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Feed Your Writer's Notebook This Summer

Julie Patterson

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Click here to download [Sandra Cisneros' story "Eleven"](#) that Julie mentions.



For more notebook strategies:

Read/re-read our article ["Julie's 5 Most Frequently Used Notebook Strategies."](#) originally published in September 2011.



Julie Patterson is associate director and writer-in-residence at the Indiana Partnership for Young Writers. Her poems, essays and articles have appeared in literary journals, magazines and newspapers throughout the U.S. She has a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing from Lesley University.

Dear Teachers and Writers,

Summer is a great time to tend to your writer's notebook. You can "stock up" on notebook entries that will support your mini-lessons during the school year. Not sure what to write? Here are some notebook strategies to help fuel your inspiration.

Julie Patterson
IPYW writer-in-residence

Pick a fight. Take a stand. My writer's notebook often serves as a "safe place" where I can say things I wouldn't necessarily say aloud to anyone. That doesn't necessarily mean *secrets*, though. My notebook is also a great place for me to rant or flesh out my opinions and reactions to controversial things I experience.

I invite you to try it, too. What have you heard someone say, read in the newspaper or seen on TV recently that honked you off? Try "talking back" to someone in your notebook. Pick a fight, especially if it's over a big societal issue.

Birthdays

I have a summer birthday, so this time of year is inextricably linked to birthdays in my mind. On top of that, I recently studied Sandra Cisneros' "Eleven" (a short story about an embarrassing 11th birthday, attached at left) with a group of middle and high school students and I'm anxiously anticipating the birth day of my first child, so it's probably no surprise that I've been writing about birthdays in my notebook.

What birthday(s) stand out in your memory (your birthday or someone else's)? As you write about it/them, try to not only "report" what happened but also to think deeply about why those particular memories stick with you. Think about the extremes of birthdays—what was the best one? Worst? What's your stance on birthdays—are they to be celebrated or ignored/hidden? What does your birth date (or time, location) say about you? What "family legends" surround your birth? (For example, legend has it that my brother cried for weeks when he found out I was a girl. "I already have a sister," he wailed, asking Mom and Dad if I could be returned to the hospital and exchanged, like a duplicate Christmas gift.)

You don't need to answer *all* of these questions about birthdays, of course, but do some thinking about them in your notebook. See if you uncover any "story worthy" material.

Stare.

"The writer should never be ashamed of staring. There is nothing that does not require his attention." - Flannery O'Connor

O'Connor's *Complete Stories*, a collection of short stories, won the National Book Award for Fiction in 1972 and is still widely circulated today. "Staring" may very well have inspired many of her stories since she is known not only for her attention to detail (sometimes describing an object with specific details that foreshadow larger events to come in the story) but also for well developed characters that are often "morally flawed." I can't help but believe she spent a lot of time people watching.

Let O'Connor's wisdom feed your muse. Go to the park (or the mall if the temperature climbs too high) and people watch (or dog watch or flower watch). Eavesdrop. Stare. Try to really get to know someone. Record your observations in your notebook. Your notes may inform a fictional character or poem that you create some day!

