

# The Complete Digital Renaissance-Man Series

Below is a collection of blog posts I began in 2010 on how to be a digital Renaissance Man, including my most-viewed post on how to create and keep a commonplace book. In June 2015, I added a small section on the Renaissance-Man office. I'll make further additions as the mood strikes. Enjoy.

## A Digital Renaissance-Man Analog To-Do/Calendar System

Let me begin by saying that I'm not against smartphones or online services that let you do things such as store data or jointly work on documents. But as with social media, I choose not to use them. I like the feel and (semi-)permanence of paper, and enjoy being (mostly) untethered from the tyranny of having to charge batteries. I *do* carry a cell phone, but it's a (very) dumb phone. It covers the basics of communication--voice calls and text messages--and that's all I require it to do.

For the most part, I keep and manage all my personal information the old-fashioned way--on paper.

The most important link--the very heart of the system--is a small notebook and mechanical pencil I carry in my shirt pocket. (In the Renaissance, they probably used small ivory plates or [writing table](#) to write on.) I use my little notebook to make notes or observations and to write down ideas. I also use it capture dates for meetings and things to add to my to-do list. Inside the front cover, I put down important phone numbers and information such as my car's license plate or my student ID, so that I don't have to thumb through the whole notebook to find something I refer to often. This pocket notebook is the equivalent of a shopkeeper's "daybook," a place where information is temporarily stored until it can be transferred to the appropriate place. It's a two-way tool--I also use it to temporarily store information that's been taken from other locations (such as the place/time/phone number for a meeting or a list of books to buy) for use while I'm out of the house. Each entry is dated, and lined through once the item has been transferred/accomplished/is no longer needed.

The other two parts of the system are a to-do list and a calendar. My to-do list is kept in a notebook slightly larger than my pocket notebook. It sits on my desk (or on the counter in the kitchen) and is where I keep undated items I need to take care of. Whenever I come home, I take a minute to "download" any new to-do's from my pocket notebook onto the list or to cross off anything I got done while I was out of the house. I use Mark Forster's [autofocus system](#) to set, prioritize and deal with the tasks on my list, but you can use any system that works for you.

As for calendars, I use a full-size (8-1/2" x 10") calendar that shows a week across two pages and which has a two-page monthly calendar between the end of one month and the beginning of the next. The monthly calendar pages keep track of birthdays, recurring bills and deadlines. Towards the end of a month, I transfer the next month's important dates into the appropriate days of the weekly calendar and add notes/set up sub tasks ("Buy/mail birthday card for X" the week before X's birthday) as needed. If one of the tasks is to call/email someone, I put their phone number/email address beside the task so I don't have to search for it. As the day's tasks are completed, they are lined through, both on the calendar and on the to-do list.

And that's my entire system. It's simple, takes little time to set up and maintain, and I never have to worry about forgetting to charge my pencil or notebook. But most important, it's what works for me. Your system may be different, or you may need to modify this one in order to make it work for you. The only way to know is to experiment until you come up with something that satisfies your needs, doesn't take all your time to manage, and has a reasonable chance of preventing you from forgetting that someone special's birthday.

# Of the Byways of Literature

The Argument -- This colloquy shows that both profit and pleasure can be found in searching through the models of the past. Forms of literature and discourse no longer used and considered archaic may be renewed and revived; or at worst, read and enjoyed for their own sake.

VIRGIL, ABELARD.

A: Hey, Virgil. You almost ran right into me. Where you headed in such a hurry?

V: I'm going on a tour of the Province of Literature.

A: That'd take a while.

V: Yeah, it would. The Province stretches as far as the eye and mind of man can see. Cultures both living and dead expanded its borders; and it still grows with each passing year and each man that adds to it.

A: If it's that big, you're never coming back.

V: The whole of it is too much for one man. But I'm only going to visit the byways of English Literature.

A: The byways? Sounds like a perfect recipe for getting lost.

V: It does. But I have a map.

A: A map?

V: Yeah. Just as the men of the Renaissance looked to the Greeks and the Romans, I'm looking to them as models.

A: Why not just cut out the middle-man?

V: Because the men of the Renaissance didn't just copy what they saw as the best of the Ancients. They adapted the ancient models to fit their own languages; then grew beyond them, creating styles of literature all their own.

