

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 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 [anecdote.com](#)



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

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:

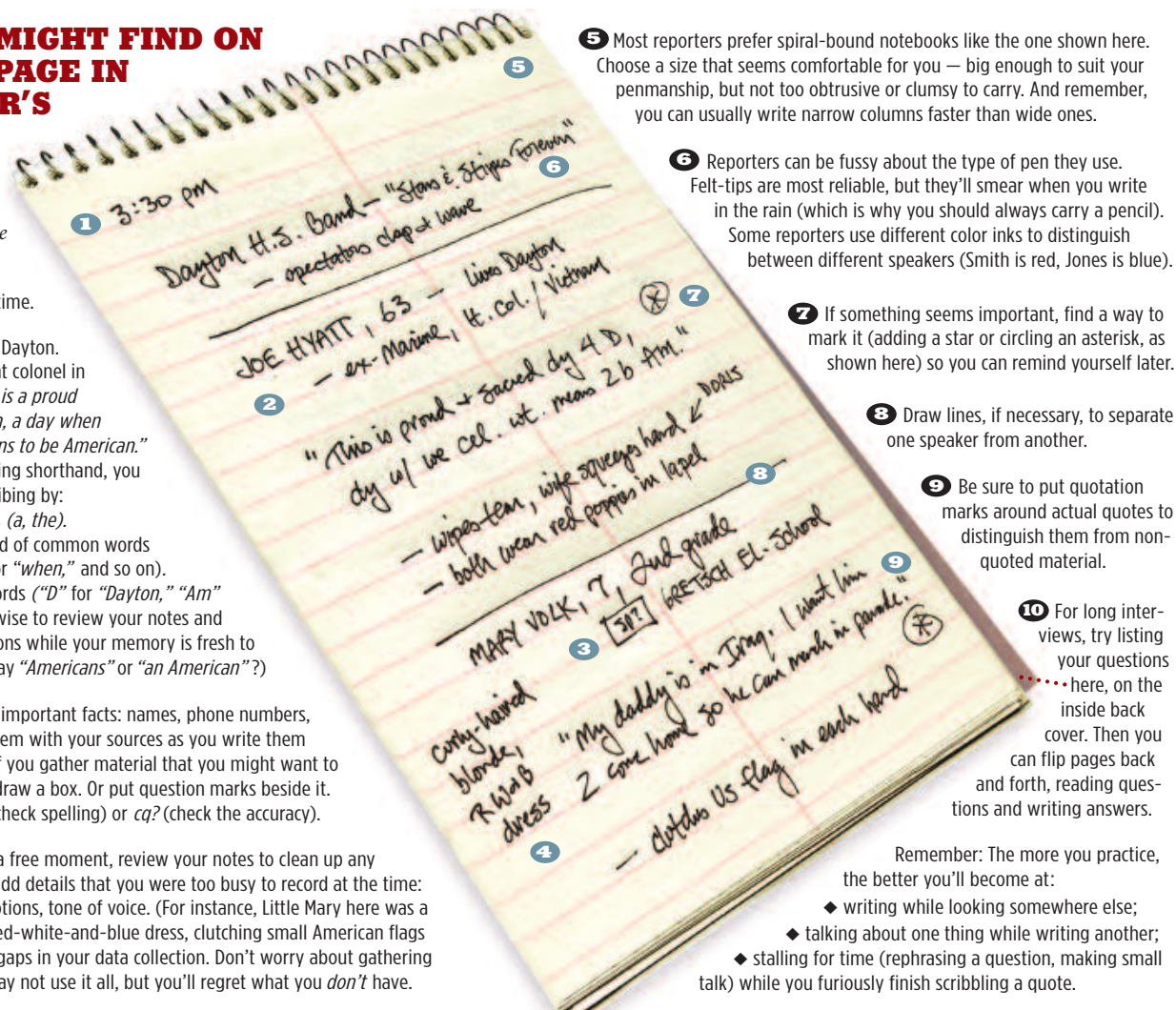
1 A running log of the time.

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 *cg?* (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.

WHICH IS THE BEST WAY TO TAKE NOTES? A LOOK AT THE PROS AND CONS



NOTEBOOK

Ah, the simple notebook. It's the most indispensable, tried-and-true tool in your toolbox. No matter how high-tech you try to be, you'll always end up someplace where your only option is scribbling notes in a notebook (or, if you're really desperate, on gum wrappers, envelopes, toilet paper — or your arm). So you might as well get good at it, to avoid being caught unprepared.

