate the power of a pen in the hands of a skilled writer!

Many published authors use a writing notebook, but they all use it in their own ways. Some authors never leave home without it; others only use it on occasion as the need arises. Some authors carry only index cards in their pocket for jotting down ideas on the fly; others keep elaborate, organized journals. Still others record their thoughts and ideas in a spiral notebook from a discount store. There is no right way to keep a writing notebook. It is meant to serve the needs and preferences of the writer, not the other way around. I have tried several different kinds, myself, and my favorite is a thin, lined notebook that is about 5x8 ½”, staple-bound with pretty paper covers. It is easy to carry, lightweight, and thin enough that I can enjoy picking out a new one before long.

In this lesson you will learn how to keep a writing notebook for academic purposes. Later you can expand your use to creative purposes, if you choose. In fact, you may begin doing that naturally, since academic and creative purposes often meet. You will use your writing notebook throughout your study in *The Denim Beret Writing Program*, so take your time to work through this lesson thoroughly.

## Lesson, part 1: Supplies

Before we discuss how to use the writing notebook for your academic studies, you will need to obtain certain supplies. Fortunately, they can be as simple and inexpensive as you choose! These include the following items:

- a notebook that is large enough to write in comfortably for long stretches at a time. Based on my experience with students, I recommend a sewn-binding composition book. It is cheap, easy to handle, easy to store, and durable. If you dislike writing in composition

books because the pages can't easily be folded back, you can use a half-size (5.5" x 8") spiral notebook. The spiral can be on the side or at the top.

- a pen or pencil that you enjoy using. Any kind of ink is fine, as long as it doesn't bleed through the paper.

If you like, you may add...

- a variety of colored pens, pencils, and highlighters, if you like to color-code your work or just brighten things up a bit
- small, colored flags or sticky notes for creating dividers in your notebook, to bookmark certain pages, and to add temporary notes.
- paper clips
- a clip that will allow you to attach your pen/pencil to your notebook for safekeeping
- small envelopes to paste on the inside covers
- a supply case

**STOP.** When your supplies are ready, continue with the lesson.

## SESSION 2

### Lesson, part 2: Setting Up

To set up your notebook, I suggest opening to the page that would be page 5 if you were looking at a printed book. This allows you room to create a title page and table of contents, if you later decide they would be helpful. Remembering that no "right" way to keep a writing notebook, I will still require you to follow certain set-up instructions for this course. You may set up and use future notebooks however you like.

Now you will divide your notebook into two equal sections. Create a title page for the first section. It should follow your table of contents and be named "Writing Notes." Then flip the notebook upside-down and turn it over. Open the back cover. What is now the first page will be the title page for your second section. Name it "Writing Practice." When the two sections of your notebook meet in the middle, it will be time for a new notebook.

You may be wondering why I don't suggest using a 2-subject notebook, if you will have two sections. You may do this if you choose, but I suggest using the half-size version if you can find it. It will be easier to use and carry around. The advantage of using a 1-subject notebook the way I suggest is that it uses all the paper. If you fill up one section before the other section, you will need to buy a new notebook before using all the paper in the first section.

If you have followed instructions up to this point, your notebook is now ready for use. If you wish, add dividers using paper clips or self-adhesive flags or sticky notepaper. Small envelopes may be taped to the inside covers for collecting any scraps that you don't want to adhere to the pages.

### Lesson, part 3: How to Use the Notebook

So, what do you write in this notebook? What do you do with it? The front half of the notebook is straightforward and easy to use. This half, entitled "Writing Notes" will be used solely for writing and grammar notes. Here you should record any procedures, tips, and rules I ask you to follow. You might jot charts or cheat sheets or a list of your commonly misspelled words or even vocabulary lists. In this half you should also take note of any helpful strategies you have learned for crafting a piece of writing. Sometimes I'll even ask you to print a page and cut-and-paste a chart into your notebook. In short, this part of your notebook is your "how to write" handbook.

As this half of your notebook begins to fill up, you have a decision to make about how to keep the information you need at your fingertips. You don't want to struggle to find the notes when it's time to use them. You have several options:

- Rely on your memory. If you use your notebook enough, you may come to know where things are and not need any system for finding what you want.
- Use self-adhesive flags or sticky notepaper. Write the heading for the page on the flag/paper and place it at the edge of the page to serve as a permanent bookmark.
- Use your reserved first couple of pages to form a table of contents. You might want to number all the pages of that part of your notebook and add corresponding pages to your table of contents--but that is an optional extra step.

The back half of your notebook, "Writing Practice," is where you might feel a little lost, at least at first. It is much like a blank artist's canvas, which can feel intimidating to even the most seasoned writer. You will fill it up quickly, though, because this is where you will work with the writing process. In it you will do warm-up exercises, jot ideas, complete your prewriting, and perhaps work on trouble spots in your papers during the revision stage.

### Conclusion

In a course on non-fiction writing, you might find that using the writing notebook seems little different from keeping a notebook for history, science, or math. Usually, your writing projects will be for school, so you will have specific instructions to follow, just as you do for other subjects.

As you become more comfortable with using your notebook, though, you may want to use it for personal projects or for creative writing, such as stories and poems. This is okay; in fact, I encourage you to detach your writing notebook from the structures of school and make it your own, especially if you have a personal interest in writing. You can record all kinds of things that catch your interest, such as quotations, snippets of conversation that you overhear, character sketches, descriptions of things or setting that spark your imagination, story ideas, rough drafts, and so on. When you fill up the notebook, label it with the date you began and the date you finished—and then start a new one! Store your notebooks in a handy place so that you can return to them when you need to refer to them for ideas and information that you recorded.

**End of lesson. Complete the lesson 1 worksheet and submit to parent for approval and/or grading.**