A: Sounds interesting. Mind if I come along?

V: Not at all. Some company would be nice.

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A: Wow. What's this great big ruin we're standing in?

V: Abelard, I'm surprised you don't recognize it. It's a colloquy, also known as a dialogue. No less of a man than Desiderius Erasmus once lived here.

A: It certainly looks like it was a magnificent house, but it's obviously been abandoned for some time. What's that over there? Looks like some sort of theater--but the stage is so small.

V: It's a closet drama. Designed not to be performed, but read.

A: Whoa, did you see that? A fox just ran into that ruined heap over there.

V: Hmm, that appears to be the remains of a fable. There was a moral in there once, you know.

A: So I've heard.

V: See those beautiful towers over in the distance?

A: I do. But I've never seen odd shapes like that.

V: They're styles of poetry that have fallen out of favor. The one on the left there is alliterative poetry, the kind used to write Beowulf.

A: No wonder it looks so ancient and imposing. Deeply moving in a way, too.

V: It really can be. Beside it are rhyme royal, the villanelle, and terza rima. There are even more styles there than just those. You can look up their names if you're interested.

A: Wow, there's more out here in the byways than I thought. But while it's all interesting to look at, what good is it? You've only shown me empty shells and tumbledown ruins.

V: You might see them as empty, but let me ask you: If you needed a house, you could renovate other houses--even abandoned ones--right?

A: Yes.

V: And even if parts of them were in ruins, you might find a usable piece or a beautiful ornament if you went and examined them closely, yes?

A: True.

V: So perhaps these literary ruins can be renovated and put to new use, or serve as models; and you yourself said they were interesting to look at. So if nothing else, they can be a source of pleasure or amusement.

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V: There's just a few more things to see before we head home.

A: What are those three very solid-looking buildings over there?

V: Ah. That one is an essay. And there beside it, a bit larger, is a treatise.

A: All that for just one topic?

V: Indeed. Sometimes they can be rather long-winded.

A: And that last one?

V: An apology, I'm sorry to say. See how it wraps around, defending the writer's position?

A: Imposing and a little bit forbidding, don't you think? Look, I can see home from here. What's that last edifice, right on the edge of the byways? It doesn't look abandoned.

V: It isn't. That is the house of letters. The shape has changed over time, but the purpose remains the same--communicating with someone else. In the Renaissance, letters were often more like essays, written for and sent to a single person. Popular letters were copied and passed around, or collected into books for others to enjoy.

A: And here we are, back where we started. Thank you for the tour. Want to go get a beer?

V: A beer would be great. Even I'll admit the byways can be dry and dusty at times, even if they're well worth visiting.

## Commonplace Books -- Old Wine in New Bottles

*"...[W]e judge it is of great service in studies. . . to bestow diligence and labor in setting down commonplaces; as it affords matter to invention, and collects and strengthens the judgment."* -- Francis Bacon, "Advancement of Learning," Book Five, Ch. 5

In ancient Greece and Rome, students of rhetoric were encouraged to write down arguments, categorized into "topics" or "common places" for study. Wealthy Greeks and Romans also kept private notes containing what they saw, heard, read, or thought in books called "hypomnema" or "commentarii;" some even having slaves that followed them around, wax tablet and stylus in hand, for just that purpose. Like so many other things ancient, the commonplace book reappeared in the early Renaissance. The rediscovery of rhetoric, coupled with the relative scarcity of textbooks, forced students to write extracts and abstracts of texts into their own notebooks, to be used both for later reference and as models to copy. Erasmus, in his book "On Abundance of Words and Ideas," encourages students to write down quotes, stories, and anecdotes in order to gain "abundance" ("copia") in vocabulary, grammar, and ideas.

During the Enlightenment, educated men kept commonplace books filled with quotes, commentaries on their reading, miscellaneous thoughts and observations, and even recipes. Sir Francis Bacon kept a commonplace book, as did John Locke and Thomas Jefferson. The practice persisted into the early twentieth century before almost completely dying out.

