

More Writing Out Loud



by Deborah Morgan

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More Writing Out Loud is a remarkable combination of the practical and the mystical. It guides us expertly through the techniques that prompt new writers to write, at the same time it encourages us to let go when the magic sets in—as it always does. We've used *Writing Out Loud* in our workshops for five years, and have watched with pride and admiration as new writers discover that they have something to say, and that they can say it in fresh and artful ways.

**Deborah Epstein, Founding Director
Neighborhood Writing Alliance, Chicago, IL.**

Anyone who found *Writing Out Loud* a revelation will be even more impressed with *More Writing Out Loud*. This second volume is, in every sense, *more*: More reflective of writing experiences of all kinds, more capable of authoritatively addressing wider needs, more confident with recommendations and models about writing, and more demanding of *us*, the teachers, administrators and researchers who work around (perhaps without truly engaging in) "writing from the heart."

**Patrick J. Fahy, Ph.D., Associate Professor
Athabasca University, Athabasca, AB**



I love Deborah Morgan's *More Writing Out Loud* because it creates a safe, supportive environment in which anyone, regardless of skill level, can write without fear and share with pleasure. The book encourages writers (and teachers too) to stretch and discover and take risks, to reach deeper into their own secret places and venture farther into the public world. When we write from the heart and know that we're heard, we gain a stronger confidence in ourselves and a greater respect for our personal journeys. Let's have more and more of this kind of writing!

**Susan Wittig Albert, author of
Writing From Life
Austin, TX**

Being part of the Writing Out Loud Instructors training made me conscious of how students in my classroom might experience this unique approach to writing. My jumbled feelings of fear, apprehension and excitement about putting my words "out there" were no different from those of the students I work with. A valuable lesson in the common experience of being human.

Bev Sochatsky, Instructor, Edmonton, AB

Deborah Morgan's approach to writing is particularly valuable for people who have lived through violence and tough times. She invites participants to try out new experiences in a safe environment, eliciting powerful writing, capturing the essence of playing and exploring, something many adults were not free to do as children. A key to the richness of her work is that she creates space equally for drawing out tales of pleasures and revealing painful areas of hurt. In this way she creates the possibility for classrooms of healing and creative learning.

**Jenny Horsman, Ph.D., author of *Too Scared to Learn*
Toronto, ON**



Grass Roots Press

More Writing Out Loud

by Deborah Morgan



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Cover artwork by Barb Hartmann
Book design and layout by Terry McGuire
Printed by Quality Color Press Inc.

Additional copies of *More Writing Out Loud*
can be obtained from the publisher:

Grass Roots Press
A division of Literacy Services of Canada Ltd.
PO Box 52192, Edmonton, Alberta T6G 2T5, Canada
Phone: (780) 413-6491
Fax: (780) 413-6582
Email: grassrt@telusplanet.net
Web: www.literacyservices.com

National Library of Canada Cataloguing in Publication Data

Morgan, Deborah, 1954-
More Writing Out Loud / Deborah Morgan.

ISBN 1-894593-17-0

1. English language – Composition and exercises – Study and teaching. 2. Adult education. I. Title

PN148.M667 2002 808'.042'0715 C2002-901455-7

Printed in Canada

**Dedicated to
our first
Writing Out Loud Trainees**

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Carol Roberts — Barrhead, Alberta
Brenda Sherring — Yorkton, Saskatchewan
Bev Sochatsky — Edmonton, Alberta

Acknowledgments

It seems that just about everyone in my work and personal life got involved in this project; it has truly been a community effort. I am grateful to everyone who helped me to see and set the direction I needed to go in order to make this book work. Rewriting is so much easier with gentle humour and sincere encouragement! Many thanks to:

Keith Anderson and Alberta Learning and Yvette Souque and the National Literacy Secretariat for funding the training and the writing that went into the making of this book. I have loved working with you both.

Terry McGuire who offered me cheese with my wine while desktop publishing the book during his own hectic schedule.

Sharron Szott, Barb MacTavish and Alice Kneeland for continuing to keep the belief alive that anything is possible.

Laurie Kehler for being there when I couldn't be and for pulling the details together with such determined enthusiasm.

Pat Fahy for being my friend and my champion for so many years.

My sons, Tyler and Josh, who mean everything to me. Thank you for your love.

My parents, Thomas Morgan, my biggest fan, and Barbara Morgan, my favourite optimist.

My Fairy Godmothers, Sally Morgan and Barb Edwardson, for making it financially possible for me to keep writing.

My kindred spirits, Velen Johnson and Kathy Niven, for laughing and crying with me and keeping me sane (well, mostly!).

Peter Gzowski who never got to see this finished book, but who remains my dear friend and mentor, even still.

Susan Wittig Albert, Jenny Horsman, Pat Fahy, Deborah Epstein and Bev Sochatsky for endorsing *More Writing Out Loud* and my work with such affirming words of support.

Pat Campbell and Grass Roots Press for taking the risk to publish *More Writing Out Loud* when it was still just an idea in my head.

Barb Hartmann for the cover art for the book which inspires me every time I look at it.

Judith Tomlinson for my ongoing grammar lessons.

Bonar and Quality Color Press for making the book look so professional.

Janice Depaoli and Pop'lar Books for promoting my work in our local community.

And a very big thank you to all the students, instructors, friends and teachers who so willingly trusted me to use their personal writing samples, quotes, thoughts and ideas in the text of *More Writing Out Loud*.

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Catching Up.....	1
Write to Learn Student Stories.....	5
Chapter Two: Using This Book.....	11
Chapter Three: Recognizing Fears.....	15
Chapter Four: Feeling Safe.....	23
Chapter Five: Freewriting.....	33
Exercise: Fearless Freewriting.....	45
Chapter Six: Writing What You Know.....	51
Exercises: Colour it.....	55
Day by Day.....	59
Firaday.....	64
Now That's Funny.....	66
Grab Bag.....	70
By Another Name.....	74
If the Shoe Fits.....	76
Chapter Seven: Encouraging All Writers.....	83
Exercises: Real Love.....	86
Authority List.....	89
Animal Crackers.....	94
Armchair Travel.....	97
Magic Wand.....	100
Quality Quotes.....	104
Ode to Oprah.....	108
Chapter Eight: Acknowledging Emotions.....	113
Exercises: Synchronicity.....	125
I Remember...I Forget.....	128
Stuffies.....	132
Letter of Thanks.....	135
Challenges.....	139
Message in a Bottle.....	141
Chapter Nine: Celebrating Writing.....	145
Chapter Ten: Looking Back, Moving Forward.....	157
Bibliography.....	167



Chapter One

Catching Up



A whole world opened up for us when *Writing Out Loud*, our first book, was released in 1997. Now, with *More Writing Out Loud*, the excitement and amazing opportunities continue. Before we move on to the new learning we have done in the past five years, I would like to go back and review some of the history of how we got to where we are today.

History of the Original *Writing Out Loud* Handbook

Chapters Program (1994-1997)

Chapters was a literacy/life skills program developed in Camrose, Alberta, and funded by the federal and provincial governments. The program was designed by and for women receiving government financial assistance who were ready to make changes in their lives. It was in this program that we first became excited about the benefits of writing. Of all the activities we did, the women liked writing the best — not spelling and grammar exercises, but writing about their thoughts and life experiences. They benefited and learned from hearing the stories of others too.

In this project we learned that writing can actually help people begin to:

- Look at their lives in a more positive way.
- Explore ideas they feel uncomfortable talking about.
- Connect their thoughts and feelings.
- Identify their values, hopes and goals.
- Validate their stories, their lives.
- Improve their literacy skills (writing, reading, listening and thinking).
- Solve personal conflicts and problems.
- See that they can effectively express and communicate ideas.
- Move forward in their lives.

At the end of the Chapters Program, we decided to put together a handbook of

all our favorite writing ideas and exercises. The women wanted others to learn about the benefits of writing that they had experienced. The handbook was a simple binder full of desktop published, photocopied pages of writing ideas. The students called the handbook *Writing Out Loud*. They helped to assemble 100 binders, which were distributed to the coordinators of volunteer tutor programs in Alberta as part of the project's final report requirements.

