

Taking notes

What's the best way to record the facts and quotes you gather for a story?

It seems ridiculously simple: People talk to you. You write it down. You type it up. Done! Next!

Not so fast, Lois. Reporting may not be rocket science, we admit, but the truth is: If you don't take



Christina Leonard takes notes and makes a backup tape recording while interviewing a county official for an Arizona Republic story.

good notes, you cannot write a good story. And good note-taking isn't easy. It involves major multitasking — lots of listening, interpreting, observing, evaluating, writing and thinking in a hurry. Under pressure. About unfamiliar topics. In strange places.

If you're not careful, your notebook can become a confusing, chaotic mess, which is why every good reporter needs a system for recording data quickly and organizing it smartly — a system that guarantees that the data you put in your story exactly matches the data your sources give you.

And it all starts with your notebook.

THE OTHER REASON TO CARRY A NOTEBOOK

While researching San Francisco's alternative lifestyles in the 1970s, journalist Elizabeth Fishel found herself at an orgy where everybody was naked.

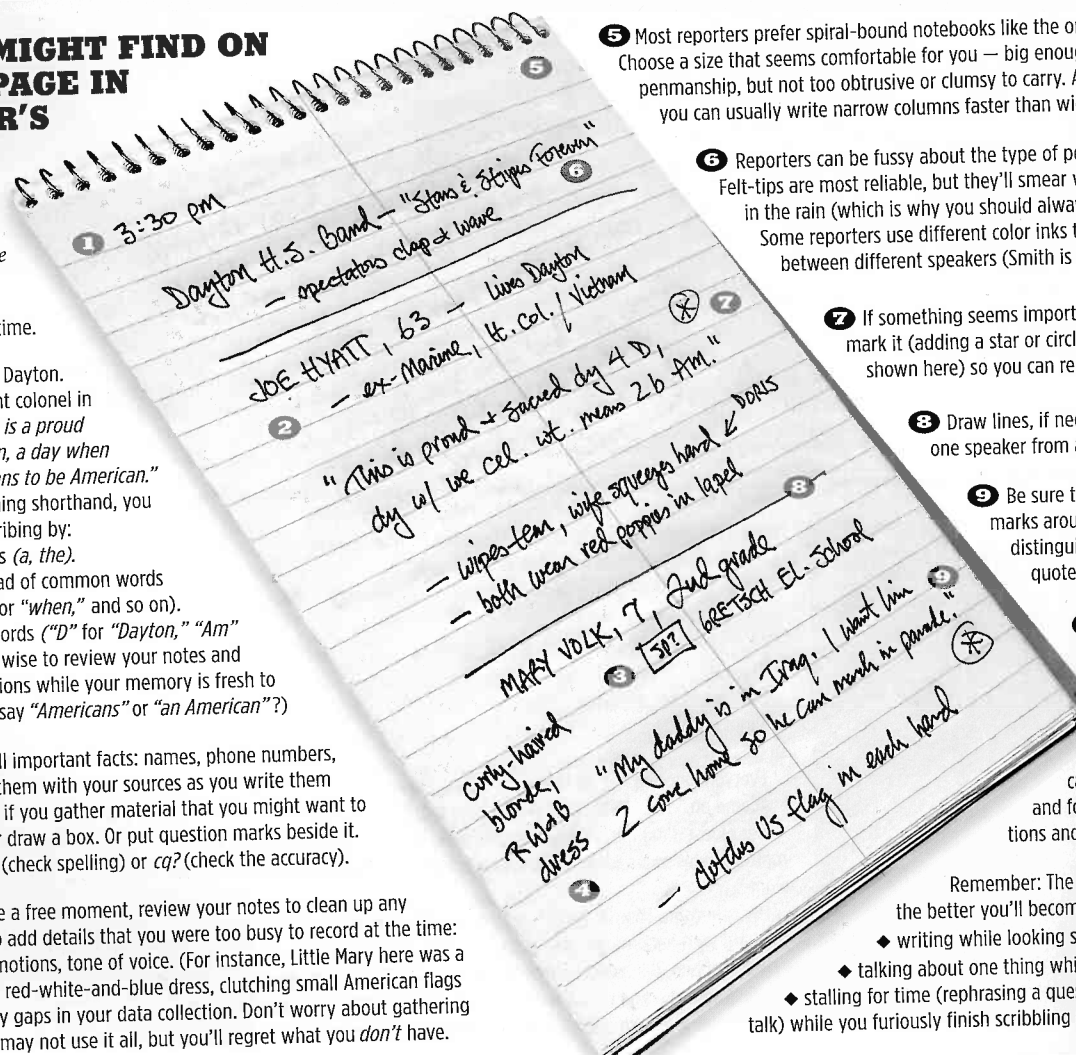
Trying to be "a good sport," she disrobed. And for the rest of the night, Fishel doggedly interviewed guests while scribbling in a notebook ("my shield, my alibi, my fig leaf," she called it) tightly clutched against her naked body.

— The New York Times
via anecdotage.com

WHAT YOU MIGHT FIND ON A TYPICAL PAGE IN A REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Suppose you're covering a Memorial Day parade in Dayton. Here are some notes you might gather:

- 1 A running log of the time.
- 2 Joe Hyatt, 63, lives in Dayton. He was a Marine lieutenant colonel in Vietnam. Hyatt said, "This is a proud and sacred day for Dayton, a day when we celebrate what it means to be American." Notice how, without learning shorthand, you can speed up your transcribing by:
 - ◆ Skipping small words (*a, the*).
 - ◆ Using symbols instead of common words ("2b" for "to be," "w/" for "when," and so on).
 - ◆ Abbreviating long words ("D" for "Dayton," "Am" for "American"). But it's wise to review your notes and spell out those abbreviations while your memory is fresh to avoid confusion. (Did he say "Americans" or "an American"?)
- 3 Carefully spell out all important facts: names, phone numbers, statistics. Double-check them with your sources as you write them down. When in doubt — if you gather material that you might want to check later — circle it. Or draw a box. Or put question marks beside it. Or add a phrase like *sp?* (check spelling) or *ca?* (check the accuracy).
- 4 As soon as you have a free moment, review your notes to clean up any sloppy shorthand and to add details that you were too busy to record at the time: physical descriptions, emotions, tone of voice. (For instance, Little Mary here was a curly-haired blonde in a red-white-and-blue dress, clutching small American flags in each hand.) Fill in any gaps in your data collection. Don't worry about gathering too much material. You may not use it all, but you'll regret what you *don't* have.



5 Most reporters prefer spiral-bound notebooks like the one shown here. Choose a size that seems comfortable for you — big enough to suit your penmanship, but not too obtrusive or clumsy to carry. And remember, you can usually write narrow columns faster than wide ones.

6 Reporters can be fussy about the type of pen they use. Felt-tips are most reliable, but they'll smear when you write in the rain (which is why you should always carry a pencil). Some reporters use different color inks to distinguish between different speakers (Smith is red, Jones is blue).

7 If something seems important, find a way to mark it (adding a star or circling an asterisk, as shown here) so you can remind yourself later.

8 Draw lines, if necessary, to separate one speaker from another.

9 Be sure to put quotation marks around actual quotes to distinguish them from non-quoted material.

10 For long interviews, try listing your questions ... here, on the inside back cover. Then you can flip pages back and forth, reading questions and writing answers.

Remember: The more you practice, the better you'll become at:

- ◆ writing while looking somewhere else;
- ◆ talking about one thing while writing another;
- ◆ stalling for time (rephrasing a question, making small talk) while you furiously finish scribbling a quote.