What Is Commonplacing?
by Richard Peck

Commonplacing is the art of keeping a "commonplace book", or simply a "commonplace".

A cross between a notebook and journal, commonplace books were kept by most of history's most renowned luminaries, including the likes of Isaac Newton and Leonardo Da Vinci.

Most recently, the founders of Intel used "patent notebooks" which hold strong similarities to commonplace books, in order to record their discovery / invention of the integrated circuit and microprocessor - two of the most defining technologies of our time.

What Is Commonplacing & Why Is It Important?

Not quite note-taking, not quite scrapbooking, commonplacing would likely be better called the "Intelligent Man's Journal". It's a way to track, discover and indulge in new ideas.

Although there are absolutely no contemporary sources on how to effectively keep a commonplace, the principles continue from the past, whereby you're encouraged to feed your curiosity by investigating new ideas (going to art museums, trips to other countries, reading new books, visiting the opera etc).

The point of commonplacing is to cultivate a mindset of discovery.

Reading new books, investigating why certain things happen the way they do, looking at things from a different perspective; the "mindset" of commonplacing is still alive in many people, but unfortunately, the method to maintain it seems to have diminished somewhat.

Of course, industrialization, the digital revolution and a more connected world have relegated commonplaces behind the likes of blogs and social media. However, they are making a resurgence with a number of tools & products being designed to help a new wave of intrepid knowledge-seekers indulge.

History of Commonplacing

In the 17th and 18th centuries, commonplacing was a VERY widely used tool, and was actually taught in universities such as Oxford.

As the industrial revolution occurred, the need for a broad set of knowledge diminished, being replaced with a focus on specific industries (as people were taken into employment in the new towns).

Today, this need for specific knowledge has been supplemented with the need to understand and assimilate into other cultures (typically because you'll be selling into them at some point). The need to learn new languages, new proficiencies (coding / AI) and to keep on top of current events is huge. This is where the need for a new-age commonplace is present.

Whilst commonplace books have been with us since the early medieval period (when paper became a much more widely available resource), the idea of commonplacing (IE storing your information, ideas and research in a central repository) has existed for millennia. Obviously, the medium has changed but the principles have remained.

The Principles Behind Commonplacing

The point of commonplacing is that you need to indulge your creative side and use that to create new ideas & projects of your own.

The best way to do this is to create some way of making the implementation of said ideas pay, either by way of a product bought or service rendered.

The mindset of commonplacing by all the greats of the past was that they put their ultimate goals before any research. If they wanted to learn a new language, they tied it to a real-world achievement, as to both give them the ability to track progress but also ensure they can justify the time investment required.

Thus, in order to cultivate an effective commonplace, you need the following:

New ideas with the majority of the population fixated on a flickering box that tells them how to think, the best are focused on extending their horizons through new ideas. Books, art galleries, museums and fares are just a few of the ways you can fill your mind with brand new possibilities.

New Projects The real core of commonplacing are the new projects it encourages you to undertake. These projects not only allow you to express your creativity, but ensure you are able to build on the growth already achieved. The key is understanding how to make a project profitable. If you're able to get paid to indulge in what you really want to do, you've basically won at the game of life.

New Acquaintances Finally, a commonplace should put you into the sphere of new acquaintances - who'd probably not have listened before. Creative types have a very strong commitment to their work. If they feel you are going to be a distraction, they'll just cut you out of their lives. Adopting the likes of a commonplace mindset gives you the ability to talk to these acquaintances as you need.

A New Breed of Commonplace

The main point of this article is to explain the new type of commonplace that's starting to emerge, especially with the Internet.

The "commonplace book" of the past, whilst not dead, is certainly not as popular as it used to be. Apart from the main reason of it having to compete with social media et al, the real reason is that there are so many easier, cheaper and more effective ways to extend your creative abilities with personal computing technology.

The modern commonplace is not a book... but a system - designed to give the curator the best opportunity to maximize their potential and receive real time feedback for it, either by way of community feedback, or from social engagement online (seeing what other people are doing).

If you want to achieve anything new with your time, the best thing you can do is get involved with it. Use your time to look at what you really want to do / build, then take tentative steps towards implementing something. Once you gain some traction, you'll be in a position to start trying to accelerate your progress. This is where having a reliable commonplace system is important.

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The best resource for reading about common-placing is The Ultimate Commonplace System. You're able to see more information about how to keep a common place by looking at the StartGainingMomentum blog.

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