We were totally unprepared for the overwhelming response we received to *Writing Out Loud*. Many people said this was the first resource they had ever found to help them teach writing. We sold over 1000 copies in binder form before Grass Roots Press published the redesigned 2002 edition.

What it Means to “Write Out Loud”

Originally, “writing out loud” meant to put in writing, words that were difficult to say out loud. A woman in the Chapters Program surprised herself one day when she finished doing some writing about the loss of her marriage. She looked up suddenly and said, “I don’t like talking about this stuff, but it sure feels good to write about it. I feel like I’m writing out loud instead of talking out loud!” The other women in the class loved the idea that they could “write out loud” too, and the expression stuck.

Now, as more and more people explore the idea of putting their thoughts and ideas in writing, “writing out loud” has come to mean writing from the heart, writing with feelings and emotion, writing about what matters. It also means having a voice and being able to communicate with others through writing.

Promoting the Use and Value of Writing in Literacy Programming in Canada

The sales of *Writing Out Loud* clearly indicated that there was a real need in the literacy community for more information about writing and the teaching of writing. To respond to that need, we developed the Write to Learn Project, generously funded by the National Literacy Secretariat, which allowed us unique and exciting opportunities to explore and promote the use and value of writing.

Write to Learn: Phase 1- Research (1998-1999)

We spoke to many literacy workers, as we responded to requests for *Writing Out Loud*, who said that writing was not a big part of their literacy work. They said they needed more in-servicing because they didn’t feel as well trained to teach writing as they were to teach reading or even numeracy. Based on what we were hearing, we decided that the first phase of the Write to Learn Project would be surveys and interviews with 50 literacy practitioners in Western Canada to find out how writing was being used and valued in literacy programming.

We learned that a surprisingly large number of instructors were not

comfortable with teaching writing because they were not confident in their own ability to write. They did, however, recognize the need for more writing instruction for students and indicated a desire to learn how to improve their practice and approach to teaching writing. Most taught mechanical grammar and spelling exercises during time allotted for writing, with no encouragement (or time) for creative or free writing.¹

Write to Learn: Phase 2 — Promotion (1999-2000)

Given what we learned in Phase 1 of the Write to Learn Project, it became apparent that we would have to “get out there” and talk to people about using writing as a means of personal development as well as literacy skill development. We felt we needed to show people, firsthand, how effective the Chapters or Writing Out Loud approach to writing was. In Phase 2 of the Write to Learn Project, a team made up of two instructors and three literacy students spent a year traveling to literacy programs and professional development events across Canada. By December 2000, we had delivered 47 workshops/presentations in 18 cities in 8 provinces and territories, to almost 1000 male and female instructors, coordinators, tutors, students, and administrators, to talk about and demonstrate the value of writing. It was both an exhilarating and exhausting experience!

None of the work we did with the Write to Learn Project would have been possible without the dedication and commitment of Sharron Szott, Barb MacTavish and Alice Kneeland. Originally members of the Chapters Program, Sharron, Barb and Alice continued to work with me as volunteers to help distribute *Writing Out Loud* when the funding for Chapters ended. We met every week to stay in touch and keep writing together. They listened to all my ideas about promoting writing and started attending presentations with me when I went to conferences or did workshops. They even starred in a video and wrote a book! It was their enthusiasm for writing that was the catalyst for this phase of the project. Sharron, Barb and Alice traveled with me and Margaret O'Shea-Bonner across Canada, talking to students and instructors about how their lives had changed because of writing. They have made my work possible and I will be forever grateful to them for their honesty and courage. At the end of this chapter is a special section called “Write to Learn Student Stories”, where I have included their personal stories, with their permission, because courageous people like Sharron, Alice and Barb are why we do the work we do.

Write to Learn: Phase 3 — Training (2000-2001)

At the end of Phase 2 we felt that we had only scratched the surface of the demand and need for information about teaching and encouraging writing. We successfully raised awareness about the value of writing, then suddenly found ourselves with a waiting list of anxious and excited instructors and programs who had heard about our workshops and wanted us to organize one in their

¹ Fahy, P.J. and Morgan, D. (1999, Summer) Current writing attitudes and practices in selected adult literacy programs in western Canada. The Alberta Journal of Educational Research. 209-211.

area. We also had a waiting list of programs that wanted us to come back and do a second workshop. It soon became obvious that we were no longer able to meet the demand for writing workshops and in-services.

A solution to this problem was to train other literacy workers to provide the same workshops and in-services that we had been doing. In the summer of 2001, we completed the Write to Learn Training of the Trainer's Project where we trained, through distance education, 25 literacy workers from Whitehorse, Yukon to St. John's, Newfoundland to become Certified Writing Out Loud Instructors. The training program was a five-month intense and in-depth study of the writing process and ourselves as writers and teachers of writing. This on-line training program was a rich and rewarding experience for all involved. We learned about teaching writing by writing about it. A group of people who had never met each other before came together through on-line conferencing to share their successes and challenges with teaching writing to literacy students and instructors. During this course, we learned more from one another than any of us anticipated. We continued to see the benefits of being part of a group of writers by becoming a community of writers ourselves.

By the end of the project, we could see that the literacy community across Canada was experiencing a growing interest in and excitement about writing. The Instructors discovered over and over again that with the Writing Out Loud approach to writing and teaching writing, both students and instructors let go of their fears and let themselves write — with amazing results.

The people involved in the training were so convinced of the personal and academic importance of writing that they wrote this mission statement as a framework for their beliefs.

We believe that writing and supportively sharing our stories can be an insightful and pleasurable means to self-discovery, personal validation, literacy skill development, connection to the community, and increased emotional and physical well being.

Writing Out Loud started out as a resource for teaching writing to literacy students. We are happily discovering that the book is now being used with a wide variety of groups — from seniors, youth at risk, women in conflict with the law, single parent groups, and college and university writing programs. This is a development we are thrilled about, but never anticipated.

Similar to the desire expressed by the women in the Chapters Program to share their writing experiences with others, the Writing Out Loud Instructors wanted to share what they learned about writing in the Write to Learn Training Project with fellow literacy workers. This new book, *More Writing Out Loud*, is a collection of the highlights of what we learned in the training, as well as an assortment of some great writing ideas gathered from coast to coast. Through *More Writing Out Loud* we hope to continue to offer our experience and support to those working with reluctant writers. It is our goal to encourage all people to put words on paper so they too, can experience the pleasures and benefits of writing out loud.

Write to Learn Student Stories

I would like to introduce you to Barb MacTavish, Sharron Szott and Alice Kneeland, the three women who have so bravely and willingly worked with me in the Chapters Program, with *Writing Out Loud*, and in all aspects of the Write to Learn Project. (These bios were written while Sharron, Alice and Barb were working as “writing ambassadors” with the Write to Learn Project in 1999). They are still learning and growing (and writing!) and have remained my “fearless supporters” as I’ve worked on this new book. They also continue to do writing workshops and presentations with me and their enthusiasm for my ideas to keep promoting writing never wavers. They started as students in my classroom, but as friends and mentors, Sharron, Barb and Alice have truly become the teachers.

Sharron Szott

Hi, I’m a student writer with the Write to Learn Project. I’m the mother of three grown children and four grandsons. I left an abusive marriage over nine years ago and have come a long way in my struggle to survive. I only had grade eight education and the only training I had was to be a house wife and raise my children. After three years of working at cleaning and working for a news paper inserting flyers, my health began to fail. I left work and went on a disability.

My self esteem was very low and my social worker told me about the Chapters Program. I was a nervous wreck when I went to apply as I thought I would be rejected because of my lack of education. Boy was I surprised when I was the first one to be accepted! I was accepted for who I was and my eagerness to want to learn.

I could read and write some but I stumbled on so many words because I didn’t know the meaning of them. I remember writing home to my mother when I would be away working on a farm helping with the house work. I would write, How are you? I am fine. Gotta go now. When I look back today I smile so proudly at what I’ve learned along the way.

