

Top Ten Ways to Use Your Summer Vacation in Your Writing

By Mandy Houk

I realize that, technically, I'm recommending a working vacation. But we're writers—are we ever really off-duty?

Here are some things I gleaned from my recent nine-day, ten-state, 2,500-mile road trip. (Aside from stiff legs, six pounds, and an impressive mountain of laundry.)

1. Give yourself permission to daydream. You have no deadlines for your day job, no dishes to wash, beds to make, or errands to run. Breathe in, breathe out, and let your mind wander.

2. Ask yourself how your characters would react to the travel nightmares you encounter. When the fire alarm went off in our hotel, I got dressed, brushed my hair, and called the front desk to see if it was the real deal. It wasn't. But this made me wonder—which of my characters would react as I did (like a blooming idiot), and which would leap out of bed and flee down the staircase without giving a thought to the sad state of their pajamas? Would one of them sniff for smoke and listen for sirens, while the other jumped out the window screaming? This can be a great exercise in figuring out characters; or it might be worth including in your storyline.

3. Collect new characters. I know, we do this anyway. But it's easier to notice the quirky grocery store bagger when you've got no schedule to follow than when you're late for an orthodontist appointment.

4. Collect new settings. Before we left on our road trip, my manuscript—an odyssey of sorts—was set in Georgia and South Carolina, since I've lived in both states and thought I could describe them easily. But our road trip took us through steamy Missouri and seedy Memphis and bright, cow-filled Oklahoma. I took notes all along the way, even selecting specific stretches of road and certain landmarks. I'm more excited about the book now, with its sense of newness.

5. Collect region-specific dialog. Again, many of us do this already. Heck, Deb Courtney has a dedicated dialog notebook. But if you haven't tried it yet, a road trip is the perfect opportunity. And if you're in a region you'd like to think about including as a setting, or as a hometown for a character, it can be especially useful to nail down the colloquialisms.

6. Collect quirky details. At a Mexican restaurant, you get chips and salsa. No surprise there. But at a fish place in Omaha, when our waitress approached, she had a curious little plate on her arm. "Here's the bread and pickles for ya." And that's exactly what it was: a stack of dry rye bread, and a saucer overflowing with sliced dill pickles. Will I ever write a book where that might come up? I don't know. But it's in my writing notebook, alongside my notes about pickups backed up to roadside ponds in Missouri, fathers and sons fishing straight from the tailgate. And the astonishing quantity of armadillo roadkill in Arkansas. And the Queen Anne's Lace dotting the sides of the highway through Oklahoma. And the awe-inspiring formations of Kansas clouds.

7. Collect names. Names of waitresses (we had one named Mirth). Stores ("Quicker Liquor"). Or collect slogans. My favorite, hanging in front of a bar: "Not here for a long time—just a good time."

8. Research for historical fiction—or get new ideas. I'd never considered writing historical fiction until we spent time at a Civil War cemetery in Keokuk, Iowa. Both

Union and Confederate soldiers are buried there, since the hospital in Keokuk was open to both. The hospital itself sparked my imagination. But later, as I aimed my camera at a beautiful, crumbling tombstone, I realized it was the grave of a female who'd served with the army. Once I started looking, I found several more women buried there. Many nurses, but several soldiers. Historical fiction? Could be interesting.

9. Reminisce. Being on the road, it was natural to think of my childhood. My dad had a miles-per-day goal, as well as the goal of taking my sister and me through all 48 contiguous states before we grew up. My mother was all about the scenery. As Daddy blew through the panhandle of Oklahoma ("Hey, that counts!"), Mom would anxiously holler, "Are y'all lookin' out the window?" Reminiscing gives me access to that little girl that dreamed of being a writer in the first place. And I'm no brain surgeon, but I'm guessing that our memories are stored fairly close to our imaginings. One often leads to the other.

10. Write! Whether you're in the passenger seat with a notebook, or in the hotel with a laptop after the kids drop off to sleep, take advantage of the loose schedule and fill it with words. Descriptive passages. Expanded passages of dialogue, inspired by something you overheard in a diner that morning. Character sketches based on the screaming family at the gas station. Or write something totally unrelated to your trip—just write.

And enjoy the ride.

Originally appeared in The Pikes Peak Writer, Volume VIII, Issue 4, July, August 2009