Some say that blogs are the modern, digital equivalent of commonplace books. I don't agree. Blogs are public ruminations; some half-digested, others more well thought out, but all of them intended to be read by others. Blogs are electronic essays. A commonplace book is a private thing; a space where a man can copy out a quotation that strikes him, meditate upon it, worry it like a dog with a bone, then add his own thoughts and reflections upon it. It is a diary of the mind; and like a diary, not intended for public consumption.

Why keep a commonplace book at all? I can think of three reasons. The first is the original reason for keeping one--an abundance of words and ideas. A writer needs to have a ready stock of quotes, thoughts, and ideas on hand; just as a cabinet maker needs to have a supply of wood. The quote at the top of this article, in fact, was put in my commonplace book several months ago, to be taken out and used just today. In addition, writers always seem to have ideas while busy with something else. "...[S]ometimes the most admirable thoughts break in upon us which cannot be inserted in what we are writing," Quintillian says, "but which, on the other hand, it is unsafe to put by.... They are, therefore, best kept in store."

A commonplace book is also an aid to self-education and memory. Keeping one forces you to become an active reader, to read with one eye towards the main points of an argument, the beautiful quote, the insight that gives you pause. You become aware of just more than the words on the page; you become aware of the author's arguments, his writing style, and what **you** think about what the author is saying. It creates a give-and-take between writer and reader. Furthermore, the act of writing down quotations and arguments fixes them more firmly in the memory, making it more likely that you'll remember them at appropriate times. Periodically re-reading your commonplace book will further strengthen your recall even more.

Finally, reading your own commonplace book can be a tool of self-knowledge. Seeing which categories have the most quotations and comments gives you insight into your personal interests, what you hold important and dear, and how your tastes have changed over time.

There are two major methods of keeping a commonplace book. The first is Erasmus' method, which he describes in his book "On Abundance of Words and Ideas." Erasmus was concerned with helping students develop abundance in their persuasive writing, and focused on "exempla" that could be used to support or give proof in an argument. He suggested that a student keep a notebook with the exempla (quotes, fables, proverbs, etc.) that they came across in their reading. The notebook should be arranged into categories based on the principles of "affinity and opposition" -- for example, piety and impiety. Each category was then subdivided (piety to God, to country, to parents, and so on) to prevent confusion, and the same done for the opposite category. Categories could be created at will, or taken from classical authorities such as Cicero or Aristotle. They could also be simply listed alphabetically. When a student read something noteworthy, he wrote it down under the appropriate heading. This allowed a student to use "the riches of your reading." Exempla that could be used under multiple headings would be written out as many times as necessary, or at least a note left on where it could be found (i.e. a citation).

The advantage of Erasmus' system is that it puts all related topics in one place, so that one exempla suggests another. This is especially useful in rhetoric, where multiple examples help drive home a point. The disadvantage (which Erasmus doesn't mention) is that once the commonplace book reaches a certain size, it becomes unwieldy to use without an index of some kind.

In the seventeenth century, John Locke, the English philosopher, published his "new method" for keeping a commonplace book. In keeping with the spirit of the Enlightenment, the system is (relatively) simple and utilitarian. Locke brags about being able to keep a commonplace book of any size with only two index pages. (However, he both combines letters [ex. I/J] and keeps his headings in Latin in order to reduce the size of his index. Modern English requires an additional page.) First create an index by taking a ruler and marking out spaces for each letter of the alphabet in a blank book; then subdivide each letter into five smaller spaces--one for each vowel. (ex. Ba, Be, Bi, Bo, Bu.) Commonplace headings are organized by first letter, then first vowel. ("Breath" would go under "Be.") On the first available left-hand (that is, even) page, write the heading in the left margin, letting it hang out further than the rest of the entry. All topics that begin with the same letter/vowel combination go on that left-hand/right-hand pair of pages (ex. all "Be" words go on pages 10 and 11). Write the left-hand page number in the index under the appropriate heading. If an entry goes past a right-hand page, find the next free left-hand page and continue writing. If the very next right-hand page is free, do nothing. But if the next free left-hand page is further back into the book, add that page number to the appropriate index. Furthermore, write the number of the continuation page at the bottom of the old (full) page and the number of the continued from page at the top of the new (empty) one. (This is the same system that magazines use today if they have to split up a story--"continued on" and "continued from.") All quotes should have their sources written down for later use.