I never did much writing through the years as I never knew how to express myself through written words. I couldn’t write down what I wanted to say because I was afraid of being laughed at. But not anymore! From Deborah’s gentle way of teaching writing without condemning me for all the mistakes I made, I have come to love writing. I write every chance I get now. I love to write about all the memories I have from the places I’ve been. I still make mistakes but I’m learning more and more every day. I love to rhyme words and write poetry. I can tell a story using poetry to tell about all the things that have happened to me in my life.

I love what I'm doing today, being an ambassador for the Write To Learn Project and giving workshops to others like myself. It's so much fun to encourage students to write their thoughts and feelings on paper, to write about their fears and their hopes and dreams. It may sound silly to some, but I know from experience that it works. It worked for me. I believe everyone can write once they over come their fears and write all their thoughts and feelings down that they have kept bottled up for years.

I've met a lot of wonderful and interesting students in my travels. They all want us to come back again and do more writing with them. They want so much to have a writing group in their community but need help to get it started.

Writing has helped me to feel good about myself. I like being a part of something that makes a difference in others lives as well as my own. Also I find keeping busy helps me deal a lot with all the pain I suffer every day. I find the deeper I get into writing the less pain I have.

Alice Kneeland

In October 1995, I began Deborah Morgan's Chapters Literacy Program. At that time I was separated from my husband of twenty-one years, and I was suffering from severe depression. I suffered anxiety and panic attacks on a regular basis.

In the spring of that year, I had been in hospital for several weeks from an emotional breakdown. I was unable to look after myself or be responsible for my two high school age sons. I stayed with family for two months, and then I was able to live on my own, with the help I received through Camrose Social Services. My sons lived with their dad for a few months, and then my younger son came to live with me. My older son was going to Red Deer College by that time, and was on his own.

I was receiving counseling from Alberta Mental Health. My social worker told me about Deborah's program and that I should consider joining other women there. I didn't know what Chapters was about, but at that point in my life I would do anything to help myself feel better. I took his advice and am so thankful I did. I will tell you why being in her class has changed my life.

In the Chapters Program we did a lot of writing. I did have my grade twelve, but I was so emotionally withdrawn I was unable to cope with being in the public. Being in Chapters I felt safe and secure. I started writing with the other women in the class. I was able to express myself through writing. I have become more sociable with others. I can even laugh now, where before all I did was cry if anybody looked at me. I was always afraid of doing something wrong. For the first time in over twenty-three years, I am happy with who I am as a person. There are times where things do get

overwhelming, and I write in a journal. The pressure eases off and I am able to cope better because of writing things out. They don't seem so big if I can get them down on paper.

My family often comments on the improvement in my health over the last couple of years. When I first started the Chapters Program, they were a little skeptical about me being with other women who were going through similar situations as I, afraid that my health would worsen by being in the group. They often tried to get me to leave the class. I was so happy being in the class, I wouldn't do what my family told me. Being in Chapters gave me just what I needed. I felt safe and secure for the first time in my life. I had lots of new friends and I have become more outgoing outside my home.

I truly believe in what we are doing in the Write To Learn Project and I'm really proud to be part of it. I am so positive about the Project, I feel I owe my life to writing and my support group from Chapters. I don't even want to think of what would of become of me, if it wasn't for the support I received. I am so happy now, and if I can help in any way by telling my story to others, I would be glad to.

Barbara MacTavish

I am 36 years old and a single mother with two children — Tanya who is 11 and Leanne who is 8 — and a kitten named Lucky. We have been in Camrose for 4 years. I have been fortunate to have been a member of this writing group from the beginning of my arrival to Camrose.

I started out in the Chapters Program where I discovered a wonderful new way to view myself and my world. I learned from my instructor and fellow classmates about self love and self discovery through writing. I learned to honour myself and my words. When I started Chapters I felt very alone, without hope, and a sadness tinged with anger. I learned it was okay to feel these things but in order to go on, I would certainly need some positive reflection which was shown to me by the people at Chapters. Some very strong women there gave me a sense of belonging and a nudge in an exciting new direction. I thank God for them. Surrogate angels I think. They helped me with parenting as well and gave me something to be proud of. My writing.

They also gave me support when it was time to enter the working world. I worked at various six month work projects through Social Services and my writing group was always there if I was feeling unsure or to help me celebrate my victories.

I am now one of the writing ambassadors for the Write to Learn Project. We have traveled to various destinations in Canada writing with other literacy groups. Our great instructor, Deborah Morgan, has been a pioneer in the literacy world and I have gotten to come along on this exciting journey of writing.



I also work as a dietary aide and nursing attendant at a psychiatric Geriatric Hospital in Camrose. It has been a very positive workplace for me. I like the workplace mission that says to treat everybody as a reflection of God's love.

I have some very positive things in my life now. Through writing and being involved in the Write to Learn Project, I have discovered who I am and what I stand for. Once I felt better about myself, I was able to go on and find a good job in a healthy workplace. I am trying to keep a positive flow in my life. How lucky I am to be on a journey of seeking happiness and joy. Sometimes I am reminded that I could still be on a journey of the living dead, filled with bitterness and resentment, sadness and anger.

My only wish is that the Write to Learn Project and my writing group could have more flexible hours so that I wouldn't have to miss things on the days that I work. I feel like I miss so much when I miss a class. There should be writing groups that people can belong to that meet at different times of the day and week. It would be really wonderful if there were a whole lot of writing groups so that people everywhere could have a chance to discover life like I have.

Looking Back on Our Year of Travel

Write to Learn Project — 1999

by Alice Kneeland

When we first started talking about traveling across Canada, I was very excited and nervous at the same time. I had never flown in a airplane before and I was also scared about my doing my part facilitating fearless writing workshops, that I wouldn't do a good enough job to represent the project. But it turned out better than I thought. The best part was that I was accepted on the same level as the other students we met, because I was a learner myself.

We went to so many amazing places. There was a real diversity of people in Yellowknife. There were Native, Japanese and Hungarian people who all had literacy problems and also social problems. Newfoundland was so far away from Camrose, but the people there had their own literacy difficulties too. They had funny Newfoundland accents and they treated us like queens. We have been through tough times, but they were the ones who had the hardest struggles.

I related to most of the students really well, especially the women whose self esteem we could see was very low. As they wrote and told some of their troubles, my heart went out to them. There were lots of women whose self esteem was shattered by their husbands or partners, but there were men emotionally crying out from the pain of abuse and loss too. When I saw people reaching out to us in their writing, I wanted to go to them and hold them and

say that they will heal, just keep writing things down. I wanted to tell them that they will become strong. I know this works because writing has been emotionally healing for me.

Quite a few students in the classes were worried that their writing wasn't good enough to read in class. They had a big fear of making mistakes, so they did very little writing and were shy to let people know what they had written. They sure relaxed when we explained in our workshops that spelling and grammar comes later. It's way more important to get something written on paper first.

Everywhere we went people loved our workshops and really wanted to spend more time with us. It was really hard to leave our fellow students, and wonder if their instructors would continue to do writing with them. Many adult students in our workshops had many personal problems, that I know need to be taken care of, before they can learn anything new. If they could deal with their problems through freewriting in each class, then the problem could be put aside temporarily, so they are ready to focus with their heads clear of "stuff." People learn better with clear heads.

Sharron, Barb and I were respected by the other learners and instructors because we always told our stories and were open and honest about our life struggles. We talked about how writing has helped us to have a more positive outlook on life. The students we met felt at ease with us and that they could open up too because of our honesty. I think we really made a difference because the program coordinators and instructors could see how strong Sharron, Barb and I had become by doing all the workshops and by being in the Write to Learn Program. They saw how it worked with the 3 of us so they were eager to see their students do as good as us.

"We are all one people, all one nation." I heard an Aboriginal Elder say this when we were in Saskatoon and this stuck in my mind. I didn't really know how big Canada is, not until I flew from one coast to the other. Canadians need to keep up the literacy programs and even develop more because there are so many people in need of literacy help.

