

Taking the Curse Out of a Writer's Notebook

by Tammy Schubert

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Ever start a writer's notebook only to find that after a couple of volumes you can't find data when you need it? Well, this problem plagues just about everyone using notebooks.

A notebook is a fabulous portable medium for recording your thoughts, research, writing exercises, meeting notes, newspaper clippings, sticky notes you can't part with and anything else that comes to mind. It is faster to use than a laptop, too. These books come in a variety of different formats, sizes and bindings, which meets the needs of even the most finicky writer or one who is on a tight budget.

The curse is in retrieving specific data when it is needed. Unlike a Microsoft Word document, you cannot do an automatic full-text search on a keyword in a matter of seconds. Unless you have a bionic memory, you could be flipping through volumes of pages for a couple of hours until you find specific information, or you just might overlook the data.

The solution is to use a table of contents, which allows you to find information quickly—at least as long as you title your entries in a meaningful way and note the page numbers.

Grab a clean notebook and a pen. Flip to the first page, and write "Table of Contents" across the first line. Write "Date", "Topic" and "Page No." across the top of the second line. I suggest you draw lines down the page separating the columns. An example follows on the next page:

| Table of Contents | | |
|-------------------|-------|----------|
| Date | Topic | Page No. |
| | | |

Skip the next ten or twelve pages. You will come back to them when you record your entries.

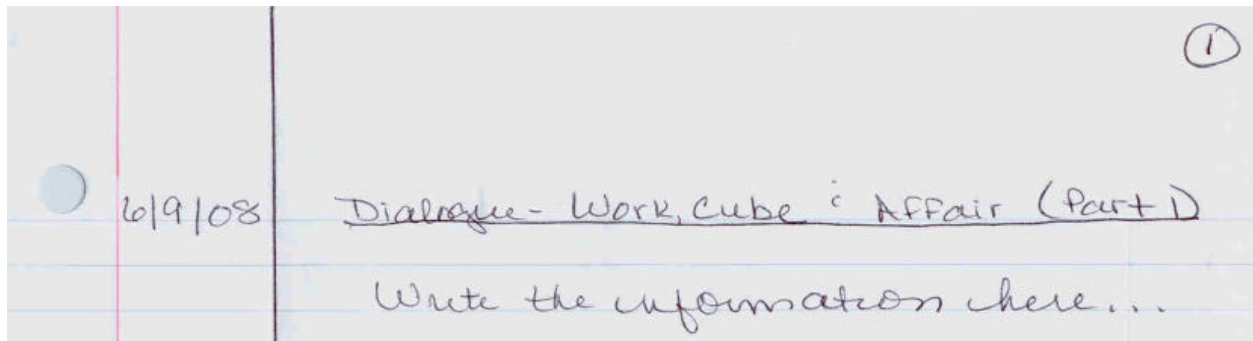
Put page numbers in the upper right hand corner of the first twenty pages. Then circle them, or do what makes you happy. Finish numbering later when you are stuck waiting for everyone to show up for a meeting or as you use the pages.

Leave about an inch or two of space on the left side of each journal page to mark action items or to insert special comments. For the sake of consistency, draw a line down the page to separate the expanded left margin from the regular body of journal. It's easier on the eyes. See below:



Now it's time to write. Get into the habit of dating your entries and providing a descriptive title. For instance, I like to do a writing exercise periodically that involves eavesdropping on conversations around me and writing down statements that have potential for stories later. (You would be amazed at what people talk about when they don't think they have an audience. This is especially true when you work in a cube farm and everyone forgets that the half walls don't block sound. I learned in vivid detail how a colleague managed his affairs—and I do mean affairs.) So here is what the first line of my entry

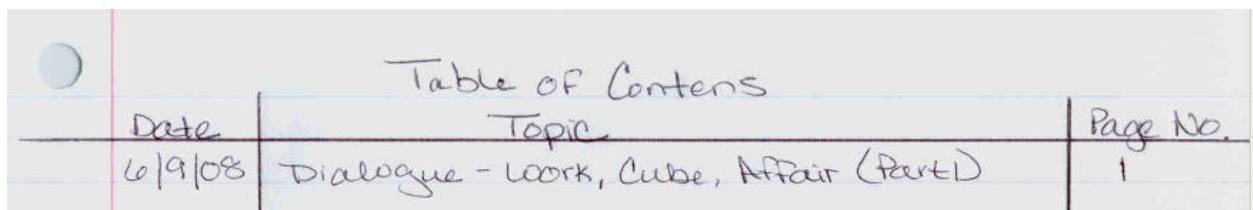
looks like:



A handwritten table entry on lined paper. The table has two columns. The first column contains the date '6/9/08'. The second column contains the title 'Dialogue - Work, Cube, Affair (Part I)' and the instruction 'Write the information here...'. A circled number '1' is written in the top right corner of the page.

| | |
|--------|---|
| 6/9/08 | Dialogue - Work, Cube, Affair (Part I) Write the information here... |
|--------|---|

Then I write until my hand cramps, the conversation stops or I'm about to get caught. Then I record the entry on the table of contents. Mine looks like this:



A handwritten table of contents on lined paper. The table has three columns: 'Date', 'Topic', and 'Page No.'. The first row contains the date '6/9/08', the topic 'Dialogue - Work, Cube, Affair (Part I)', and the page number '1'.

| Date | Topic | Page No. |
|--------|--|----------|
| 6/9/08 | Dialogue - Work, Cube, Affair (Part I) | 1 |

Feel free to switch the information around to suit your needs. The most important thing to remember is to record enough data to provide a meaningful point of reference so that information can be found quickly by skimming the table of contents.

Once you run out of pages, put the dates and the volume number on the cover. Then start all over with a brand new notebook.

Tammy Schubert is a technical writer by day. But when the sun goes down, she writes Western historical romance novels and pursues her dream of becoming a published author. For additional tips, go to www.tammyschubert.com.