A lastair Reid, in *Whereabouts: Notes on Being a Foreigner*, describes the zest of the traveler on arrival in a new country:

in a foreign country, the pattern of days is less predictable—each one has its character, and is easier to remember. So, too, the weather; and so, too, the shape and feel of newspapers, the sound of bells, the taste of beer and bread. It is all rather like waking up and not knowing who or where one is…. Quite ordinary things take on an edge; one keeps discovering oneself miraculously alive.

The goal of the writer—whether traveler, memoirist, journalist, novelist, or one who keeps a log just for himself—is to live with the keenness of the foreigner, to experience, wide-eyed, the sensations aroused and the events offered up by his peculiar surrounds and then to evoke them so brightly on the page that the reader, too, experiences the foreigner’s frisson: discovers him- or herself invigorated, transported to another rich and miraculous life. A time-honored way this may be accomplished is through the keeping of a field notebook: through the faithful recording of the this-and-that of life; the atmospheres and incidents; the bells, the beer, the bread.

For many years I have welcomed adults into my writing seminars—wonderful people writing of their travels, their explorations of cattlemen or the KGB, their childhoods, their fictional characters, their complex, rich lives. Often they arrive with bundles of journals and letters, sheaves of collected writings, and rubber-banded stacks of torn envelopes and newspaper corners scribbled with notes they want to turn into vivid memoirs, essays, travel pieces, literary journalism, or stories. Each and every person who enters my room has unique tales to tell and wisdom to impart.
The one thing they too often lack is adequate notes on the very people and places they want to write about. Their notes—and consequently their writings (at least initially)—have a fundamental flaw: an insufficiency of concrete and sensory detail with which to build flavorful, satisfying stories. They haven’t made notes at the level of precision that causes a time, place, scene, person, or emotion to quicken on the page. They lack sufficient rich description in their field notebooks—whether those “notebooks” be index cards, computer files, paper-clipped scraps of jottings, or classic black books.

When traveling, gathering bits of the past for a memoir, assembling material for a novel or reportage, or keeping a journal or blog, it is difficult to hold in the mind the many aspects of an experience to record—the very details that would make the experience come to life on the page. I have composed this “field notebook for field notebook keepers” to rectify the situation—to ensure that the holder will keep a notebook so rich that the writing, and the essays and stories that may later come from the jottings, will fall off the page like ripe plums.

To me, the two words field notebook are among the most romantic in the language. They conjure: Charles Darwin hunching on Galápagos rocks describing finches; Margaret Mead filling a book with the antics of Samoan girls; Virginia Woolf penning her diary after a day’s tramp through the downs; George Orwell huddled in a Barcelona café reporting on the Spanish Civil War.

Muddy-boot biologists, mosquito-slapping naturalists, war reporters, diarists, novelists, voyagers, literary journalists, urban bloggers, ethnographers, and myriad other explorers and watchers—I can see them all clearly in my mind’s eye, jotting in situ their observations of the world. What these varied scribblers all have in common is the impulse and the need to keep rich notes on life’s offerings—to keep a field notebook.

To take time in the midst of, or at the conclusion of, a long day of immersion, to set down that experience in ink in a notebook, is the writer’s primary and most basic method for capturing and recording the stuff of life. The proper keeping of a field notebook is key. To me, it is not only one of life’s chief joys but a sacred practice.

Besides its practical and romantic purpose—to trap in print that Monarch butterfly that is life on the page—the words field notebook also connote hard work. I know the labor well from my own anthropological and literary journalistic field researches for books on the lives of people in Argentina and France, as well as from my forays into memoir and essay. The discipline and devotion required to plunk oneself down at the end of a day of interviewing, hanging out with shepherds, observing the effects of war, or visiting friends to inscribe in ink for all time those events is not to be belittled.
The first field notebook I ever kept was for a field study of Patagonian right whales, my second for a study of Argentine sheep ranchers, and, hooked, I have kept up the practice since, for sundry other writing endeavors.

The practice of the field notebook was, to me, a revelation, as portable paint and easel must have been for the nineteenth-century discoverers of painting en plein air. It was also a revolution—a way to grab the spindly leg of life as it flickered by and pin it forever to the page. More, it was a way to live—and to savor that lived life. It offered the chance to live life thrice—at the point of experience, at the point of note-taking, and at the point of reviewing the observations and setting them into a structured tale. Think of the field notebook as a writer’s sketchbook.