It's really sad there are so many adult students with such little writing and reading abilities. I think writing should be taught early in school! The Fearless Writing approach to writing. Freewriting should begin in elementary classes then maybe there wouldn't be so many children growing up as lost adults trying to finish school, with no writing or reading abilities. The problem could be caught sooner in the early years of school. Help them when they are young!



Chapter Two

Using This Book



The format of *More Writing Out Loud* is similar to that of *Writing Out Loud*, but this book takes a more in-depth look at the challenges and realities that need to be considered when teaching writing in literacy and social programming. The candid and honest thoughts and experiences shared by the people who have contributed to the book will provide you with real-life, groundbreaking learning that will both inform and inspire you.

There are well-researched books on the market that talk about the benefits of writing, but few that talk about what it's like to be a teacher of writing, what it takes to get over our own fears about writing, or how to deal with emotions that surface when we write. As well, most books about writing work from the premise that people are already skilled writers. As literacy workers, we have the added challenge of working with new and often reluctant writers. The philosophy behind *Writing Out Loud* and what you will learn in *More Writing Out Loud* is not a “right or wrong” approach to teaching writing. It is simply one that has been used extensively and successfully in the field, especially by the people who participated in the Writing Out Loud Instructors training.

When asked why she was interested in the Writing Out Loud training, Brenda Sherring from Yorkton said, “Using *Writing Out Loud* strengthened my convictions and provided a methodology that I can wholeheartedly embrace and be an advocate for... It works, it works, it works!!”

Teachers and Students Write Together

Throughout *More Writing Out Loud*, you will be asked to write along with the student(s) you are working with. This is extremely important.

When I was a teenager, I had a teacher in a ballet class who continually and impatiently corrected our steps, but never once showed us or modeled how the steps were to be done. She would have an older, better dancer demonstrate,

but I don't think any of us ever saw her wearing ballet slippers — in fact, we decided she either didn't like ballet or didn't know how to dance at all! Writers need to see and interact with other writers. They need and want to be shown how to write.

Mary Norton and Helen Woodrow make this point very clear in their book, *Propriety and Possibilities*:

How people see themselves as writers and how they feel about writing influences their teaching and learning. Instructors who demonstrate their own enthusiasm for writing promote positive attitudes and self-concepts among writers. As they talk aloud about how they generate text, wrestle with ideas, or use spell checkers, instructors reveal to students how they go about the process of writing. (p 49)

Writing with students may sound a little daunting if you feel any discomfort with your own writing. (See Chapter Three: Recognizing Fears.) Actually sitting down and writing is simply the best preparation for teaching writing. The best way to understand the needs of the students is to be one of them. As you write with the students, your own writing and comfort with writing will improve, and you will have a good understanding of the problems that the students face as they write. The idea of listening to someone talk about writing, without ever doing or sharing any writing, is as odd as a dance teacher trying to teach dance steps without moving herself!

A rule of thumb I follow is never to ask students to do anything that I wouldn't be prepared to do. So when I ask someone to write about their first love, I write about my first love too. Writing together places the teacher among the students, and as a teacher, you will find that you will do as much learning as the students do.

Editing of Quotes and Writing Samples

Please note that all writing examples included in the text of *More Writing Out Loud* have been edited for clarity and readability only. These pieces are first drafts, the bare bones of our writing. They are not perfect. I hope through these authentic writing examples that you will see how profound and moving simple, non-graded, free-written pieces (written by adults of different ages and writing levels) can be.

The instructors' quotes from the distance education, on-line training (similar to email) are also edited for clarity and readability only. I wanted the quotes to remain conversational and real — just as they were meant at the time. We didn't know when we were doing the training that we would be writing *More Writing Out Loud* together. This makes the honesty of the instructors' comments that much more poignant, and I am grateful to them for letting me share their honest thoughts and reflections with you. We have used an "email logo" to identify writing that came directly from our on-line discussions.

Writing Exercises

All the exercises in *More Writing Out Loud* were provided or prompted by the participants of the Writing Out Loud Instructors training. These ideas can be used in a one-to-one setting, in a group or in a classroom. Most of the examples cited in this book stem from writing groups, but I know of many people who have used these exercises with individual students, learners or clients. Many of the exercises originated in programs for women, but they can also be used with men or mixed groups. Each exercise includes an introduction, exercise steps, writing examples, suggestions for adaptations, the instructor's reflections and a brief history of the program where the exercise was tried and developed.

The exercises move from “easier to more difficult” following chapter discussions on issues such as writing what you know and acknowledging emotions, but you can jump in anywhere in the book that suits you and your student(s). Please remember that these exercise ideas are only suggestions. You can adapt the exercises to be more workable, applicable, or relevant for the people you are working with. Show the exercises to the students. Ask if they would like to try a particular idea. In the process they may come up with a better one!

When you and your student(s) are ready to try some exercises from *More Writing Out Loud*, take a minute to read Chapter Four: Feeling Safe. There are important suggestions in this chapter for helping to create a safe environment for any writing and learning you do together.

Why Writers Write

Writers write to communicate, to express and explore ideas and thoughts. The Writing Out Loud approach to writing encourages people to write what's on their minds, to describe what's important to them, or to tell their stories. It is important to be aware that some people write to understand better how they *feel* about something, while others write to figure out what they *think* about a situation.

I come at the world from my heart. My feelings are always on the surface and I have little trouble expressing them. It's my thoughts that give me trouble. When presented with an issue, I often say, “I need a few minutes to write about this to clarify my thinking.” My older son is the opposite. He's a clear, logical thinker who can tell me right now what he thinks about a situation. But when I ask him how he feels about it, he hesitates. In contrast to my way of doing things, he will use writing as a way to sort out and get in touch with his feelings.

The writing you do with other adults using the exercises and ideas in this book will surprise, enlighten and touch you. All of the Writing Out Loud Instructors join me in wishing you great success and new awareness in your personal and professional writing adventures.

Chapter Three

Recognizing Fears

The Number One reason that people are reluctant to write is fear. This is true for students as well as instructors. Writing is an academic skill, but it is also an outlet for creative expression. It's not surprising that people have a fear of writing. Many of us cringe at the idea of expressing ourselves through creative arts such as singing, dancing, or drawing. Unless we are trained or skilled in these arts, we experience a natural fear when asked to "perform," especially spontaneously.

We have often heard students talk about being afraid of being laughed at if they put words on paper. They worry that their writing doesn't look good or that they have nothing interesting to write about. Students aren't the only ones who feel this way. During the Writing Out Loud Instructors training, we learned that many of us experience the same fears expressed by students.



From: Janet, British Columbia

Writing — well, to be perfectly honest, writing at times, frightens me. I feel instant panic. I freeze and my mind goes blank. Thoughts haunt my mind, like "I'm a teacher, I should be able to write something earth shattering," or "What if I sound silly?" or "What if it doesn't make sense?" or "What if they don't understand what I'm saying?" or "What if I can't perform like I'm supposed to?" Scary!! So yes, in this way, I can relate to how my students feel. This semester I told myself that I was going to make a huge effort to write daily, in my journal with my students. I knew the benefits from listening to my own students, and I wanted that to happen to me. So I started to practice my "talking on paper." That was two months ago. I'm still writing and it's getting easier. My students fear their spelling, sentence construction, punctuation, grammar, and their handwriting. Because of those fears,

they are unable to write. My only fear is “What to write?”, but they have to deal with both: “What to write?” and “How to write?”



From: Brenda, Saskatchewan

I'm still thinking about the fear business... I guess why I am still thinking about it and not writing about it, until now, is because one of my fears of writing is what happens when thoughts are down in print: they are there! There is not a great deal of mind changing that can easily and gracefully be done once things are in print! So a big fear is not having thought the whole thing out enough before I commit it to some sort of imagined permanency. Also, it takes awhile for me to unscramble what is in my head in order to be able to put it down. I would be almost embarrassed to let anyone see the scrambled part. It would be sort of like learning that company is on the way so a mad cleanup of the house is done with no minutes to spare only to have said company inadvertently open the closet door where all the stuff was stuffed! Students that I have worked with have shared a similar fear. They have commented that they find it sometimes difficult to zero in on what to write about. I guess I can empathize!

