

Commonplace Books

It is very helpful to read with a commonplace book or reading-diary, in which to put down any striking thought in your author, or your own impression of the work, or of any part of it; but not summaries of facts. Such a diary, carefully kept through life, should be exceedingly interesting as containing the intellectual history of the writer; besides, we never forget the book that we have made extracts from, and of which we have taken the trouble to write a short review. -

Mason, Vol. 5 p. 260

What is a commonplace book?

Charlotte Mason expected older students to keep a commonplace book, or reading diary. This book served, in a sense, as a companion to the many books read in the upper years of the PNEU programs. In the above quote, Mason expressed that keeping one acted in some ways as narration does. Once a student has made an effort to connect with the words, then the words become part of them and their base knowledge. Today, students should continue this activity, keeping a commonplace book as a record of meaningful quotes, passages and verses as they read, even carrying on with this tradition throughout their life.

At what age or level do most students begin keeping a commonplace book?

PNEU programs show that typically students began keeping a commonplace book in Forms V and up; this correlates to Years 10-12. For the purposes of this curriculum, students can begin a commonplace book around age 12 or 13, depending on their readiness.

What should students include in their commonplace book?

PNEU Program 124 (Forms VI and V) includes this statement “Keep a Commonplace Book for passages that strike you particularly”. This alludes to the idea that students should feel a sense of ownership with their commonplace books, choosing their entries based on what inspires or interests them. The PNEU article “The Teaching of History” suggests that students in the upper forms should keep a commonplace book for the literature which aligns with the history time period being studied and that “The pupils make entries into a ‘Commonplace Book,’ of those passages whose literary force or beauty have particularly appealed to them” (Nesbitt V12: 917-929).

Poetry, dialogue, detailed descriptive scenes, speeches or anything else that the student finds interesting in any way can be used as a selection for an entry. Students should look for sentences, lines or passages which catch their attention-whether by its beauty, style, use of figurative style or ability to cause the student to stop and pause, lingering over its meaning.

There are many different ways to approach the commonplace book. Literary terms, rhetoric categories or just keeping a record of favorite quotes, poetry and passages are all examples of different themes for a commonplace book.

How often should my students make an entry into their commonplace book?

Each student should make an entry at least twice a week, but, of course, more often than this should also be permitted. A reminder can be written on their assignment sheet. The assignment might read as follows: Complete two entries into your commonplace book for this week. The entries will be due on Friday and the entries must be made from any two of your books presently being read this term.

In what way should my students make their entries?

The student should vary the books they choose for entries by title and subject each term. For example, they might choose one book for literature and one book for history. The following week they might choose one book for science and a different book for literature, etc.

Each entry should be made in good handwriting and should be made with a concentrated effort to copy it as exactly as it is written.

A date for the time of entry, title of the work and author of the work should be included in every entry. Some students may wish to include page numbers to make it easier to relocate the source of their entry. It may be helpful to sometimes include a sentence or two briefly explaining the main plot points of an entry included or the characters involved in a dialogue exchange. Student can also add their impressions of the work or of that particular excerpt. These additions can certainly vary according to the interests of the students.

Writing in the margins of books which belong exclusively to the student may be an option for those families who permit this. For those who do not, sticky notes and flags or Book Darts may prove helpful in keeping a specific page marked, so that students may go back after reading to then copy their entries into their commonplace book. This allows the student to keep reading, marking points of interest quickly, rather than disrupting attention and leading to searches after reading.

Everything else is left to the independent mind of the one keeping the commonplace book, giving the students a great deal of creative and personal freedom with it.

What supplies will my students need?

A commonplace book can be made from numerous different types of notebooks. These can vary from a beautiful leather-bound journal to a basic composition book, whichever is the best fit for your family. Be sure that your student also has access to good pens with flowing ink, a good writing surface and any stick notes, flags or Book Darts which might be needed.

What might help younger children better transition into keeping a commonplace book?

In this curriculum, children begin with copywork, progress into keeping a copybook and then move into keeping a commonplace book. It is important to note that Charlotte Mason advocated for children to have more input or choice than is often associated with the general understanding of

copywork. The typical understanding of copywork has usually been for the parent or the author of a specific program to choose what is to be copied. While this is helpful in the younger years, when the transcription level is fully focused on copywork only, it is not helpful as children begin to read and write fluently, achieving independence. Mason actually encouraged the idea that children should have more say in what was transcribed. In *Home Education*, she writes “A certain sense of possession and delight may be added to this exercise if children are allowed to choose for transcription their favorite verse in one poem and another. This is better than to write a favorite poem, an exercise which stales on the little people before it is finished. But a book of their own, made up of their own chosen verses, should give them pleasure” (238). This is why my insertion of a **copybook** not only aides greatly in transitioning between copywork and keeping a commonplace book, but also provides the structure for children to choose their entries and have more of a voice in selecting what is written once they’ve reached this level of fluency and independence.

Another helpful transition activity is for children to begin copying mottoes into a notebook by the time they reach Form II. The task of writing mottoes was to be undertaken during Sunday Occupations (PNEU Program 124) and was considered a part of the moral training of children.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a motto was “a word, phrase, or sentence that expresses the principles or belief of a person, group, country, or organization”. Mottoes for children might include phrases or sentences which express their own beliefs or principles or they might express the beliefs and principles of a person, country, culture or religion which the children wish to emulate.

In *School Education*, Mason writes:

In the reading of the Bible, of poetry, of the best prose, the culling of mottoes is a delightful and most stimulating occupation, especially if a motto book be kept, perhaps under headings, perhaps not. It would not be a bad idea for children to make their own year-book, with a motto for every day in the year culled from their own reading. What an incentive to a good day it would be to read in the morning as a motto of our very own choice and selection, and not the voice of an outside mentor: ‘Keep ye the law; be swift in all obedience!’ The theme suggests endless subjects for consideration and direct teaching; for example, lives with a keynote; Bible heroes; Greek heroes; poems of moral inspiration; poems of patriotism, duty, or any single moral quality; moral object-lessons; mottoes and where to find them, etc. (135).