The system actually sounds more complex than it is. To see it in action, do a quick online search for Locke's "A New Method of A Common-Place Book". By the time Locke was creating his commonplace books, they had become more of a repository of facts, information, and quotes than a storehouse of rhetorical examples. His alphabetic index system makes it much easier to store and retrieve information. However, it also means that related ideas might be written down in entirely different locations, making it harder to draw connections between them.

My personal commonplace book is kept electronically, using a system that's more Erasmusian than Lockean. It's a single, giant text file. At the very top of the document, I have an alphabetic list of topics. In the body, I repeat each Topic name, then write everything--quotes, comments, personal observations--under that topic heading. This allows me to search by topic and keeps related items together. Being a single computer file, I'm also able to do a keyword search if, for instance, I can only remember a word or two from a quote. I cite all my quotes, and preface everything that I write (comments, stand alone quotes) with an asterisk to mark it as mine, rather than some other author's.

The advantage to an electronic commonplace book is that it takes up no physical space and can be searched easily. Text files are hard to corrupt and are readable by almost all computers. By adding a hotkey-linked shortcut on my desktop, I can open my commonplace book with just a few keystrokes. Of course, it requires a computer to be used; and if I were forced to print it out, it would become a hundred-page-plus monster. But even then, the index would still allow me to make use of it.

Creating and maintaining a commonplace book is an investment of both time and effort. However, all that work will be more than repaid in "a copia of words and ideas." As a writer, I can't think of anything more worthwhile and useful.

## Jeremais Drexel's Method of Excerpting

*There was never a book he [Pliny] saw, that he did not want; no book that he deemed worthy of reading, that he did not excerpt; none that he excerpted, that he did not relate in his letters. -- Jeremais Drexel, "Aurifodina Artium et Scientiarum Omnium," Part I, Book VI*

In the mid-1600's, a Jesuit priest by the name of Jeremais Drexel sat down and wrote out his thoughts on how to take notes (which he called "excerpting.") The resulting work, *Aurifodina Artium et Scientiarum Omnium [The Gold-mine of All Arts and Sciences]* was so popular that, according to historian Ann Blair, it was reprinted in translation as late as the 19th century.

On a mechanical level, Drexel's method is fairly complex. There are two overarching categories of notes--sacred (for religious works) and profane (for everything else). Each is to be kept in separate sets of notebooks. Each category is further divided into three sub-categories: Lemmata, Adversaria, and Histories. Lemmata are citations from books. Adversaria are longer notes on topics, and include anecdotes and things heard. Histories are events that can be used to support points made in one's own writings. Each of these three sub-categories are to be kept in their own separate notebook. In addition, each of the six notebooks should have its own half-size notebook to act as an index, making a grand total of a dozen volumes. Of course, this is just the minimum--it's expected that the number of books will increase along with the number of notes.

If one desires, one can add an additional category called Miscellanies, in which things such as speeches, problems, man-made and natural wonders, facts, and other small bits of information, as well as thoughts, dreams, or ideas are noted. For special projects, such as a book, Drexel suggests a separate volume in which to keep notes just for that subject.

Once the notebooks themselves are ready, notes are taken as follows: The subject heading of a set of notes is written in large letters in the margin of the notebook. The heading is then also copied into the index, alphabetically by first letter, followed by the page number used in the notebook. After each note, the author's name, book title, chapter, and page number should be written down. Three spaces are to be left between each note and several blank lines between each subject. (Though Drexel doesn't mention it, volume numbers would also have to be marked down in the index once the notes grew beyond a single book.)

As to where to find raw material, Drexel suggests that one read the best authors, those who have written the biggest and brightest works--predominantly the ancients. (Poets, he suggests, should read Virgil; philosophers, Aristotle; orators, Cicero.) Best, too, to read well rather than many books. (Multum non

multa.) Finally, one shouldn't read cursorily, but with thought and attention. Read an author completely through, noting his arguments and use of language.