A surprising number of instructors remember (very vividly) experiences in school where they were judged or criticized that left them feeling uncomfortable with their personal writing.



From: Kathy, Nova Scotia

As a science undergraduate, I was severely traumatized by the comments of a philosophy professor and for many years was hesitant to write anything that was not strictly technical or that would be read by anyone other than my mother or grandmother, to whom I wrote on a weekly basis. I think that those fears that I had then are similar to the fears that I have seen students express. As I have been writing this, I thought about all the different techniques that we as good adult educators use to help our students with the writing process and I suddenly realized that, in my own time in school, no teacher ever helped us to understand the process — we were just expected to write. I have no reason to believe that this has changed. So it is no wonder that most people (except for those who are natural writers) would be afraid to write. Not many people are not afraid to do something that they have not been taught anything about.



From: Carol, Alberta

The time in my life that made me almost hate writing was university. The one English course I had to take was a killer for my love of writing. All I can remember is never understanding what the teacher wanted me to see. She seemed so hung up on finding sexual references in poems and stories. My interpretation was always way-off according to her. I never saw sexual connotations in the daffodil! There was a time when I just did not read or write anything. All I wrote was what I absolutely had to and when I got that back it was so covered with red written remarks that I felt I could not do anything correctly. I actually got to the point where I did not like to write anything whether it was going to be read by anyone else or not. I still struggle with this. I enjoy writing and I want to leave behind some parts of my life for my children and grandchildren to enjoy but I procrastinate about doing it. "I am too busy" or "It isn't all that interesting", etc. I think in this way, my mentally challenged writers are better off than I am. They are usually pretty optimistic about what they have written and are proud of it.

When I was in Grade 5, I was caught passing a note to my girlfriend. Mrs. Snyder, an older, very strict teacher, made me write "I will not pass notes in class" 100 times on the blackboard. She insisted on good penmanship, so I had to erase the last 25 sentences and redo them because my writing had gotten sloppy by that point! During our on-line discussion about negative experiences with writing in school, we identified a number of examples where writing had actually been used as a means of punishment!

Some of us were lucky and had teachers throughout, or at some point in our schooling, who loved writing — who were able to inspire us to become excited about the written word, making writing a positive experience.



From: Gayle, Nunavut

I must admit that I don't really feel that I have fears about writing but I do feel that I do not make the time to write for personal use anymore. My excuse (perhaps this is out of fear that I am not aware of yet!) is always that I am simply too busy and/or too tired. My family and teachers were always supportive of writing and reading so I now see that my whole life has been one supportive of written expression. It's not that I see my writing as being out of this world or anything like that, it has simply never really occurred to me to be afraid of writing.

My students, of course, have not had this same privilege, for various reasons. Their fears are based upon lack of self-esteem, positive

educational experiences and practice. Most of them do not have the personal fortitude to persevere in the face of obstacles, real or perceived. I see my job as being one of providing opportunities to help them remove their obstacles and go through their fears. Hopefully the outcome is one of increased writing enjoyment.

Writing, like reading, is something that most of us do everyday. We take our ability to write for granted. As experienced writers (whether we enjoy writing or not) we have many more opportunities to practice writing than most students do. Practice alone can greatly improve writing.



From: Lynn, Newfoundland

One of the differences between the fears that the learners and I feel about writing is related to opportunities to write. I think I have had more opportunities to write than the learners I work with, which might lessen some of my fear, or at least “toughen me up” a bit to critical feedback.

Unfortunately, literacy workers rarely have the opportunity to write freely. With the demands of the more rigid formats of writing reports, submitting proposals and developing training materials, there is little time or place for writing for pleasure.



From: Kim, Saskatchewan

It seems to me that learners are often most reluctant about spelling and other composition issues (sentence and paragraph structure), whereas I’m just embarrassed about content, or specifically my lack of creativity. I’ve been accused of being too practical and organized by some creative people, and I do believe this has fortified some barriers for me in doing much personal or creative writing.

When we are unsure of ourselves, we don’t want to be noticed. We are afraid of being judged, laughed at or embarrassed. Many new writers hesitate to put words on paper, not because they lack the skills but because they lack the confidence. This lack of confidence can compound our fears.



From: Bonnie, Alberta

The fears that I have about writing are very similar to those of the learners I work with. All through school my one albatross was spelling, punctuation and grammar. I could read, organize ideas, make deductions, but when I wrote things down, I found the mechanics really difficult. I also get so involved in what I want to say that I seldom proof my work well. I used to consider this an unimportant “detail.” The truth is, I wasn’t taught a lot of grammar and punctuation (that I remember) and my sound discrimination and memory for spelling are not good.

This didn’t really bother me that much at school where it seemed the teachers were pretty much looking for content and didn’t seem to correct you that much. In the work world, though, I have found plenty of opportunities to publicly display this problem. I remember the first time I stood in front of a class as a teacher and didn’t know how to spell a word. I smudged it so no one would know that I didn’t know. Later, as a literacy coordinator, I made plenty of errors in letters and on posters which embarrassed me. I can see the humour that this would inspire as I’m the one who’s supposed to be good at this. Writing about working with “leaners” (learners) got lots of laughs. It made me feel pretty stupid.

Feeling stupid leads to feeling fearful. I don’t send out anything anymore without multiple proofs. The fear is compounded for me when it comes to writing because just in case there was any doubt about your faults before, you now know that they will be preserved in black and white for all time. Email is a terror — you can’t get it back. You can imagine how I had grown to hate writing. It’s a chore, a necessity to be mastered. The first time I attended one of Deborah’s Writing Out Loud workshops, I remember experiencing a creative joy in writing. I never thought of writing as a way to expose your innermost self, to examine it and celebrate it in a way that’s rarely offered in our world. Now I know that writing is a creative venture that is a chance to help you get over your fears.

I really identified with Bonnie’s embarrassing (mis)spelling experience. The first advertising I did to promote the literacy program I was running years ago was a flyer I sent out to invite community members to attend a public meeting. According to my computer spell-checker, it made perfect sense that I was holding a “pubic” meeting instead of a public one!

It helps to remember our own anxieties about learning and writing as we encourage new writers to put pen to paper.



From: Bonnie, Alberta

When I work with learners I try to keep in mind my experiences with fear of writing. It helps me see why even one sentence can be difficult to put down. I've had plenty of other successful experiences in my life to help build my confidence and overcome my reluctance, but many of the learners have had just the opposite. I encourage them by saying: "If a sentence is too big, start with a few words. Take small steps towards a goal. As each fear is overcome, we can start to proceed with the next step until we get where we want to go." In order to be helpful, though, our goals have to be achievable or we are just setting up for more failure. That's the great thing about free writing. There is no failure.

A couple of years ago I auditioned for a part in our community production of "The Sound of Music," something I had always wanted to do. I had to sing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" for the audition, along with about 50 other women. My voice was clear and strong, and I was thrilled when I got the part of a singing nun. But the first night of rehearsal, terror set in. There were 20 women gathered in the junior high school music room. The choir director handed out some sheets of music with complicated directions for five-part harmony, and after a few introductory remarks, motioned for the pianist to begin. This was community theatre. Did all these women have the background to know how to read this music? I was a total amateur. I had never learned to read music, I just sang by ear. Everyone started singing, except me.

So I faked it. I was sure if anyone knew, I'd be asked to leave the choir. I listened and learned the parts from the other altos singing beside me. As the "singing nuns" got to be friends, I eventually admitted that I didn't know the names of the notes or how to read music. To my surprise and delight, the other singers didn't judge or criticize or laugh at me. Instead, they took me under their wings and gave me all the encouragement I needed and I sang my heart out for ten nights in what was one of the highlights of my life.

Barb, one of the students in the Write to Learn Project, said she overcame her fears about writing through "a whole lot of praise and a whole lot of practice." Whether we want to improve our ability to sing, write or swim, we have to practice — a lot. The more we write, the better our writing becomes and the more our confidence grows. Praise, support and consistent encouragement from peers and instructors can dramatically speed the process of gaining confidence and overcoming fears.

