

Keeping Sketchbooks

‘My Sketchbook is a witness of what I am experiencing, scribbling things whenever they happen’

Vincent Van Gogh

Students have often approached me asking it means to keep a sketchbook, how to structure it in a coherent manner and how their sketchbooks might differ from learning logs. During a sketchbook workshop day I ran with students in June we discussed the following points:

What is a sketchbook and what should it do?

Your sketchbook is a book or pad with blank pages which will document your visual investigations. Sketchbooks may come in different sizes and formats with different paper types specific to different materials.

Your sketchbook should:

- Show your development and progress-offers time to pause, record and reflect
- Show your voice and observations; clarify your vision and thoughts.
- Help develop your drawing skills, visual awareness and imagination
- Record objects, places events and everyday life
- Your sketchbook can be a visual diary, reference point or exploration of materials
- Allow space for immediate and spontaneous work
- Try something out, ask questions and evaluate its success; move onto new ideas and solutions

It is good practice to have a range of sketchbooks, you may have one as your main body of exploration and smaller sketchbooks which explore specific modes of enquiry.

For instance if you or your tutor have noted that you are struggling with using colour, dedicate a small A5 sketchbook to solely exploring colour. (This might include the history and theory of colour, artists who use colour in their work, exploring colour through light and tone, your own practical investigation and experimentation.... and so on.)

You may have smaller sketchbooks for areas such as : drawing from life and observation, drawing from imagination, drawing people and faces, colour, composition, collage, mark making printmaking, photography and artist research.

What should be included in a sketchbook?

- Collection of imagery and exploration of materials
- Drawing- quick drawing, loose drawing, longer observational drawing, drawing from memory, drawing from imagination
- Show what has interested and intrigued you-this might include photographs, textiles, magazine and newspaper articles, found objects
- Use it to investigate starting points for your work and resources for future reference
- Written notes about texture, scale, colour, method, technique, form, tone, composition in relation to your own work and artists you are researching
- Experimentation with different materials, colour combinations, overlays, collage, printmaking, colour washes, found papers Using a different medium forces you to look at a subject in a different way
- Thumbnail sketches- these can help plan final imagery in terms of testing composition and colour schemes-make notes alongside them to record your thoughts.
- Observation, reflection and invention

Sketchbooks should show your **bad** as well as your good visual progress- discuss your weaker work and try to find solutions for improvement.

Students agreed many were unsure of how to structure a sketchbook in terms of making everything flow and how to show clear developments of an idea from start to finish. The following can be useful to help guide your ideas.

How to structure a sketchbook

Ideas and starting points: Mindmaps and written notes

Theme and artist research:

Arrange and Stick in photographs of exhibitions, print outs of artists work and discuss process, content and materials used. Make notes about how they relate to your own work, compare and contrast. Add in your own artists studies which might emulate style/ content or way of working.

Direction and avenue of research

Spider diagrams, lists, initial drawing and thumbnail sketches. Draw out your plans and ideas visually - this might included studies or plans. Add some notes alongside and write up a more thorough passage in your learning log; Ask yourself questions as starting points:

Where has your research led you?

What will do you now and how will you do it?

Playing with process:

Drawing:

Some may be quick and loose to try out compositions or materials. Use a range of drawing materials to explore different avenues- these might include graphite, drawing fluid charcoal, pencil, pastels and ink.

Mark making:

Explore feeling, shape, texture, shape and form. Use a range of materials, try out new methods and ways of working. Explore and expand your ideas; if you are used to drawing very small- get out of your comfort zone and draw big. Have fun combining materials and enjoy this process of play which will lead to new discoveries.

Other areas of exploration might include: printmaking, collage, photography and mixed media.

Experimentation with:

Colour, composition, form, tone, shape, content.

STOP and step back: Evaluation and critical reflection.

It is important to step away from your work at this point and try to be critical. Use your learning log to evaluate your process so far. What should this include?

Which pieces do I consider to be successful/ less successful and why?

Which areas have I struggled with and how will I overcome these problems?

What have I enjoyed and learnt ?

How has my work so far contributed to my development?

What will I do now?

Additional experimentation and producing variations

Try out final images in different ways in order to guide your evaluation. These might alter in scale, colour, composition etc. Consider presentation of your final pieces. Sew together loose pages using the guidance below and include loose larger pieces in a small folder or document/ archive box.

Final evaluation and conclusion

Use your sketchbook work to help you evaluate. Again, use questions above and below to help prompt you if you find this difficult:

What have I learnt from this project?

What else might I do to improve or extend this project if I had more time?

How can I address and improve on any weaknesses?

Has this inspired any new ideas or direction?

Binding your own sketchbooks

When it comes to handing in your sketchbooks, it can be useful to label sections which relate to specific projects, another option is to work on loose pages and sew these together at a later date in order to document your process in an ordered manner.

A simple bookbinding technique which can be used to collect loose pages is Japanese stab binding.

