

Traveling Writer

Look at it like this – let's say you have one of those electric typewriters, and you put down all your ideas using it. You need electricity to run the gadget, you need rolls of inked ribbons to feed it, you need paper flat enough to roll up through it when you type. If you want to underline something important, you have to back up and type the underline beneath words you typed first. Now let's admit, when you do all those things you have your notes in nice condition, perfectly legible and so on. But what if you aren't a trained typist? You'll have to look at the letters to hit the right ones. If you misspell a word or make one of those typographic errors – what your mother would call a mistake – fixing it is a pain. And traveling with an electric typewriter is a major obstacle – you won't be using it to record your immediate stream-of-consciousness impressions of the Grand Canyon. So that's one end of the spectrum.

But let's say you want your writing to be really arty, you want a calligraphic pen and some nifty nibs and a supply of India ink. You can write on anything, but if you want to be productive, you'll need paper of the right composition to soak up the ink at just the right speed. If you have a sudden thought, you have to pull out your special paper, find a flat space, open your ink bottle and place it where it won't tip over. If you want to, you can write your Grand Canyon observations as they come to you, but it will be unwieldy. And while you are writing, you are paying too much attention to the act of placing letters on the page, and not enough to saying what you are trying to say. I suppose that is the other end of the spectrum.

But if I have a pencil, I'm set. An idea comes to me while I'm being served some eggs and toast, I grab a packet of sugar and my pencil. If my notion is too long for that, I pull a napkin out of the holder. Still not enough room – somewhere in that coffee shop is the local weekly advertiser, and I can write in the white spaces.

What if I'm doing some odd jobs because it's too long before the next free meal? I do some roofing, since I can usually find one that needs work. There's at least three square feet of blank space on the wrapper for a bundle of shingles, and they are always happy for me to haul away as many wrappers as I want. Remember last month when I patched up the swimming pool deck at the church camp? The mortar came in huge bags – if I'd been in the mood I could have written War and Peace on about four bags.

Of course I can't carry around all those packets and papers and bags. I'm barely able to lug my few clothes when I have to move along. What would I do with them – read them out loud to you? Tell me – would come hang out with us if what you heard was some old crank reading what he was thinking on his water break at the working bee? Read them to myself? I already had those thoughts. That's how they got onto the paper in the first place.

No, it's all about writing it down. After that, it is nothing to me. So I would say that is the perfect middle of the spectrum. Lighter than a typewriter, less complicated than calligraphy, and if I can cadge a pencil once in a while, it costs exactly what I can pay.