Do you have to like writing to be able to teach writing? As we conducted our research, we heard many literacy workers express a desire to be better, more confident writers, while some simply said that writing "wasn't their thing" and

that that wasn't likely going to change. Most literacy workers, however, recognized the benefits and value of writing, and were therefore able to bring enthusiasm about writing to the classroom.



From: Colleen, British Columbia

My personal fear is that I really have nothing to say and I dislike trying to think of something creative to write about. When I worked with the Lifewriting group, I'd be so impressed by some of the things the women wrote and shared that I'd feel inadequate. Can you believe this is a teacher of 30 years saying this? I never liked to write and I can't honestly say after two years with Lifewriting that I like it any more. I like the healing aspect I see it has. I did a lot of journaling when I was in my 12-step work. It seems I'd always go back to my journal when I was in crisis. Journaling gave me a way to follow a thought through to the end rather than have it flit in and out of my mind.

It has been reassuring to hear that many other people aren't into writing, as I used to feel like a fraud who shouldn't even be doing the work I do. Yet I love getting my students going and I seem to have a knack to motivate them to write and be comfortable with it.

We have shown in this chapter that instructors have their own fears about writing, for a variety of reasons. The Writing Out Loud approach to teaching writing, which encourages instructors to write with students, can bring up fears about personal vulnerability. As instructors, we are supposed to be models for students. Can we still be models if we're not confident writers? I believe we can. Robert Sommer, in his book *Teaching Writing to Adults* says, "Cognitive psychology has shown that adults are capable of developing writing skills, even late in life, but teaching methods need to reduce their anxiety about expressing themselves." (p. 31). As writing instructors, we need to give ourselves permission to relax and enjoy the process of writing. Many of the Writing Out Loud Instructors talked about their writing improving throughout the training because they were doing more of it, but also because they were receiving feedback and support for their ideas and stories from the other writers. This gave them confidence to continue expressing ideas and asking questions. When we write together, we learn together. With a lot of praise and a lot of practice, it is indeed possible to overcome our fears and improve our writing.



Chapter Four

Feeling Safe



As we prepare to take a risk or try something new, we need to feel physically and emotionally safe. For some people, safety involves a safe place, a secure environment where they feel comfortable physically. For others, safety means knowing that their emotions and feelings will be respected and kept from harm. When we ask people to put words on paper and then read those words out loud, we are asking them to be open with their personal thoughts and ideas, to be vulnerable.

Creating safety in a learning setting can be a serious and complicated issue, especially in literacy education. As literacy workers, we are more and more aware of the devastating effects emotional and physical abuse can have on a child or adult's learning. Jenny Horsman, in her book *Too Scared to Learn; Women, Violence and Education* speaks openly and often painfully about the effects of violence on learning.

It is particularly important to look at the impact of violence on learning in the area of literacy, not simply because there may be extremely large numbers of adult literacy learners who have experienced violence, but also because literacy learning is likely to work as a particularly strong trigger for memories of violence for many women. However, the effects of violence are not confined to literacy learning. Education at all levels will also be profoundly affected. Because literacy takes learners back to their failure to learn to read well as children, it may also take them back to memories of being a child, to memories of violence at home or school. Literacy learning may be terrifying and may lead to panic. Learning something which many assume should have been learned in childhood may pose a challenge to anyone, more so for someone struggling with a sense of self and low self-esteem, who may also have experienced violence or trauma. (p.19)

Jenny has done (and continues to do) extensive research on this extremely important and “hard to talk about” subject. I highly recommend her book to further explore the topic of the effects of violence on learning.

It is important for anyone working with adult students to understand and recognize that the years of living a person brings to a particular learning setting may not have been easy, and may in fact, have been filled with traumatic events that shaped their confidence and perceptions about learning. Many students wouldn’t be in our programs if this weren’t the case.

Over time, I discovered that each of the women in the Chapters Program had issues of abuse in their lives. Many of their stories were horrific and at the very least, heartbreaking. If I had known their backgrounds ahead of time, I honestly don’t know if I could have taught the women in the program. I would have felt intimidated and inadequate and even fearful that I would somehow do more harm. But I learned that we all had stories — that we were all, on some level, survivors of traumatic life events that affected our comfort with learning and taking risks. We learned about each other’s life experiences as we spent time together. It wasn’t always easy going, but we were able to share our stories (and we all had many!) because we considered some of the following factors that helped us to build trust and establish personal and working boundaries.

Writing Setting

When I compare the cold, sterile, hard-chair feeling of some classrooms I’ve visited to my comfy chair and the cozy room where I do my writing, I’m not surprised that people have trouble relaxing with writing. The office space that later became the Chapters classroom was a bare-bones, cement-walled space. The first thing the women in the Program wanted to do was “cheer it up.” To make the space more livable, we found some inexpensive garage sale furniture and created a living room at one end of the classroom and a tiny kitchen at the other. Over time, the women brought in items from home — a plant, an afghan or a cushion — that brightened up the classroom and helped us all to feel more comfortable.

As much as we know that a warm, inviting environment is more conducive to learning, not everyone has the luxury of having a space that can be decorated or made to feel like their own. Many literacy workers share space with other programs or borrow space in libraries, church basements or schools. Most people have to “make do” with the space assigned to or made available to them. This can certainly make teaching writing more difficult. I have however, seen instructors transform a room with simple touches like scented candles, extra lighting, a bouquet of flowers, and a fresh pot of coffee. Encourage students to let you know what their physical needs are and to help you find ways to make the place where you write together as comfortable as possible.

Group Guidelines

In the Writing Out Loud Instructor's training, we spent a great deal of time talking about creating a safe environment by establishing group guidelines as a starting point for building trust and boundaries.



From: Sylvia, Manitoba

I have always started a new class with guidelines that the students create. It really helps them to take ownership of their learning, their environment. I do add my "two cents worth" by just adding that my wish for the class is that it is a place that is positive, happy, rewarding, encouraging, secure, and free of abuse of any kind. I have never had a problem with foul language, or violence. People who come into our classroom for the first time always comment on what a warm, happy and encouraging place it is.

Guidelines, or a framework for working together, are important whether people are working one-to-one or in a group setting. The purpose of establishing guidelines is to help individuals feel emotionally and physically safe and to provide groups with a code of conduct, an understanding of "what's okay and what's not."



From: Debbie, British Columbia

Establishing a safe, comfortable and productive place for everyone in the classroom is essential to any kind of free and open communication. It is the only way for learning to take place. I always start a new class with a group discussion that centers on the question, "What will it take for you to feel safe and comfortable here?" Although the answers may be similar for each group, the ideas are coming directly from the students and are never imposed by me. Students here must make a choice every day about whether or not to come to classes. I believe that choice is strongly influenced by how safe and comfortable and productive they feel in our classroom.

The students' ideas are recorded and copies are distributed to all group members. They are also posted in the classroom. We also revisit the list from time to time to see how well we are doing at maintaining the kind of learning place we want our class room to be. I have made the mistake of assuming that everyone knows what is expected in order to make a group function. I have been amazed at how quickly and easily the situation can deteriorate without a working set of guidelines for behaviour.

As the instructor I must be willing and able to model the kind of behaviour I am looking for from my students. Of course, there will be times when I blow it, too, and I am always willing to apologize for it. I want to build an open, trusting relationship with my students and I have found this approach to be quite successful over the years.

Creating guidelines and involving students in the process can take some time, but this activity can be integral to helping a group to bond or take ownership of the learning and the safety of individuals within the group.



From: Colleen, British Columbia

I have mixed thoughts about group guidelines. Of course, we must have them for a group to be safe and effective. On the other hand, do we have to spend a lot of time hashing them out and getting the wording just so? Wouldn't "respect for self and others" do it? Then again, does that mean the same thing to everyone? I found in both years of Lifewriting we spent an entire session establishing guidelines and getting the wording just right to satisfy everyone. In the end they generally always end up saying the same thing and it boils down to respect. Then again, the experience itself of communicating and negotiating in the group is a bonding activity where you get to know more about one another.