But why the need for this book: a field notebook for field-notebook keepers? Isn’t note-taking an obvious, easy sort of thing—one we all mastered in high school if not before? No, it is not at all easy, especially not to do well.

I have experienced its failings myself. I arrived home from my first year and a half in Patagonia, for instance, having not recorded a single conversation with the ranchers I afterward yearned to write about. I was granted the opportunity of returning to right this negligence and to undertake systematic fieldwork, but such luck is rare. Years later, this time with memoir-writing in mind, when I went to my carton-filled basement to excavate my supposedly rich archive of youthful journals, I had a similar shock: there was nothing in those pages and pages of pennings worth using in a sentence, much less in a book-length memoir. Most of the writing was generalizing and caterwauling on the page. (This is not to belittle the emotional benefit of journal-as-release, but it’s advantageous, for the writerly sort, if the journal can serve simultaneously another fruitful purpose.)

In my diaries there was no mention of the croquettes eaten or account of the intense conversations my friend Ali and I had about how to catch a boy—the specifics that might have brought those eighth-grade years back in full color. The truth is, it is rare for untutored journal writers and travelers to actually record more than generalities like “Had a delicious meal last night with James and Charlotte,” or “The countryside was beautiful.” Most record-keepers forget the very details—the beef stew with pickles, the bounding yellow fields of rape, the encounter with a gypsy, the ponderings about beauty—that would cause the experience to live in the reader’s mind.

In her beloved novel Out of Africa Isak Dinesen evoked for all time the beautiful landscape and wise Kikuyu people of Kenya. Here she recreates an encounter she had after a flight with her friend Denys Finch-Hatton:

Once, when Denys and I had been up, and were landing on the plain of the farm, a very old Kikuyu came up and talked to us:
“You were very high to-day,” he said, “we could not see you, only hear the airplane sing like a bee.”

I agreed that we had been up high.

“Did you see God?” he asked.

“No, Ndewti,” I said, “we did not see God.”

“Aha, then you were not up high enough,” he said, “but now tell me: do you think that you will be able to get up high enough to see him?”

“I do not know, Ndewti,” I said.

“And you, Bedár,” he said, turning to Denys, “what do you think? Will you get up high enough in your aeroplane to see God?”

“Really I do not know,” said Denys.

“Then,” said Ndewti, “I do not know at all why you two go on flying.”

And here, M.F.K. Fisher, inveterate traveler and gourmande extraordinaire, sets before the reader, in *The Gastronomical Me*, a buffet of the meals she enjoyed during a 1936 voyage on a Dutch passenger-freighter:

I don’t remember much about the food, except that it was very different from the almost lavish cuisine of the other freigher we knew, the Italian one. It was dull, good, heavy food, but there were many vegetables and salads all the way to England. The coffee was fine, and this time we could afford to drink Dutch beer when we wanted it, and quite a lot of delicate Rhine wine.

The baker had a fight with the chef soon after we left port, and the barber took over all the pastry making . . . or so we heard. We had cake twice a day, in many different shapes but always the same. It was almost like cold omelet, as if it were made of hundreds of egg yolks stirred with a lot of sugar and a little flour and then baked. It was usually in thin solid pieces, like small bricks, elaborately topped with glaced fruits and always served with flavored whipped cream.

We often had a thick green soup, in the colder seas, filled with cabbage and potatoes and leeks and always with slices of link-sausage floating in it.

And there was one unattractive but delicious thing, a kind of sludge of different vegetables flavored with ham, which the waiter called Udgie-pudgie. I finally saw on a menu that it was Hodgepodge. The captain said the crew loved it, and it was indeed good, in a simple crude way that might offend or bore sophisticated palates.

What if Isak Dinesen had simply written, “Met an old Kikuyu”? and if M.F.K. Fisher had simply noted, “The food was variable onboard ship”?

I have assembled this manual so that, when you are writing in your diary, or dashing off sentences in your travel journal, or recording your field notes for your book of literary journalism, or composing your blog or memoir or novel, you will have a ready reference that will prompt you to record the kinds of details and observations and stories that make for evocative records and
tales of life. So that you will summon the rich sensory detail you need; record the conversations, gestures, and habits of the people you meet; and describe the land with such richness that the people and places you are trying so valiantly to capture spring from the page. And so that, later, when you return to your notes in order to reexperience those times or to turn them into finished pieces of writing, you will have there, in your notebook, the very accounts and stories and details you need and will only have to pluck and arrange.