Drexel also lists seven principles of excerpting: begin early in life; excerpt judiciously; and constantly; select things worthy of noting; review one's excerpts from time to time; learn from one's notes, rather than just copying and repeating what's been written down; and pay attention to the purposes of one's study when making excerpts. If followed, these principles lead to a personal body of knowledge. "The excerpts we create are a library," he writes. "Wherever we are, and where books are few, our compendium can be considered useful."

While the advent of computers has made Drexel's cumbersome method for taking notes antiquated, his points about reading and his principles of excerpting are still valid and useful today. Better to read few authors thoroughly, drinking from the deep well of knowledge, than to be a butterfly, flitting from flower to flower and book to book, getting only a taste of nectar from each one. And by periodically reviewing our notes, we have their contents in our memories and on the tips of our tongue (and pen). But these notes can be more than just useful--through their re-reading, examination, and meditation upon both the thoughts of other authors and the list of topics we chose to take notes on, they form a path to self-knowledge and self-improvement.

## A Digital Renaissance Man Bibliography

### Information Storage and Retrieval

- *Advancement of Learning*, by Sir Francis Bacon. See Book V, Chapter 5 for a discussion of commonplace books; and Book VI, Chapter 2 on the use of Aphorisms.
- *Of Studies*, in *Essays Civil and Moral* by Sir Francis Bacon. Bacon's recommendations on how and what to study.
- *Francis Bacon's Advice to Fulke Greville on Research Techniques*, by Vernon F. Snow, *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 23 No. 4, (August 1960). Bacon discusses digests ("epitomes") of books, commonplacing, and the use of research assistants.
- *A New Method of A Commonplace Book*, by John Locke. Locke reveals his personal method for indexing his commonplace book, as well as how he cites the sources of his quotations.
- *Reading Strategies for Coping with Information Overload ca. 1550-1700*, by Ann Blair, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 64 No. 1 (January 2003). Blair describes the multiple strategies used in the Early Modern period to extract and organize information.
- *De Utraque Verborum ac Rerum Copia* (often called simply "De Copia"), Desiderius Erasmus. See Book II, The Eleventh Method, for Erasmus' suggestions for setting up and using a commonplace book.
- *The Scholemaster*, by Roger Ascham. Ascham offers his method for speedily learning Latin (which could be applied to other languages) and talks about the merits and faults of both commonplace books and epitomes.

### Writing Styles -- The Senecan/Ciceronian Debate

- *Advancement of Learning*, by Sir Francis Bacon. See Book I for a discussion of the two styles.
- *A Senecan Ramble*, by George Williamson, Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1951. Williamson traces the appearance and rise of the Senecan style in English prose and links it to various writers, including Bacon.
- *Francis Bacon and Renaissance Prose*, by Brian Vickers, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1968. A fascinating analysis of Bacon's writing style.
- *On Style*, by Demetrius. A discussion of Greek writing styles, which were adopted and adapted by the Romans and later, English writers.

## On Writing Poetry

- *Poetry* by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch. "Q's" opinion on poets and poetry.
- *A Defence of Poesy and Poems* by Sir Philip Sidney. This is Sidney's treatise on the purpose of poetry--to educate while it entertains.
- *Observations on the Art of English Poesie* by Thomas Campion. Campion advocates unrhymed, metered poetry in imitation of Greek and Latin styles.

## Websites of Interest

- [Luminarium](#) A rich source of material on Elizabethan (and other English) writers.
- [Project Gutenberg](#) A great general source of online texts.
- [The Online Library of Liberty](#) Copies of Bacon's and Locke's works can be found at this site.
- [The Internet Archive](#) Their texts section has a large number of texts by and about the Elizabethans, on writing, and on other subjects of interest to the digital Renaissance Man.

## On Learning a Foreign Language

Renaissance education hinged upon the learning of Latin. Latin was not only the mark of an educated man, but the common medium for exchange of ideas all across Europe. From the earlier Scholastics all the way through the Elizabethans and on into the early 20th century, Latin was the language of knowledge. It was more than just a medium of communication, it shaped how men thought, spoke, and wrote. Even Sir Francis Bacon, writing in English, translated "The Advancement of Learning" and the "Novum Organum" into Latin, assuming that they would endure longer in that tongue.

While there is no common world-wide language (despite attempts such as Esperanto and Loglan), many of the advantages that once came from knowing Latin can still be obtained by learning a language other than the one you were born speaking.