Establish guidelines right from the beginning. It is much easier to develop a framework of understanding with group members from the onset than it is to try to negotiate reasonable guidelines after an incident has occurred that might have been prevented if guidelines were already in place.



From: Kathy, Nova Scotia

I feel very strongly that every group should have group guidelines — so strongly, in fact, that establishing guidelines or a "code of conduct" with and for their group has been written into the job description for our instructors. We find that having guidelines and revisiting them often not only promotes learning and good writing/reading, but helps avoid/solve many other problems as well. Sometimes this "code" is the first time a person has ever been reminded that they actually can control how they respond to a given situation and that they have a responsibility to do so.

Guidelines can also be developed to address specific concerns or needs of the group.



From: Carolyn, Yukon

In my own experience as a learner, I can really appreciate the importance of having a user-friendly, built-in “way out with dignity” when you feel uncomfortable with some exercise, topic, or routine. Sometimes even having to say you prefer not to participate is hard to do if the situation really has you gripped. A simple provision for a “way out” could be something like a card with the words I PASS, or TIME OUT written on it (with maybe a symbol such as a coffee cup), which everyone would receive along with other supplies for the course. The person who feels uncomfortable at any time simply needs to display the card or the cup to the rest of the group without speaking, if he so chooses. I think it is important too, that the person choosing to refrain from participating never be questioned, coaxed or commented about.

In the Chapters Program, the women worked together to create the Chapters Commitment, which was an agreement that each of the participants in the Program signed as their commitment to the program and to each other.

While I am a participant in the Chapters Program I will do my best to:

- Respect the uniqueness and ability of each person in the Program.
- Not pass judgment on others.
- Be fair and helpful with my comments.
- Help to create an accepting place to learn.
- Be allowed to “pass” on activities that I do not want to take part in.
- Respect the people in the program by not using their names or speaking about them or their writing in discussion about the program outside of the classroom.
- Be a good listener.
- Give everyone the right to have their own opinions as I have a right to mine.
- Understand that it is okay for me to express my own needs (i.e., quiet time, time out, etc.).
- Contact the coordinator or a classmate if I am unable to attend class as I understand that my being at Chapters is important to my own success and to the success of the Chapters Program.
- Play an active part as a member of the team of creative people who are working together to build and shape the Chapters Program.

Guidelines can be “revisited”; they are not carved in stone. We have used the word “guidelines” more than “rules” because the code that each group works with will be unique to the group and the learning setting and should be adjustable as the group identifies areas of need.

Here’s another example of “ground rules” that Susan Devins developed with a group of students in a writing group in Edmonton.



From: Susan, Alberta

I actually feel quite strong about the need to establish ground rules — before beginning activities, training workshops and group sessions. I also think those ground rules need to come from student/participant voices. So, I usually start off with a couple of items and ask participants to add or delete from that starting list. For the student group I worked with for the Writing Out Loud training, I negotiated a list of important aspects to include in our writing group. This was a list for all of us to help create a better experience while we were together. We had opportunities to revisit the ground rules when new students joined the writing group. This is what we came up with:

- Provide support.
- Provide constructive criticism.
- Recognize different levels.
- Recognize different styles of learning.
- Accept our talents and differences.
- Maintain confidentiality.
- Have fun.
- Try out computer programs.
- Include spelling tests/spelling lists from writing/spelling bees.

When the group from the Write to Learn Project was traveling across Canada presenting writing workshops, we came up with a set of workshop guidelines that we handed out (or put on a flip chart) at the beginning of each workshop. In short workshops, there wasn’t time to develop a new set of guidelines each time. We verbally discussed each of the six points of the “Fearless Writing Workshop Guidelines,” to make sure everyone understood the guidelines that we hoped they would practice with us over the length of the workshop. We always asked group members for feedback or suggestions just in case anyone had a particular need that wasn’t represented in the following suggestions:

- Respect the privacy of everyone in the group.
- Feel free to “pass” if you are not comfortable with a certain exercise.
- All writing in this workshop is “practice” writing. The idea is to put words on paper. You don’t need to worry about spelling and grammar or how your writing looks.

- Take care of yourself. Take “time out” if you need to. You are safe here.
- Take time to listen as well as time to speak. Everyone deserves a chance to be heard.
- Give yourself permission to relax and have fun!

Do guidelines always work? For the most part, yes, but sometimes it can be difficult for participants to “buy into” the guidelines.



From: Janet, Alberta

I have had mixed experiences with setting guidelines in the classroom. In one group I had a man who felt it was demeaning to him as an adult to discuss rules of behaviour. I know how he felt but with that group, it was important to set guidelines of behaviour. To make it easier for him, I rephrased the discussion around the question, “What you can expect from others when you share your writing?” I had a few basic items and the group added a few more.

If you run into an situation where the established guidelines weren’t helpful, don’t give up on the idea. In most cases they work — at least as a starting point. I have never met an instructor who was sorry she took the time to establish guidelines, but I have heard a number of instructors lament that there were no guidelines in place when they needed them.

Personal Boundaries

One of the underpinnings of the Writing Out Loud approach to teaching writing is that teachers write along with students. That means that instructors or tutors are (and can certainly feel) as vulnerable as students.



From: Deanna, British Columbia

When we started the Lifewriting group, I know I feared revealing too much of myself to a bunch of strangers--I hid a lot behind philosophizing and behind humour: no way was I going to start “spewing” in such a setting!! I was not about to put myself in a situation in which any others could “have something” on me. I had to maintain my dignity! It took the searing honesty of some other participants to humble me, and make me realize that my fear was keeping me from doing any real writing or sharing. Most of the other women in that initial group shared this same fear sooner or later with the rest of us.

The fears that Deanna expressed are fears that are considered acceptable for students to feel but not for teachers. We need to be honest with ourselves and the other writers we are working with and recognize that the group guidelines are there for the safety and comfort of group facilitators as well. Students need to be reminded of this during the process of developing guidelines. Without dominating the process, instructors need to feel able to make suggestions or ask for certain ideas to be added to a groups' ground rules. As an example, Lynn in St. John's requests "that group members not interrupt others while writing, thereby creating a 'closing in' around the table when we begin. (Where we write) really is a sacred space for us."

Openness to learning

In order to teach writing in the diverse situations in which nontraditional students learn and respond well to their varying needs, one must be able to operate within the apparent contradictions of doing and not doing, teaching and not teaching. Yet this is what makes teaching fun, interesting and dynamic. Sommer (p. 14)

I agree with Sommer in that teaching writing can be difficult because there is so much unpredictability — which can also make for interesting and fun learning experiences. Writing teachers have to be open to all possibilities. Writing is not a linear activity. It often takes us in circles and to places we least expected. And those places are more often exciting and interesting than they are difficult. Teachers who are passionate about and open to learning help to create a safe environment simply through their beliefs and attitude. This is a quote from Jenny Horsman's book, *Too Scared to Learn*, that sums up my own feelings:

In order to create a safer setting where learners can relax and focus on their own learning, program workers must actively question what it means to be trustworthy teachers; they must become clear about their own boundaries, respect the boundaries of others and support learners to set their own boundaries and respect those of others. When instructors actively build trust and support learners developing trust in their own abilities and knowledge, important learning breakthroughs may occur. Creating balance that makes space for speaking and writing about pain as well as enjoyment and pleasure is part of the process of creating the literacy program as a safe place to learn. (p. 125)

We all feel more safe in a learning setting where we are allowed to have fun and laugh and even play, where we are allowed and encouraged to be all of who we are. As adult teachers and students, we all have issues — we all feel vulnerable at different times. It is possible to work together to find healthy ways to express our needs and emotions when we develop personal and learning boundaries around mutual respect. I love this story that Diane Mullen posted during the training.



From: Diane, Saskatchewan

A story I have used to illustrate a particular approach to group guidelines comes from my daughter, Amanda. After the beginning of Grade 7, she came to me feeling frustrated with her new teacher. She told me that while her Grade 6 teacher had one rule for everything, her Grade 7 teacher had different rules for everything — rules for bathroom break, rules for homework, rules for the playground, talking, gym — the list went on and on! I was curious about the one rule that her Grade 6 teacher had that could replace all of the other rules. When I asked Amanda, she replied, “Respect. Mrs. Freisen’s one classroom rule was respect.”

