

Finding the Right Notebooks for Writers: What Decades of Testing Have Taught Me

I have been writing for a living for over thirty years. In that time I have filled hundreds of notebooks, maybe thousands. I have tried hardcovers and softcovers, dot grids and blank pages, cheap spiral pads and handmade leather journals. And I have learned that the tool you write into matters far more than most people realise. A notebook that fights you - bleeding ink, falling apart at the spine, refusing to lie flat - can kill a writing session before it starts. A notebook that disappears into your hand, that takes whatever pen you throw at it, that stays open on its own: that is a small piece of magic.

The search for the perfect notebook never really ends. But over the years I have settled on a short list of notebooks for writers that reliably do what they are supposed to do: get out of the way so you can work. What follows is not a ranking. It is a set of real-world observations from someone who has used every single one of these notebooks through multiple drafts, long flights, coffee spills, and the occasional tear-stained page.

What Makes a Notebook Work for a Writer

Before I get into specific brands, it helps to think about what a writer actually needs from a notebook. The first thing is paper. Cheap paper feathers and ghosts, making your own handwriting hard to read later. Good paper holds a line cleanly. Tomoe River paper is the gold standard here - thin, strong, and coated so lightly that fountain pen ink sits on the surface and dries slowly, showing off shading and sheen. But Tomoe River is not the only option. Many writers prefer a slightly heavier stock that absorbs ink faster, especially if they use a rollerball like the Pilot G2 or a fineliner that can bleed through anything less than 90 gsm.

The second thing is binding. A notebook must lie flat. If you have to fight the spine to keep the page open, you are wasting mental energy that should go into your sentences. Sewn bindings tend to be better than glued ones for this reason. Glued spines crack over time, especially if you cram the notebook into a bag. Sewn signatures let the book flex without falling apart.

The third thing is portability. A writer carries a notebook everywhere. It goes in a coat pocket, a backpack, a tote bag. It gets rained on, sat on, dropped. It needs to survive that treatment without losing pages. This is why I have a soft spot for Field Notes - they are cheap enough to lose and tough enough to last through a whole NaNoWriMo sprint if you treat them gently.



Finally, there is the intangible factor: does the notebook invite you to write? This sounds silly until you have experienced it. Some notebooks feel sterile. Others feel like a trusted companion. The cover texture, the page colour, the way the paper smells when you open it - these small things add up. A notebook that makes you want to pick up your pen is worth every penny.

Brands I Keep Coming Back To

Moleskine

Moleskine is the most famous name in this space, and for good reason. Their classic hardcover notebooks have a distinctive look and a satisfying heft. The elastic band closure keeps the book shut in transit. The paper, however, has changed over the years. Modern Moleskine paper is not as fountain-pen-friendly as it used to be. Ink from a wet nib can bleed through, and the ivory pages show ghosting from even a Pilot G2 if you write heavily. But if you use a ballpoint or a pencil, Moleskine works beautifully. I still keep one on my desk for Morning Pages because the form factor is perfect and the paper quality is fine for a ballpoint.

Leuchtturm1917

Leuchtturm1917 notebooks solved a lot of the issues Moleskine left open. The paper is numbered, there is a table of contents page at the front, and the ink-resistant coating handles fountain pens much better. The pages are a bit thinner than Moleskine, but the coating prevents most bleed-through. I have used Leuchtturm1917 notebooks for several novel drafts and found them reliable. The only downside is the price - they are not cheap. But if you are serious about your craft, the cost per page is negligible compared to the value of the words you put on them.

Rhodia and Clairefontaine

Rhodia and Clairefontaine are made by the same French company and share the same excellent paper. Rhodia pads come in the familiar orange cover, wire-bound or stapled. The paper is smooth, bright white, and handles fountain pens and rollerballs without feathering. Clairefontaine is the more premium sibling, often with a cloth cover and a sewn binding. I use Rhodia for first drafts because the pads are cheap and I can tear pages out without guilt. Clairefontaine notebooks I reserve for projects that need to stay intact - final revisions, research notes, or anything I might want to keep for years.

Midori MD

Midori MD notebooks are minimal in the best way. The cover is a soft, uncoated cardstock that develops a patina over time. The paper is cream-coloured and fountain-pen-friendly. Midori uses a traditional Japanese binding that lets the notebook lie completely flat. The only catch is that the cover shows wear quickly - scuffs, stains, creases all show. Some writers love this. I am one of them. A beat-up Midori MD looks like a notebook that has been lived in. If you prefer pristine gear, this might bother you. But for me, the way a Midori ages is part of its charm.