Language does more than let us talk to our friends and family. It moulds, shapes, and determines the thoughts in our heads and therefore, the way we view the world. Learning a foreign language gives us another viewpoint, changing the patterns of our thoughts. Just as we say "a cup of coffee" in English, Chinese has "measure words" which are specific to each noun and are used every time that noun is counted. Roads, rivers, snakes, cucumbers, belts and eels all use the same measure word; a grouping that shows connections that may not be obvious to the speaker of another language.

Furthermore, learning a foreign language shows us the advantages and limits of our own. Some concepts can't be properly translated, such as *gezellig*, *sprezzatura*, or *guanxi*. Equally, some of the words we imbibed with our mother's milk can't be translated into other languages. The endless use of borrow- and loan-words between languages gives ample evidence that some concepts are not universal; but by speaking a foreign language we become aware of them. This ability to see the world in a different way carries over into our daily lives. To those who speak a foreign language, the world seems larger than it did before; and like bees, they see shades and nuances and colors to which others are blind.

But learning another language does more than allow us to play with new concepts and ideas; it allows us to communicate with other human beings. We become able to hear the stories of their lives, their thoughts, their concerns; and in turn they can hear ours. Through this communication, both sides benefit. We learn our similarities and our differences; which ones are basic (and perhaps irreconcilable) and which are minor or stylistic. We learn the reasons behind customs and holidays; the morals and attitudes of others cultures.

And being a frozen conversation between the reader and writer, literature is also a valuable window on our fellow man. A translated book may reach a far greater audience, have a greater effect, promote more

understanding than any single conversation ever could.

For writers, knowing another language gives access to other forms and styles of literature that can be carried back and adapted to our native tongue. Haiku, for example, is now practiced and enjoyed in lands and tongues far from that of its birth. The literature of the world is full of buried treasures, needing only someone who can read to map for them to be brought out into the light. These once-hidden gems enrich both he who finds them and the world at large.

Finally, speaking another language makes us an ornament to our native land. Anyone who has lived more than a decade or two has encountered a lost tourist or immigrant (often someone rich in years) who doesn't speak our language well. Helping (and being able to help) a person in difficulty is a deed that reflects well upon ourselves and our society and which may have consequences greater than simply explaining how to get to a nearby monument or grocery store--for today's tourist may be tomorrow's Prime Minister.

The men of the Renaissance were required to learn Latin; we have more choices these days. We have the opportunity to have broader horizons than even they did, but only if we set forth on the sea of learning a foreign language.

## **In Praise of Blank Verse**

Can we breathe into these old patterns a  
Life anew? And from dead ash blow up such  
A fire as may kindle again the minds  
Of men to stretch their ears and thoughts and tongues?  
That these meters once used upon the stage  
By men of worth like Kit and Will and Ben  
Could, their circle gone round and back again,  
Come once more into seasonable use,  
Is greatly hoped. Another ornament  
To our English tongue, long left to moulder  
In dusty caskets of forgetting,  
When pulled out and held up to the sun  
Glitters just as bright as the day 'twas cut,  
No wear of time dulling razor facets,  
Nor stain of age clouding its noble hue.  
No less than Tom Campion, of ancient fame  
Argued that our most virile mother-tongue,  
Was suited best to pentameter,  
And not the longer feet of Latin verse.  
He calling rhyme "tedious affectation,"  
Did eschew its use, unknown as it was  
To the Greeks and Romans of ages past.  
And even Daniel, of opposite mind,  
Who argued for a rhyme universal,  
Admitted it sometimes did glut the ear.  
So, our way lit by these ancient lamps,  
Let us go mine again those veins once thought  
All play'd out and by poets abandoned,  
Seeking gold where once gold was found, to bring  
Forth new treasures, more fit to the fashion  
Of these latter days.



# On Writing Poetry

When we think of the Elizabethans, we think of men like Raleigh or Drake, stalking the deck of a ship with sword in hand. But men of stature in Elizabeth's day were expected to have accomplishments other than swordsmanship, such as dancing and singing. Among these expected accomplishments was the ability to write poetry. Even Raleigh occasionally put down his sword to write, and several of his poems still crop up in anthologies today.