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
◆ It's low-tech. Nothing to break, no batteries to fail. Worst case: Your pen runs out of ink, so you have to borrow another one.	◆ Since most people talk faster than you can write, quotes may be inaccurate (unless you learn shorthand).
◆ Written notes are easy to access and transcribe later.	◆ Standing still to write can be cumbersome and restricting.
◆ You keep a permanent record of what you heard and saw.	◆ Some of your scribbles will later seem illegible to you.



TAPE RECORDER

Taping interviews is the best way to ensure accuracy, especially for lengthy Q-and-A's with fast talkers. Some careful reporters even take additional notes while they're taping (as backup, and to add comments and observations). But remember: Recorders make some interviewees uneasy. And in some states, taping people without their permission is illegal. Always ask first.

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
◆ It's the most accurate way to capture every word spoken during an interview.	◆ Replaying and transcribing tapes takes lots of valuable time.
◆ If anyone tries to challenge your story, you have actual proof of what was said.	◆ If the machine fails, the tape jams or the battery dies, you've got a serious problem.
◆ It lets you post interview audio on your paper's Web site.	◆ Unless you save every tape, you won't have a lasting record of your interviews.



TYPING

Some reporters lug their laptops everywhere, taking notes and writing stories while they interview newsmakers or watch the Big Game. But laptops are still buggy and delicate, and their batteries can die unexpectedly. That's why most computer note-taking occurs in the newsroom, where reporters sit at their desks and work the phones *hard*, typing up what they need as they talk.

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
◆ It's the fastest way to turn your notes into a story, since it's all right there on the screen.	◆ Since most people talk faster than you can type, quotes may be inaccurate (unless you learn to type with blazing speed).
◆ It's the most efficient way to gather last-minute details or plug holes in a story on deadline.	◆ Computer problems can ruin an interview or destroy a file.
◆ You can conduct an entire interview using chat or e-mail.	◆ You're stuck sitting in one place, staring at the screen.

Arm yourself with a small tape recorder, but keep it in its holster and take notes. The tape recorder is often intimidating and you don't have time to transcribe the tapes. If you discover, however, that you can't keep pace with your subject's logic or eloquence, fire up the recorder.

Steve Duin, *The Oregonian*

I became dependent on tape recorders as a cub reporter and had to wean myself from them. I never use tape recorders. I only take notes.

Deb Holland, *The Rapid City Journal*

Use a tape recorder. Only by listening to the tape later can we be properly appalled at how badly we misheard a quote and/or bungled it in our notes.

Jim Kershner, *The Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, Wash.)

I detest tape recorders. They set an adversarial tone and make interview subjects less inclined to relax and open up. Only the killer quotes need be used and they can be accurately captured with pen and paper.

Randy Ludlow, *The Columbus Dispatch*



WHICH DO YOU PREFER: TAKING NOTES OR USING A TAPE RECORDER?

Once I interviewed Ralph Nader for a story about a congressman. "His problem is he has no political guts," Nader said into my tape recorder. "Are you referring to his work on health care?" I responded. "Yes." The quote ran and the congressman's chief of staff hit the roof. "Nader says you misquoted him," he said. "You tell Nader I've got it on tape," I said. Half hour later he called again. "Nader says you took it out of context." When I stopped laughing, I told him about the context.

Don Hamilton, *The Columbian* (Vancouver, Wash.)

For a series on adolescent girls, I recorded, to ensure I could capture the way girls talk. If the person speaks fast, I record. If the person has a habit of changing their story or stretching the truth, I record. In interviews for daily stories, however, I don't record, unless it's the governor.

Monica Mendoza, *The Arizona Republic*

Both. Take the tape recorder, turn it on and set it aside. Take clear notes. When you hear that perfect quote, check the meter on the tape recorder and write it in your notes, so you can find the exact quote when you need it.

Phillip Pina, *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*

Tape recorders always fail (at the *worst* moments). Tape recorders make sources talk funny. Recorders encourage lazy notetaking. Recorders encourage lazy listening.

Clip and paste on your tape recorder:



WARNING! Tape recorders may be dangerous to your professional health.

Don Fry, *writing coach*