Hobonichi Techo

The Hobonichi Techo is a planner, but I mention it here because its Tomoe River paper is extraordinary. The Techo is thin, lightweight, and holds up to fountain pens, watercolours, and heavy erasing. The pages are dated, which makes it ideal for journaling or for a daily writing log. I have used a Hobonichi Techo for Morning Pages in the past, and the slim size meant I could carry it everywhere. The paper is so thin you can see the shadow of the next page, but it never tears. It is a marvel of paper engineering.

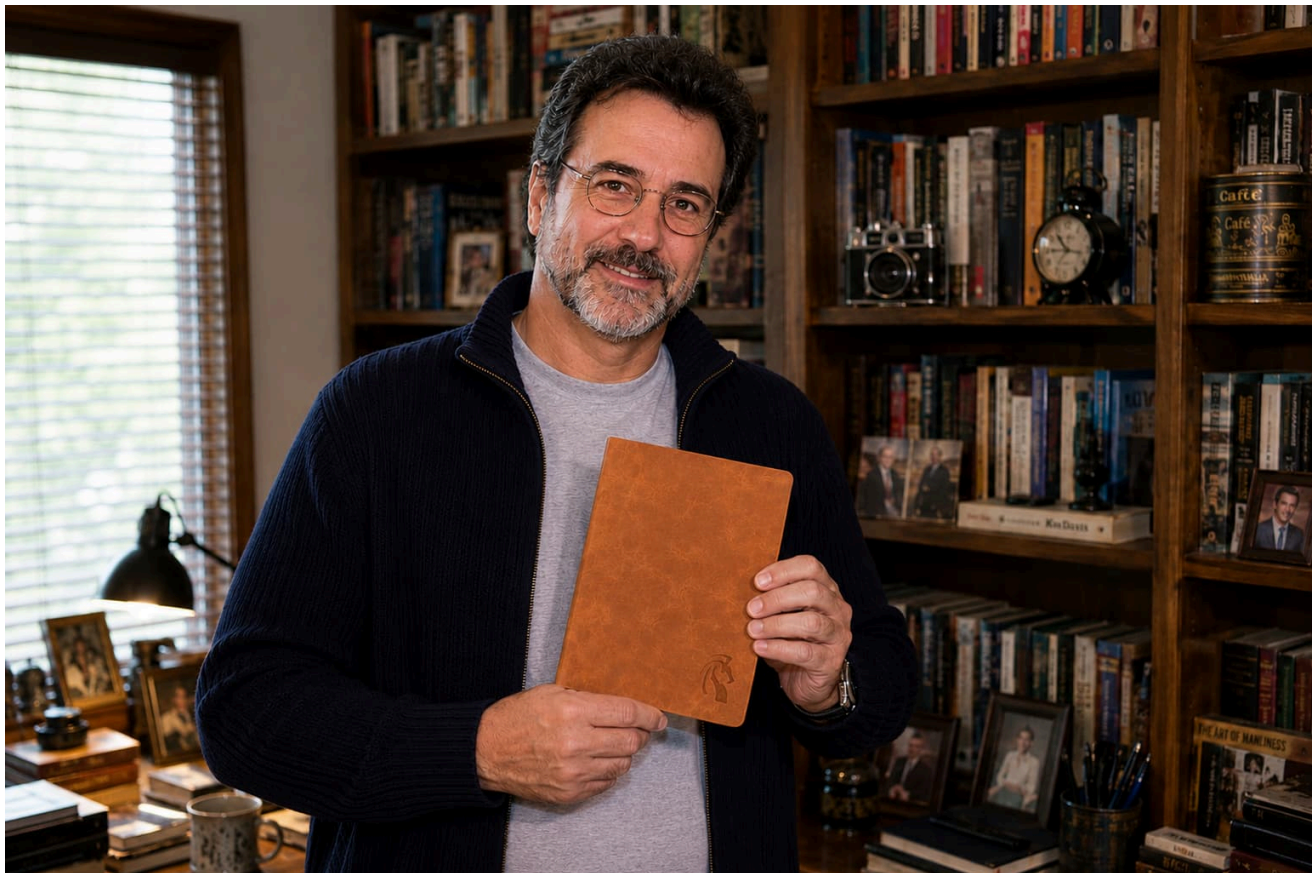
Field Notes

Field Notes are the opposite of the Hobonichi in almost every way. They are small, rugged, and made for the pocket. The paper is not fountain-pen-friendly, but it works fine with ballpoints, pencils, and most rollerballs. I use Field Notes for random thoughts, overheard dialogue, plot

ideas that strike me in line at the grocery store. They are the [notebooks for writers](#) who treat notebooks as consumables, not keepsakes. I go through about ten a year.