"Great. But that was four-hundred years ago," you say. "Why should I bother to write poetry today?"

For the same reason the Elizabethans did it--for the benefits it brings to both our own writing and to ourselves. Good poetry isn't easy to write, especially the kinds of poetry that use rhyme and meter. While I have nothing against free and blank verse, having to work within the constraints of rhyme and meter is much harder, and makes success that much sweeter. Some argue that the two are straightjackets that constrain poetic creativity; I'd argue that they give you a framework, a skeleton on which to hang your words. I'd also argue that unlike free verse, where you're struck only by the force of each line as you read it, rhymed poetry sets up a state where your mind's eye sees and begins to form the next line before you get to it. This expectation, this anticipation, creates a second, higher level of enjoyment of the poem when your own "suggested next line" is confirmed or when you're surprised to discover that the poet is more clever than you imagined.

Writing poetry strengthens language ability in several important ways. At a very basic level, poetry strengthens both your vocabulary and your grammar. Poetry appeals more to the emotions and senses than to reason, and as each line forms, you have to decide which words to use and in what order to put them to create the most powerful effect. Because their aims are different, the grammar and word choices of poetry are often very different from other forms of literature. And with poetry, you can only learn what works and what doesn't through practice.

Writing poetry also strengthens your ability to think in metaphors and images. These two strike the senses strongly, and to be able to use them--both in verse and prose--is a skill not to be underestimated, and which flows over into your other writing.

Furthermore, metered and rhymed poetry teaches you both discipline and to be creative. Writing poetry isn't easy, and like any learned skill, takes time. Once you start a poem, you should keep at it until it's finished. (How do you know when it's finished? When it says everything you want it to say--but not a single word more.) And as an exercise in creativity, trying to fit an idea or image into two lines of iambic pentameter can stretch the mind to its limit (and sometimes to the point of tearing your hair out). Or you may discover that one line flows and the other just won't gel, and you have to find an alternate way to say what you intended to say.

And finally, writing poetry changes you, teaches you to see the world with a different eye. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch wrote a short essay titled "The Art of Poetry." In it, he wrote that he felt poets look at the world, abstract the universal themes from a particular scene or event, reclothe the universal in images of their own creation, which they then present back to us. Write poetry, and ever after, a rainy day or a cat by the fire or a smiling baby will hold for you meanings above the mundane. To be a poet is to be a changed man.

And that, if for no other reason, is why we should write it.

# How to Make an Erasable "Writing Table" on Which to Take Notes

Before the days of smartphones and ipads, people used to keep their personal information (phone numbers, important dates, notes-to-self, etc.) in little notebooks they kept, along with a pencil, in their pocket. But there was a time when even paper itself (instead of scraped animal hide) was a new technology--expensive and often imported--and "writing" was something messy which normally required ink and a quill pen. How then to take notes on the go? Many people relied on "tables," an erasable form of paper that could be written on with a pen (pin) made of soft metal like silver or copper, and which could be cleaned with a damp sponge or wet fingertip.

Tables were used by scholars to take notes, by merchants to keep accounts, and poets to catch snatches of rhyme that came to them when away from their desks. Shakespeare even mentions them in his plays. Being a fan of things Renaissance, and thinking that it would be neat (and "green") to have a reusable way of taking notes that didn't require a battery, I looked into these mysterious "tables." The best description of their making (and a great discussion of how they were used) is an article called *Hamlet's Tables and the Technologies of Writing in Renaissance England* by Professor Peter Stallybrass of the University of Pennsylvania and several staff members from the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC. (*Shakespeare Quarterly*, Volume 55, Number 4, Winter 2004). Table leaves are made by painting a base layer such as pasteboard with a special coating. According to Prof. Stallybrass, "Despite the complexity of some of the recipe-book formulae, the basic ingredients of the coating are gesso and glue."

Gesso is the white, almost paste-like mixture of ground chalk and glue that's used by artists to lay down a base layer to prepare a canvas or board for oil painting. And glue is--well, you know what glue is. And since the earliest glues were generally made of boiled animals, I figured a clear glue was what was meant. So after a bit of experimentation, here's the method I came up with to make your own "writing tables."

