



“Keep a notebook. Travel with it, eat with it, sleep with it!”

Jack London

So the writer Jack London kept a creative notebook, but who else says it's worthwhile? Well... It seems everyone from Leonardo da Vinci and Thomas Edison to Albert Einstein and Charles Darwin could see the benefit! But what is 'Notebooking' and why do some say it's the single most important creative tool of them all?

Notebooking - not Scrapbooking! Let's not get these two things confused! We're not talking about filling up a book with scraps of paper, pictures and ribbons... Rather, we're talking about using a notebook to record thoughts, ideas, questions, answers and doodles...

Why bother? The problem we see when we say "Write things down!" is that it sounds boringly simple. Far more people roll their eyes skyward and shrug as if to say "Why bother?" than actually buy a notebook and start using it! That's because there's nothing sexy or high-tech about pulling out a notebook and jotting down some half-baked thoughts: it doesn't feel like you're being creative. So what makes us so sure it's a creative behemoth?! Well, there are three reasons...

Memory! All alone in the moonlight... This is the dullest of the three reasons by virtue of the fact that it's staggeringly obvious. Nevertheless, we can't quite bring ourselves to say "It goes without saying" and so we end up pointing out this astonishingly dull point: as well as having a permanent record of ideas, we really do remember more of the things we write down than the things we don't.

Far more interestingly, many scientists believe that writing things down helps process thoughts as a 'whole brain' activity... That's to say it involves both the logical and creative parts of the brain. For that reason, you're not only more likely to remember ideas that you write down, you're also more likely to improve the quality of their processing, too. Although it's not clear why, studies show that the act of physically writing – as opposed to typing or dictating – offers a number of other advantages. Physically writing:

- Heightens recall
- Focuses attention
- Facilitates learning

- Helps prioritization
- Increases awareness
- Activates more of the brain

If I only had a brain: You probably haven't had to give any conscious thought as to how you – say – open a door, for example, since you were about three or four years old. That's because your brain grasped the basic pattern of how a few doors opened here and there, then got into the habit of opening all the others without thinking. This 'pattern matching' happens with thousands of functions: your brain gets into a habit and just "Does it"!

But with ideation, it's rare for anyone's habit to be quite so casual. Most of us forget and ignore far more ideas than we act upon, creating the sense that ideas aren't important. And if your brain believes that ideas aren't important, you can bet you won't be coming up with all that many in a hurry! So the last reason for physically writing your ideas in a notebook is the most subtle: the more ideas you have, write down and act upon, the more your brain understands that creativity is valued – and the more ideas it creates.

One last thought on notebook content is to remember that the entire human experience is represented to us through our senses and perceptions... Ideas and questions certainly belong in a notebook, but so do notes on sensations, incomplete thoughts, dreams, images, observations, feelings and seemingly meaningless things that are just a little bit out of the ordinary!

Leonardo: not just a Ninja Turtle... Leonardo da Vinci – arguably the most creative man that ever lived – is believed to have had between 14,000 & 20,000 pages of notes... From the few surviving pages, we can see da Vinci's note making contains fables, riddles, jokes, sketches, mirror writing, puzzles; designs for stages, costumes, weapons, furnishings, flying machines... Notes on anatomy, botany, architecture, engineering, geography, cartography, geology, painting, sculpture, music, astronomy and physics... And questions – yes, questions – about most of these subjects, too...

Why ask questions? Do you know what happens when the mind is given a question? You can think of it as a little bit like programming a supercomputer with a problem to solve! Faced with questions that intrigue, your mind becomes curious and begins looking – no matter how subtly – for connections and answers! So asking and exploring questions is a key skill in creativity; one that Leonardo habitually used or, as he put it:

“I roamed the countryside searching for answers to things I did not understand. Why thunder lasts longer than that which causes it, and why immediately on its creation the lightning becomes visible to the eye while thunder requires time to travel. How the various circles of water form around the spot which has been struck by a stone and why a bird sustains itself in the air. These questions and other strange phenomena engaged my thought throughout my life...”

Leonardo da Vinci's constant question asking and note taking were both a cause and effect of his insatiable curiosity. This desire to understand, investigate and learn is one of the keystones of creativity and results in the development of a habitually fertile mind!

To get more out of your notebook, you can go through and review it every so often. If there's something on which you'd like to take immediate action, do so! Otherwise, store the notebooks for periodical review. Revisit them every few months or, if you prefer – and this is a lot of work – type your notes up on a computer and review them that way...

You might be pleasantly surprised to find that, even after a very short time, you're filling your notebooks with plenty of ideas and solutions. You may also discover yourself marrying thoughts old & new, and being inspired by notes from way back when. Most importantly, if you try routinely notebooking for just a month, you'll come to realise that, far from being a dull, passive chore, it's actually one of the most essential creative tools of them all.