In this book I set forth lists of all the kinds of material to record while you are traveling or gathering material, while you are blog- or journal-keeping or assembling your (memoir-writing) trip back in time: so that you will not omit some vital aspect and kick yourself later, as I so often have. You will inevitably forget some choice tidbits, but I intend, through the use of this guide, to shorten the list of the forgotten.

When I set out on my large, sprawling book-writing projects—my immersion in the lives of the sheep ranchers of Patagonia and my inquiry into the making of a French village bread loaf—compulsive that I am, I compiled a two-inch, three-ring binder’s worth of questionnaires and lists of the aspects of life I wanted to ask about—from inventories of household goods and mental health protocols to queries about money, friendship, and my informants’ philosophies of life. I made lists of the kinds of observations I wanted to make of the landscape, street interactions, meals eaten. . . . Over time I threw out the formal questionnaires and boiled my list down to just the sorts of details that could, when later reread at home base, lend themselves to the re-creation and recollection of a people and place. I offer the revised list to the reader here. Despite the deletions, the list still casts a wide net, and its suggestions may seem simple or obvious. When it gets to the actual work in the field, however, it is not so easy to remember to take the time to describe the teacup your sea captain drank from as he recounted his shipwreck in the Falkland Islands—and that teacup may end up the vital metaphor for the entire piece. You never quite know ahead of time what form your final piece of writing will take, so as much detail as you can get down in the field will be money in the bank. I guarantee you will never regret a single extra jotting you made. Instead, you will gloat over your treasures.

I’ve conceived this guide to be useful for any kind of writing from life: for those, such as voyagers or travel essayists, traveling through a place; for those, like literary journalists, who immerse themselves in a place and systematically collect interview and observational material; for bloggers and diarists; for those working from memory; or for novelists wishing to summon a real place to the page. The book may be a useful reminder to any who strive to recreate a time and place, create rich portraits, keep a record of their own life’s
events, or paint a picture of a particular landscape or culture or locale.

There are many fine writing guides that instruct the reader about how to describe a landscape, fashion a portrait, and craft a scene. What this book offers is the assurance that you will have the material with which to write those memorable descriptions, portraits, and scenes. I see this as an old-fashioned handbook or primer, a reminder in the form of lists of what to take notes on while wandering and sojourning in new spots, while reflecting on your life, and while composing and recreating a time, a set of people, and a place. Given that each project is unique, I invite you to add to and personalize this list using the space I have left for that purpose.

The book begins with a review of the elements of fine writing, a reminder, through an example of lively prose, of what it is built of. Then follow eleven sections, each of which spotlights a different kind of material that may be included in a field notebook and that, when accumulated, may yield a satisfying, rich, and thorough coverage of life experience.

PURPOSE OF THE NOTEBOOK
Here, I invite you to set down your initial aims and questions—practical, personal, and intellectual—as you take up your field notebook.

CHANCE PARTICULARS
In this section I urge you to attend to, and make note of, your sensory impressions and record concrete details of your world with specificity and precision. This practice, applied across all the kinds of material I suggest you collect, makes writing shine.

PLACE
I list in this section the many aspects of place you may wish to record, from landscape and botany to architectural features and street scenes.

PEOPLE
Here is where I direct you to put in print your interviewees’ gestures and hairpins along with their conversation, and I urge you to take the time to jot down chance encounters with firemen, bakers, and artists, as well as to make note of your own activities.

FACTS, HISTORY, AND CULTURE
In this section I prompt you to gather the basic information that undergirds your story: population, historical events, sociology, and other background. In addition I suggest that you get on paper your noticings about how people in this particular culture (even if it is your own) eat pie or greet one another.

TECHNICAL AND OTHER PERTINENT INFORMATION
Here I suggest that you record the procedures for curing warts or producing newspapers—whatever may be germane to your interests and objectives.

CHRONICLE
I urge you, in this section, to get down the incidents of ordinary daily life and the inviting aroma of those artichoke tarts you grab when hunger strikes, as well
as the names of the fleabag or luxurious hotels you may stay in while traveling.

PERSONAL RESPONSES
The recording of personal, emotional responses to events is a critical part of any field notebook. I advocate that you capture them here. They are what make the record truly yours—unique and authentic.