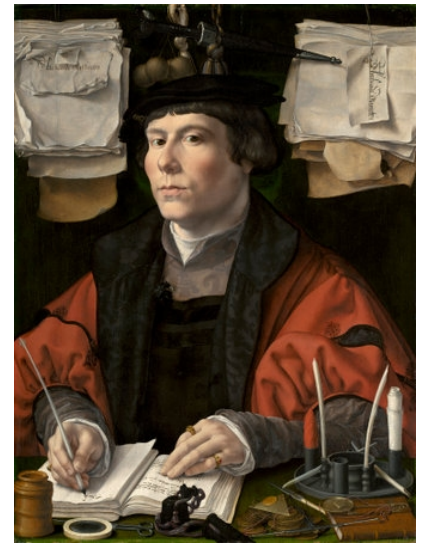
- Clear (not white) glue
- Italian gesso (don't use acrylic gesso--you want the kind that contains ground chalk)
- A paintbrush (I used a sponge-type brush)
- Thick drawing paper, posterboard, or a square of smooth masonite as a base.

Mix equal amounts of glue and gesso. Coat your base with the mixture using long strokes, making sure to go all the way to the edges. Wait for the first coat to dry, then rotate your base ninety degrees and coat it again. Let that layer dry. Repeat the procedure until you have a good, thick, even coating of white, without obvious brushstrokes. For me, it took about six to eight coats in total.

Once your base is completely dry, you can trim it to whatever size you find convenient. Write on the coated side, using the softest lead pencil you can find, and try not to press too hard. When you go to erase, use a clean, damp cloth or a damp piece of tissue to rub off the writing. Then (and this is important), let your table dry before writing on it again. Each erasure removes a little bit of the glue/gesso mixture, so eventually it will no longer work, and you'll either have to make a new table or re-coat your base with more glue/gesso mix.

## The Renaissance-Man Office

So if you want to go *really* lo-tech, you can always set up your home office so that it looks something like the picture above, which is of a [16th century merchant](#). On the desk, he has a metal tray that holds sealing wax, quill pens, an inkpot (currently sitting on the table), and some paper. In front of the tray is a small book, which may actually be an erasable [writing table](#), judging from the metal stylus lying on top. Across the front of the painting are a set of scales for weighing coins, the inkpot itself, a pair of scissors, a small round object I can't identify (perhaps a dish for tapping off excess ink), and a sand shaker (to dry the ink). Behind the man's head are balls of string, a dagger, and two sets of papers. (According to the National Gallery, these are marked "Miscellaneous Letters" and "Miscellaneous Drafts.") But notice how the papers are held together. They've been pierced--presumably with a needle--threaded together, and hung up.



*Portrait of a Merchant (c. 1530) by Jan Gossaert  
Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington*

This is how papers were filed back before folders and filing cabinets. (In fact, the English word "file" comes from the Latin word "filum" for sting). If you're interested in learning more how documents were stored in the Renaissance, head to the Folger Shakespeare Library's blog "Collation" and read the post [Filing, seventeenth-century style](#). An interesting tidbit from the Folger's blog post: notice that the blank backs of the paper are facing out. If you string your papers near their bottoms and facing towards the wall, you can then read them right-side-up by flipping them up and towards you.

Several Renaissance writers expressed their opinions on what items should reside in a scholar's study. Fra Sabba di Castiglione, a scholar who also bought antiques for Isabella d'Este, suggested that the only proper decorations for a manly study were weapons and books. The weapons should be kept polished and in good condition, he continued, and the books should be by the best authors and often studied. "For to have books, and not use them, is as good as not having them." Since books were much scarcer in Renaissance times, they were often kept on a shelf above the scholar's desk, laid face out rather than with their spines facing out. Besides items necessary for writing, other things considered good to have on a desk were small curios and antiquities, statues, mirrors (good for resting the eyes and a reminder of the vanity of knowledge), and fine paintings. If you're interested in learning the evolution of the study and its contents, I highly recommend finding a copy of Dora Thornton's book, "The Scholar in His Study."

But ultimately, the best things to have in your study are those which are useful for your writing and reading, and things which delight and divert you when your mind gets tired and you need a break.