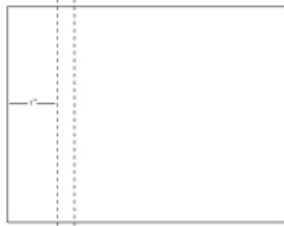
Stab Binding with Hardcover

Supplies:

- Stack of pages folded at the foredge
- 2 cover boards cut the same size as the folded pages
- Decorative paper for covering / lining covers
- Strip of linen tape, book cloth, or other material for reinforcing hinge on front cover
- 4 book-heights waxed linen thread (8 if you want to double your sewing)

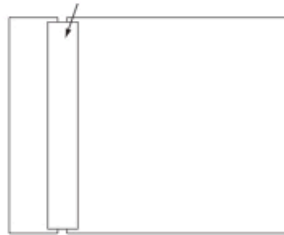
covers

cut out 1/4 inch



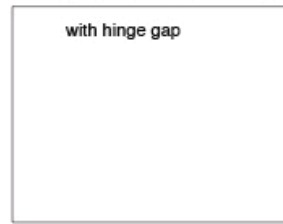
front cover board

use tape or linen cloth to reinforce hinge

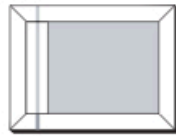
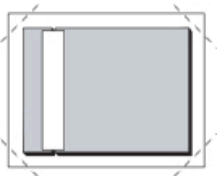


back cover; same size as front

with hinge gap



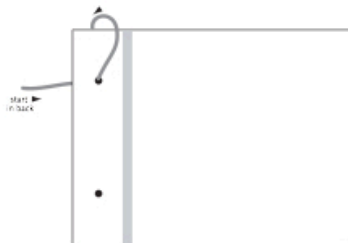
back cover board



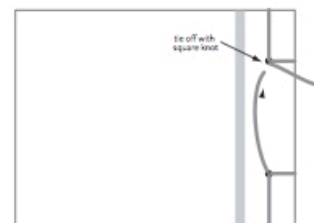
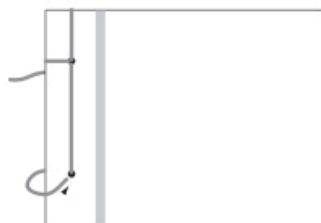
end papers slightly smaller than cover size



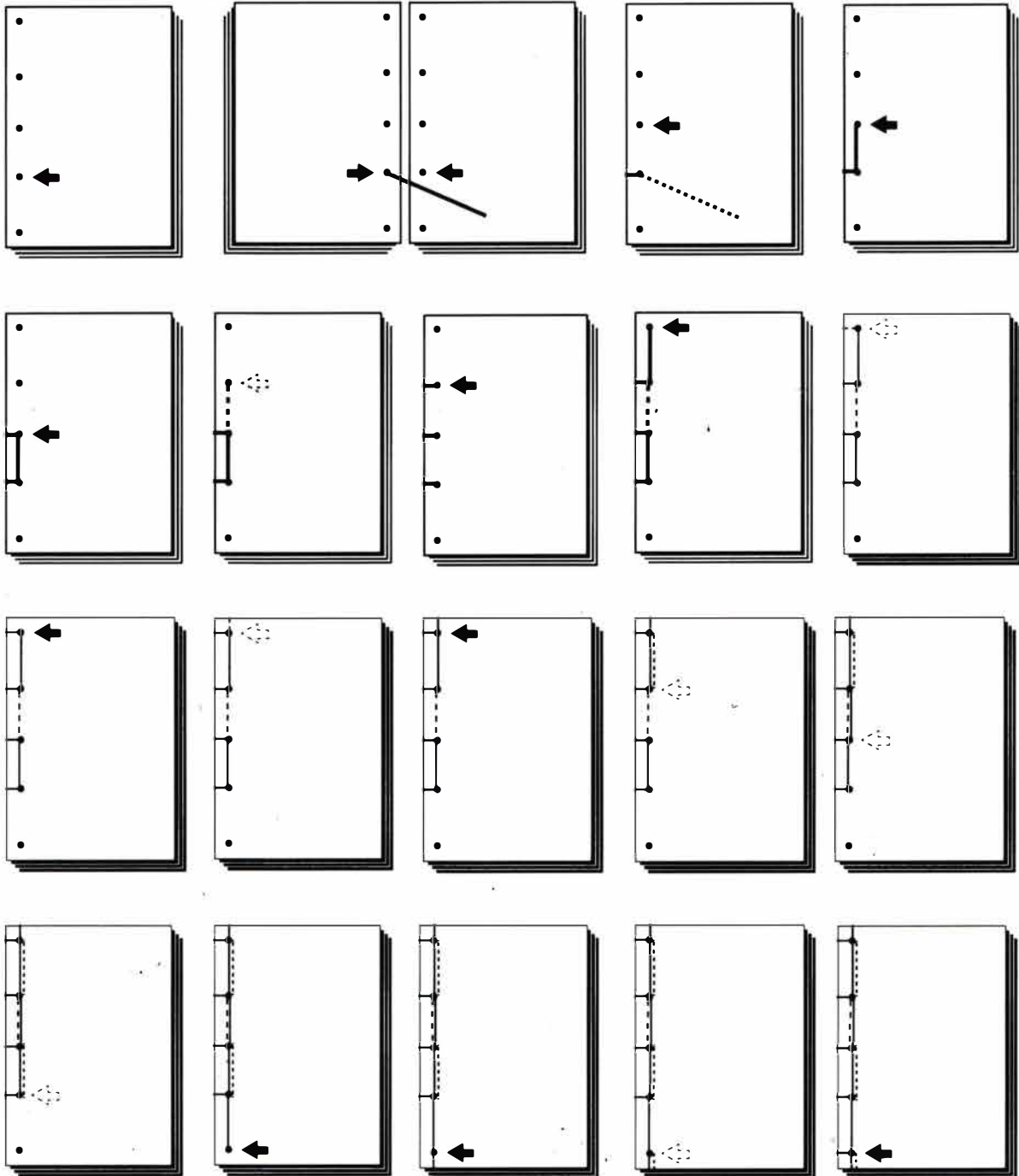
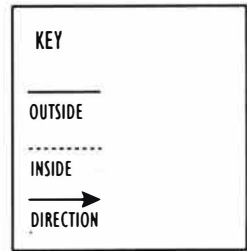
sewing



