Collecting Bits of Life

Life becomes precious and more special to us when we look for the little everyday miracles and get excited about the privileges of simply being human.

—Tim Hansel

There is so much power in the ordinary, routine, and daily living we do. Yet so often this living just passes through us like the air we breathe. Suddenly, the week is over. Suddenly, it’s the weekend. Suddenly, the New Year is upon us. And if we haven’t documented the everyday living, then suddenly, things have changed and we don’t know what happened or how. Yet, it’s not so sudden. Day by day all those little things add up to big meaning.

Collecting bits of life makes the living of it much richer. By teaching students ways to collect bits of life, we help them to find meaningful writing topics. Here are some ways to encourage students to collect bits of their lives.

• **Collect ephemera:** By collecting the “stuff” we would normally throw away, we are able to see patterns emerge. How often do we drive through to pick up dinner? What does the note left on the counter reveal about life right now? Why is a page from a tear-off calendar important?

• **Make a list:** Lists are an easy way to document life. Lists using a repeating line, such as “Today I . . .” or “I wish . . .” are a quick way to capture life. Lists detailing the contents of a backpack, desk, or under the bed are another way to record bits of life.

• **Draw a map:** Place is often a rich source of meaningful ideas. When we collect maps of important places in our notebooks, memories often flood us. Encouraging students to be specific in their maps empowers them to find important memories. As students zoom in on a place—instead of the entire backyard, just the secret hideout; instead of their house, just their bedroom—they will be rewarded with a copious amount of writing ideas.

• **Jot a quick write:** Donald H. Graves and Penny Kittle (2005) crack open the power of quick writes in *Inside Writing: How to Teach the Details of Craft*. They share two powerful rules for quick-writing. First, write the entire time, and second, write about something that matters. Providing students time to quickly record memories and thoughts gives them the opportunity to find topics they are interested in writing more about.

• **Use thinking stems:** In *Comprehension Connections*, Tanny McGregor (2007) shares thinking stems, which are phrases to encourage students to reflect on an idea. Phrases such as “This makes me realize . . .” “I used to think, but now I believe . . .”, and “This is important because . . .” prod students into reflection. As they reflect on the bits of their lives, they are able to pinpoint those ideas that are most meaningful.

By collecting bits of life and then pushing ourselves to reflect on them, we are able to live powerful lives. This is why I believe in writer’s notebooks for our young writers. It gives them a spot to sift through all the little moments that make up their lives and find the common themes. It’s not just the physical book that makes an impact. It is helping students develop a habit and routine of collecting bits of their lives and then pushing them to find big meaning in the little bits of life.

**Challenge:** Spend two weeks daily collecting bits of your life in your writer’s notebook. Notice ways you document the ordinary moments of your life. Spend time reflecting on this process so you can teach students to do this same work.

**Reflective Practice:**
- What were some common kinds of entries you collected in your writer’s notebook? (Add these ideas to the ones in this reflection to empower your students when collecting bits of life.)
- How did focusing on the small, ordinary moments of life influence you as a writer?