COMMONPLACE NOTES
This section serves as a reminder to register perspectives and quotations from scholars and experts in your field of interest, and to copy down lines from writers you love. Make notes, too, as you visit museums and wander alleys to capture the omnivorous notings of your peculiar mind. Any of these may well come in handy and stir your own reflections or provide bolstering evidence or the perfect filip, when, at long last, you read your notebook to mine its wisdom or when you seek to compose a finished work through the harvest of your notebook.

ASSOCIATIONS AND FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE
In this section I invite you to release your mind, like a horse from the paddock, and allow your imagination to gallop and play. Let the associations fly in metaphors that allow your prose, like Pegasus, to take wing.

REFLECTIONS
Finally, not to be forgotten are your intellectual reactions to your experiences. Just as important as the observations and interactions themselves are the thoughts and reflections you have in response to them.

To conclude the book, I supply, in “Writing Notes,” a list of key elements of the writer’s craft as an easy reminder while you write your field notes and construct drafts of essays, blog posts, memoirs, journalism, and so on their basis. There, as a handy reference, I list the building blocks of elegant writing, the tools of the trade.

A NOTE ON THE COMPOSITION OF THE SECTIONS OF THE BOOK
Each section opens with an excerpt that pertains to its particular focus. For instance, the passage for the section “Purpose of the Notebook” comes from Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*. It is meant to exemplify the sorts of ponderings and motives that may propel a person to keep a field notebook and to show how, if recorded, they may find their way into text. The opening passages in each section are designed to stir the reader’s imagination and nourish the inclination to make similar recordings.

I have selected the excerpts from significant literary nonfiction—travel pieces, books of literary journalism, memoirs, diaries, letters, and so on—to provide you with examples of fine landscape description, characterization, or dialogue, which may spur you to write your own. Obviously, I have not been able to be comprehensive as I intend this book to be compact, but I hope
to have provided sufficient citation to inspire. I have selected a mixture of
classics and more recent work, work of
women and men writers, and writings
from both far and near.

Following the opening quote for
each section, I point to the literary
strengths of the chosen passage and
then offer a practical list of the kinds
of notes to take, as well as a set of
directions for doing so, so that you may
amass material on the wide array of
aspects of experience: for instance,
 Impressions of people and places,
details of your daily life, and notes on
local history. In the “People” section, for
example, I ask you to make notes on an
individual’s physical appearance, voice,
gestures, quirks, habits, passions, and
so forth, so that you may assemble the
makings of a full and rounded portrait.

The book may be read through from
cover to cover, or it may be used as a
reference while recording field notes.
I have designed it, most particularly,
for the latter purpose. My vision is this:
of an evening in Provence or Tibet, or
at home while settling in to work on a
field notebook or journal or memoir, or
while sketching in a field or tapping in a
blog, the possessor will think to her- or
himself, Hmm . . . I have described the
hotel and the street in Lhasa . . . or I
have written about Peterkin’s Drugs
back home in Omaha . . . Now what else
do I need to make sure to describe?And
he or she will open this small book and
be prompted to record, too, the stink of
the butcher shop down the street or the
playground on the square where drunken
Uncle Jim threw up.

In A Book of One’s Own: People
and Their Diaries Thomas Mallon points
to the great boon that may result if you
collect in your notebook your own unique
details and observations. Here he issues
a warning to David Gascoyne, the writer
whose Paris journal he is in the course
of discussing:

Just lookback to May 13:

Last night we sat alone in the Place
Dauphine, under chestnut trees. It was
so warm, the sky so blue and clear. A
perfect May night. (Even the pissoir
nearby sounded like a fountain playing
in an Italian piazza!) The white steps of
the Palais de Justice glimmered like a
more romantic balustrade in the back-
ground.—We were silent most of the
time. Some people went by with their
dog. We were there for perhaps an hour.
I shall never forget it.

You certainly seem to have forgotten
it by September. It’s a good thing you’ll
have this book to bring it back to you.
Anyone who’s sat in that little square
can tell you it’s still just like that—the
benches, the chestnut trees, the white
steps. But someone else’s reminders
won’t do. Someone else’s chestnut trees
aren’t your chestnut trees; and his white
steps aren’t yours, either. You want the
ones you had on May 13, 1938. Above
all you want the detail of that dog going
by, and the jokey way you were struck by
the pissoir—chance particulars that will
really let it come back to you, that will let you open the diary forty, fifty years later and hear it playing your song.

It is those “chance particulars” that I hope this field notebook for field-notebook keepers will help you to catch, so that your writing—whether travel account, novel, journal, blog, literary journalism, or memoir—will play your own rare song.