

WRITING FROM THE FIELD

Six tips for keeping a good field journal

Writers take a moment to reflect in the Grand Canyon

BY KELSEA HARRIS-CAPUANO
I MISSOULA, MONTANA

ANOTHER GORGEOUS DAY IN THE GRAND CANYON. A cloudless evening sky punctuated the slow come-down from an afternoon of splashy whitewater. The energy level was still high as triumphant rowers cracked their first evening beers while rehashing their successful runs at camp. Wait, which campsite was that again? Was it the one with all the rock ledges, or that one that had all the scorpions? I think I wrote it down in my field journal . . .

I started keeping a field journal long before I realized how I could use it to help me write about my outdoor experiences. My field journals are records of my adventures and memories I want to safeguard. They serve as sacred record keepers with all the winsome details the mind forgets. I love picking up an old journal and feeling a memory slide back into place like an old friend.

Field journals are also essential for writing articles about your experiences later on. Over time, I've fine-tuned keeping a good field journal. Here are six tips that've worked well for me.

1 Make time for reflection
Letting experiences sit and allowing time to process is important. While

taking rapid notes in the moment can be helpful, you should also intentionally create some space and time to soak in the experience. As a writer, sometimes it's hard not to let the mind drift into "project" or "idea" mode, but being present and tuned in is where the real magic happens.

2 Always date entries!
This may seem like unimportant advice, but I don't know how many times I thought I would remember the day, week or even year a particular experience was from and didn't. It left me drawing huge blanks trying to recreate a timeline. Dates help give context and paint a better picture to jog your memories.

3 Create a habit that works for you
Get in a good groove of opening your journal or notebook. It doesn't have to

be a strict every day devotion nor does each entry need to contain a small novel. Sometimes I write for five minutes with a headlamp in my sleeping bag at night or sitting on the tailgate of my truck drinking coffee in the morning. I've found that it's actually easier to write habitually in the field, where I'm usually less distracted, as opposed to at home with all my devices. Creating a solid habit in the field may also help you cultivate better writing practices in your everyday life.

4 Pick the right tools for your craft
Make field journaling as easy as possible. One of my pet peeves is scrambling around for a pen or pencil. I like having a journal with a pocket or holder. I also need a journal that can take a little rough handling. Does the journal need to be small and light to easily fit in a daypack?

Does it need to be waterproof? Do I want to bring watercolors or colored pencils? Maybe I want an additional pocket notebook for plant or bird sightings. What's your style? Think about what your field needs are, and find out what works best for you.

5 Get creative
The sky is truly the limit when it comes to keeping a field journal. Use it for quick observations, little details, descriptions, narratives, poems, sketches, drawings, pressed plants, etc. Include particular sensory descriptions, like smelling the vanilla/butterscotch of ponderosa pine trees while waiting for water to boil on a chilly November morning in Arizona. I have horribly drawn sketches of the Grand Canyon that still jog my memory of a specific spot. I have colorful drawings of plants I want to look up later. I have long narratives of the days' events and pages of stream of consciousness writing. I have entries that include campsite names, flow charts, moon phases and tasty (or really awful) meals I cooked.

6 Focus on details
Details can really make or break a good piece of writing, especially when you're writing from your own experiences. Dropping a reader into your world is much easier the more details you have. They also drop you back into your memories. You never know what small sensory detail you'll record that will be the trigger for bringing the full experience back to you later. A description I have of cold, slippery, smooth Vishnut Schist under my fingers always reminds me of the feeling of awe I had when touching the oldest rock formation in the Grand Canyon.

— Kelsea Harris-Capuano is a writer, outdoor adventurer, educator and current fall OWAA intern who spent more than five years as an outdoor educator facilitating rafting, backpacking, rock climbing and mountaineering experiences for young people in the Southwest.



Looking downstream from Nankoweap, an iconic and panoramic Grand Canyon spot. The area has ancient storage spaces known as granaries carved into the rock by Ancestral Puebloans to store their food. Photos by Kelsea Harris-Capuano.

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