Baron Fig

Baron Fig makes a clean, well-designed notebook with a sewn binding and a sturdy cover. The paper is smooth and handles fountain pens reasonably well, though it ghosts a little with wet nibs. What sets Baron Fig apart is the attention to detail - the bookmark ribbon, the back pocket, the subtle grid on the inside cover. These are thoughtful touches that make the notebook feel personal. I use Baron Fig notebooks for project planning and character notes.



Rocketbook

Rocketbook is a different kind of notebook. It uses synthetic paper and a special pen that lets you wipe the pages clean with water and reuse the notebook. I was sceptical at first, but it turns out to be incredibly useful for writers who do multiple drafts. You can write a chapter, scan it with the Rocketbook app, erase the page, and start over. The paper feels a bit like plastic - smooth and slightly waxy - and the pen takes a moment to get used to. But for fast iteration, nothing beats it. I keep a Rocketbook on my desk for brainstorming and rough outlines.

Maruman Mnemosyne

Maruman Mnemosyne notebooks are a favourite among fountain pen enthusiasts. The paper is bright white, smooth, and very resistant to bleed-through. The spiral binding at the top makes it easy to flip pages over the back, which some writers find more comfortable than a side-bound notebook. I use Maruman Mnemosyne notebooks for longhand drafting when I want the paper to perform flawlessly. They are not the most beautiful notebooks, but they are workhorses.

Kokuyo and Exacompta

Kokuyo and Exacompta are less common in the US but worth seeking out. Kokuyo makes a line of campus notebooks with micro-perforated pages that tear out cleanly. The paper is good for ballpoints and gel pens. Exacompta makes a wide range of notebooks, including some with a cloth cover and a lay-flat binding. Both are affordable and reliable. I keep a stack of Kokuyo notebooks for workshops and classes where I might need to hand pages to someone.

Pen Pairings Matter

A notebook is only half the equation. The pen you use changes everything. I have tested most of the notebooks above with a Lamy Safari, a Pilot G2, and a handful of fountain pens. The Lamy Safari is a workhorse fountain pen that pairs well with Rhodia, Clairefontaine, and Leuchtturm1917 paper. The Pilot G2 is a gel pen that writes on almost anything, though it can smear on coated paper if you are not careful. For the best experience, match your pen to your paper. A wet fountain pen on Tomoe River paper is a joy. That same pen on cheap pulp paper is a mess.

The Notebook as a Ritual

When I was younger, I thought the content of the writing was all that mattered. The tool was just a tool. But over the years I have come to see the notebook as part of the ritual of writing. Opening a fresh notebook, feeling the smooth paper under your hand, hearing the soft sound of the pen moving across the page - these sensory details prime your brain for the work. This is why I believe in investing in good notebooks for writers, even if you are just starting out. You are not buying paper. You are buying a space that invites you to write.

I have also learned that no single notebook works for every writer. Some people need the structure of a Hobonichi Techo. Others need the freedom of a blank Midori MD. Some writers fill a Field Notes pocketbook in a week. Others spend months in a single Leuchtturm1917. The only universal rule is this: if you hate your notebook, you will find reasons not to write. If you love it, you will find reasons to open it.

That is the real test. Does the notebook make you want to write? If the answer is yes, then it is the right one for you, regardless of what anyone else says.



Practical Advice for Choosing

If you are new to the world of good notebooks, my advice is to buy one of each of the brands I have mentioned - or as many as you can afford - and test them side by side. Write a page in each with your favourite pen. See which one feels best. Pay attention to how the paper feels under your hand, how the notebook lies open, how easy it is to carry. The winner might surprise you.

For the record, my current daily driver is a Leuchtturm1917 with a Pilot G2. But next month it might be something else. The search never really ends, and that is part of the pleasure.

The key is to keep writing. The notebook is just the stage. The words are the show.