

## “Do you keep a Journal?”<sup>1</sup>

Exploring the Interconnectedness between Reading, Writing, Creativity, Ideas,  
and Living Deliberately

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### ***Introduction***

For many years I have asked all of my high school students to keep a Writer’s Notebook. Eager as ever to please, they want to know what to write in it, and so every year I suggest types of writing (descriptive, rhetorical analysis of a text, reactions to ideas, rants, raves, explanations, how-to narrative, original song lyrics or shots at poetry, etc.) and give them specific prompts (emulate a particularly dense and delicious sentence, describe a weird conversation you overheard today, etc.). I also ask students to use the Notebook as a Commonplace Book, a place to keep quote nuggets and ideas from readings they do not want to forget.

These are all fine ideas and certainly get kids moving on their writing – a half page a day, every day. Students typically find the writing to be laborious at first in that daily writing is new and they have all sorts of preconceived notions about what they should be writing, or even more importantly who should be writing (not them, for they are not professional writers!). But by the end of the year, most thank me for the opportunity to express themselves, to think aloud, to record a year’s worth of ideas, to discover new ways of discovering themselves. And of course, most agree that their writing improves with daily practice and at times, loving attention to language.

What I would like to do this year given what I now know from studying Thoreau, Emerson and the Concord intellectuals, is to both ground the act of journal writing in an historical context of American letters, and to explore how the journal can extend beyond the classroom imperatives of becoming better readers and writers, to the life well-lived. Deliberate attention to one’s thought processes and ways of seeing the world is a goal in this lesson and throughout the year. Becoming inductive geniuses<sup>2</sup> is another.

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<sup>1</sup> From Thoreau’s first journal entry on October 22, 1837.

<sup>2</sup> Paraphrase of a paragraph in the “Introduction” to Robert M. Thorson’s book *Walden’s Shore: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Science*, Harvard University Press, 2014. Induction as a means of generating ideas from text (whatever that text may be: book, work of art, another person, nature), is skill upon which our department has set as high priority. We use Rossenwasser and Stephen’s brilliant book *Writing Analytically* and its attendant writing (and reading) heuristics as a reference for all four years of high school.

**Target Audience**

High School Juniors

Class: AP English Language and Composition

**Context**

The summer assignment for incoming AP juniors is to read Jon Krakauer's book *Into the Wild* and to generate two question essays: one to Chris McCandless, the protagonist of the book, and one to Krakauer, the author, as a means to distinguish between the two. Students often want to analyze McCandless without acknowledging that everything we think we know about McCandless has been carefully crafted by Krakauer. Typically I will have students use those questions to write about the text to bring to our first seminar.

During our study of the book, we explore some of the authors both McCandless adored and Krakauer finds noteworthy. One such author is Henry David Thoreau. In past years I have focused mostly on Thoreau's essay "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience," and excerpts from *Walden* ("Where I lived and What I lived for," "Spring," "Conclusion," some of "Economy.") This year I want to extend our exploration of Thoreau's ideas about what it means to live deliberately, to what it means to read and write deliberately. Certainly Krakauer makes a case for McCandless' ideas being an extension of a legacy of thinkers beginning perhaps with the Transcendentalists. Both Krakauer and McCandless are readers, thinkers and writers who clearly create new ways of seeing the world, but whose ideas can also be clearly traced to a foundational philosophy.

In that first week of learning student names and dealing with all of the logistics of spending a year together, I introduce the Writer's Notebook as I discussed in the "Introduction." This year I plan to take more time introducing the journal, providing context via the texts listed below. We will explore the idea of a Journal in the context of *Into the Wild*. By the end of the book, Krakauer gives us some insight into Chris' state of mind out at Bus 142 through brief excerpts from McCandless' writing. In Chris' writing, the inductive genius emerges. His terse notes on the fauna and flora of his surroundings, what he killed for food and his list of domestic duties ("patch jeans") become the stuff that leads him to declare food "holy." Thus McCandless continues the great American tradition of journaling to discover ideas. We will rewind to that great journalist, Henry David Thoreau, and discover what perhaps journaling can mean beyond perfunctory skill building and expediency.

**Possible Texts**

- *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer (summer reading – common text upon entering class and upon which to begin our discussion of how interacting with ideas and creating new ones can shape our lives.)
- Excerpts from *Walden's Shore: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Science* by Robert M. Thorson

- Excerpts from *Writing Analytically* by Rossenwasser and Stephen (specifically about the Commonplace Notebook, inductive reasoning, and active reading and writing)
- Excerpts (two pages) on *The Dial* literary magazine from *The Thoreau Collection of Kevin MacDonnell*, an online resource found on the website of the Walden Woods Project. The purpose for *The Dial* serves as an important historical grounding in Thoreau's peer group in Concord and the reverence they had for the freedom of expressing ideas.
- Personal Photo slide show of the Morgan Library Exhibit: "This Ever New Self: Thoreau and his Journal" (Need to create)
- First Journal entries (October – November 1837) of Thoreau
- Chapter III: "Reading" from *Walden* by Thoreau
- "The American Scholar" by Emerson
- Excerpts from *First We Read Then We Write: Emerson on the Creative Process* by Robert d. Richardson

### ***Ideas for Instruction/Student Participation***

1. After our first big Seminar on the book itself and an exploration of ideas (civil disobedience, capitalism and consumerism), we will look closely at the role books and writing have on the protagonist of *Into the Wild*, Chris McCandless.
2. I will discuss the week I spent in Concord seeking out Thoreau, his society, his world and his ideas.
3. Activate prior knowledge – Free write on what it means to be a reader, a writer and the connections between reading and writing.
4. Slide show of Morgan Library Exhibit from my personal photos; students take notes, write impressions and what they has the most impact on their own sense of what it means to be a reader and a writer.
5. Post-Writing Free write: Re-read first free write. What do you want to add to your ideas about reading and writing?
6. Assigned readings from Thoreau, Emerson, Richardson, McDonnell, Thorsen. Seminar on all authors or one/two at a time. We may read some of these in class together and discuss as we read, reading carefully and with loving attention to language.
7. Discuss modern conditions for free expression. What are the cultural conversations around freedom of speech? Why might journaling be important today?
8. Possible assignments:

- Synthesis essay on what it means to be a reader and a writer from the multiple sources we read/discuss.
- Follow-up journal entries or free writes integrating new information.
- Research assignment using many of the online resources I now have for the study of Thoreau.
- Q and A with Jeff Cramer at the Thoreau Institute.
- Strolling walks and journaling observations
- Journal prompts that instruct students to move from observations to conclusions (inductive reasoning), from concrete to abstract, like Thoreau does, like Krakauer does.
- Send students out to find a journal – not a spiral notebook, but a personal journal – and a velvety pen with which to write.
- Have students create their own assignments based on interests generated during our study of Thoreau and *Into the Wild*.

### ***Follow-up Throughout the Year***

Students write every day (even the weekends, even the holidays), with some leeway for days when it is simply impossible to do so. I like to have students turn in journals twice a year. I do not read all of their writings, but I ask that they pick a few they think are representative of their writing and thinking. I typically write a few responses to their writings.

This year I would like them to think about an audience as they write, to perhaps revise some of their journal entries (as did Thoreau) and share with classmates (their audience). Maybe brainstorm with students about creating a literary café where students can read some of their writing as performance.

I would like to end the year with students engaging in a deliberate reflection on themselves as readers and writers. Have they lived by reading and writing? How so? Why not? What has changed in the way they think? Which writers (read in or out of class) inspire them? How do they want to live? Whose idea is it? How has keeping a journal influenced their ability to analyze?