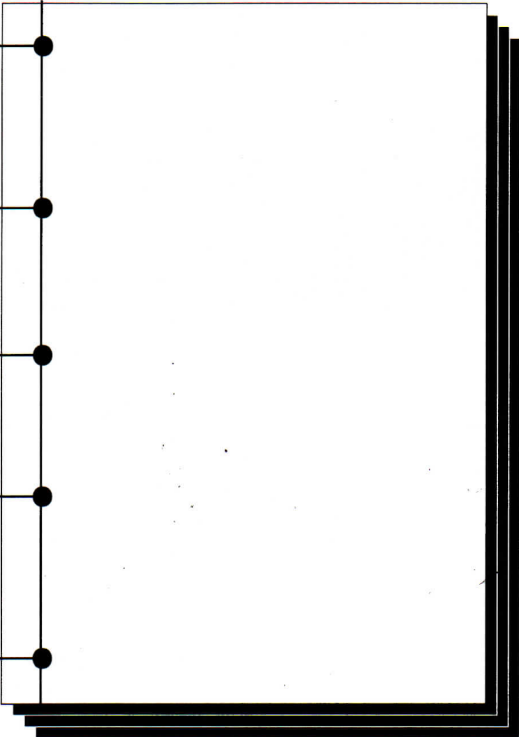
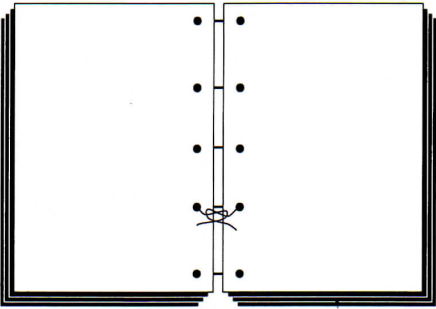
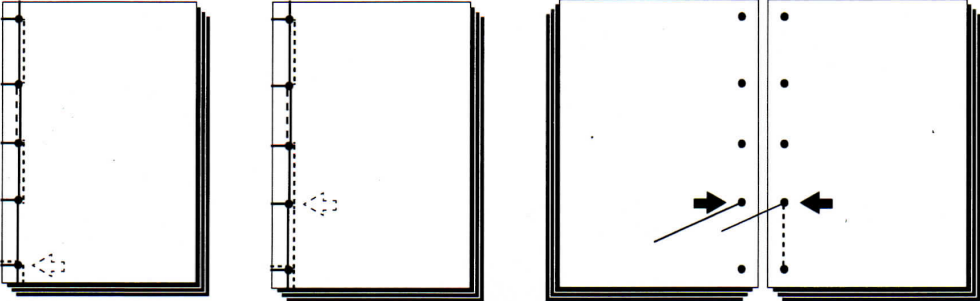
1. Punch 2 holes through the entire book (including covers)



JAPANESE STAB BIND



JAPANESE STAB BIND
continued



The difference between your sketchbook and your learning log :

Your sketchbook should dominantly explore practical techniques with some written notes to help you remember key points.

Your learning log is heavily focused on helping you discuss, reflect and evaluate your practice as it grows. It is a journal which can include your thoughts and feelings, something which can help you plan ideas, collect evidence, assess your progress and reflect upon what your experimentations and outcomes.

Useful books:

'Extraordinary Sketchbooks': Jane Stobart

'How to design and produce your own book' Ellen Lupton