When we learn to build our teaching and learning around respect — for ourselves, the people we are learning and working with, and our learning environment — we create safety, security, and trust, opening doors to rich and exciting possibilities for academic and personal discovery.

Chapter Five

Freewriting



From: Susan, Alberta

Last week, I tried freewriting. I was blown away by what people wrote about. First, I was astounded by the diversity of profound things as well as mundane things on one's mind. Afterwards, I asked if people would like to begin with freewriting, before I launch into my idea to try out for that day. The answer was YES!!!. So I feel that I have gotten over my fear about hesitations of freewriting. I was afraid students may be discouraged and draw blanks or not welcome the lack of structure, but they were really ok with it.

Freewriting is the foundation of the Writing Out Loud approach to writing. We begin every workshop or daily writing with time to write freely about whatever is on our minds.



From: Margaret, Ontario

Freewriting is free. It's freeing. It's freedom. The freedom to write is a bit scary for some people. Me included. It's almost like going to a shrink and letting it all out except that here you don't have to pay for it. Sometimes you are surprised by what you produce — Wow! That's kinda neat. Other times you are taken aback. Again — Wow! Where did that come from? That is often what eludes us, what we push aside in the "busyness" of our lives, what tempts us or maybe even what scares us.

When we do freewriting we sometimes allow ourselves to remove the masks that we have acquired over the years and say “Here’s the real me, like it or not.” At any given moment our creative side may appear. Or you may choose to be brutally honest and tell it exactly as it is right now. Or we may allow ourselves some time to be self-reflective

Freewriting can be a wonderful outlet to get rid of all the baggage we arrive in class with and a way to let ourselves be who we are.

Freewriting, like all writing, is indeed a road to discovery.

As Margaret says, freewriting is just that — a chance to write freely. In their travels across Canada with the Write to Learn Project, Sharron, Alice and Barb talked excitedly with other students and instructors about “fearless freewriting.” They are convinced that doing freewriting is the best way to overcome fears about writing because “freewriting is never wrong.”

In their how-to booklet, *Fearless Freewriting*, Sharron, Barb and Alice list some other reasons they think freewriting is valuable. (p. 5)

Freewriting:

- *Helps me to get to know other people in a group.*
- *Is sometimes easier than talking.*
- *Is easier for me than writing what the teacher says I have to write.*
- *Gets easier with practice.*
- *Helps me to do better with all my writing.*
- *Is really relaxing.*
- *Brings out thoughts I never knew were there.*
- *Helps me get focused.*
- *Revs me up.*
- *Is a good first step to enjoying writing.*
- *Is fun and it’s free!*

Freewriting can be done individually, in a group or in a one-to-one tutoring setting. We follow five very simple steps when we do freewriting.

Get comfortable

It’s important to feel relaxed and comfortable when you write. This goes back to the idea of a safe environment. Comfortable chairs, a cup of tea, good lighting, quiet (or music) and maybe even a stretch or two to limber up and relax before you start.

Sharron had a difficult time writing at first. She just couldn’t sit still or concentrate. When we talked more about it, she said she found the office-like chairs in our classroom very uncomfortable for her back. Once she brought in a favorite cushion from home, she was able to relax and settle into her writing.

Encourage writers to express whatever individual needs they might have to be comfortable and secure as they write.

Have paper and pen ready

Everyone will have different preferences for their “writing tools.” Explore the many options to see what most suits you and your student(s). Some people like to write in notebooks or journals, others like scrap paper or loose-leaf. Writing instruments — pens, pencils, felt markers — are also very important. Try all the various combinations until the writers find what works best for them. There is nothing more frustrating than trying to put words on paper with a pen that doesn’t write well!

A practical, creative activity is to make special freewriting journals. Take simple, inexpensive, spiral bound notebooks and cover them with a personal collage of magazine pictures, words and favourite sayings. The front covers can be laminated with new ones made for each season of the year.

One of the only “rules” we follow with freewriting is to date the page we’re working on. In fact, writers are encouraged to date all their work, exercises and assignments as well as freewriting. This helps people to have a sense of the day and it’s surprisingly telling to go back a month or two later to see what was on our minds then. The students often see how much their writing has improved when they look back at their freewriting, and are sometimes able to see positive changes they have made in their lives over a short period of time. For many, freewriting is the first step (and often the catalyst) for more regular and in-depth personal journaling.

Everyone writes together. If someone in the group wants to pass that day, that’s fine, but the students and teachers write together. If ever we have a guest visiting the classroom, he or she is asked to write along with us.

Write for a given period of time

The writing we do when we are freewriting is timed. That means that we decide ahead of time how long we will write for. Depending on the ability of the writers, two or three minutes might be enough. A good starting point is five minutes. The writers will let you know if they find the time too long or if it wasn’t long enough. I have found that most groups start with 5 minutes, and over time, work up to 10 to 15 minutes.

In the Chapters Program we started off using a kitchen timer to time the exercise, but we all found the buzzer much too jarring. Now we take turns being “the timer,” watching the clock to let the rest of the group know when it’s time to stop writing.





From: Linda Dawn, Ontario

What does fearless freewriting mean to me? First, it means just put your pencil to the paper and keep going! Don't stop as long as the ideas are coming. In other words, let 'er rip...

Second, it means don't worry about grammar, punctuation or spelling. Worry about putting your real thoughts on paper. That leads to the next point: Write from the heart. Don't worry about big or fancy words, just write what you feel, what comes out. The last thing I would say is to write about what's on your mind. Don't try to dream up ideas.

In sum, I love freewriting in a small group. It really clears my mind and makes me feel calm. There's nothing like the sound of pencils on paper to make me feel at peace with the world.

Freewriting is never corrected. Knowing that, students are free to write without worrying about the mechanics of writing. They can make lists, write in point form, draw pictures or write with coloured pens. The idea is simply to get words and thoughts that are in our heads on to paper.

Some writers will say, "But I have nothing to write about," or "I can't think of anything to say." There are many different approaches to freewriting. In the Chapters Program, we often used brainstorming or word prompts to help writers get started, but we also gave people the option to write about whatever was on their minds, regardless of writing ideas that might have been suggested.

Once a group is established, it's fun to vary the routine a little. You can begin with poetry, play music in the background, pull words out of a hat, or take the first line from a story and build on that. Your group will let you know what they like best. It's important to give people the option to write how and what they want — to stay true to the idea of free or unstructured writing.



From: Isa, Quebec

I used poetry (to get started with freewriting). I always set the stage for writing. We read and discussed certain poems and then I introduced the new freewriting program. It worked! The results were fascinating. Everybody had something to say about themselves and the subjects ranged from childhood memories to anger over an incident that had happened on the weekend. Just try it!

There are times when we start freewriting where one (or all of us!) gets “stuck.” We have ideas to write about and the writing is easy, then suddenly, nothing comes. It’s an awful feeling when others around you are writing furiously and you’re sitting there, panicking, feeling blank. In *Fearless Freewriting*, the authors say, “If you can’t think of anything to write, just write, ‘I can’t think of anything to write’ over and over again until something comes.” (p. 7)

Writing Out Loud Instructor Bev Sochatsky has some more suggestions:



From: Bev, Alberta

A couple of writing guidelines that author Natalie Goldberg suggests from *Writing Down the Bones* is that we “keep our hand moving,” which invites participants to not stop writing until the time is up. I really like this and know that it works for me — oftentimes I think I have nothing left to say/write and it is easy to stop. When I push myself to continue to write, I sometimes move to a different level of writing and surface up a “nugget” that invites more reflection/writing and insight.

As well, Goldberg offers the following writing prompts when the writing is not flowing — “what I really want to say is...” and “I don’t know what to write about.” By writing these prompts the words often surface.

When the time to write is up, I encourage everyone to finish their thoughts, put their pens down and take a deep breath. Some instructors insist on stopping writing the second the time is up, but that can be very frustrating for a writer who is in the middle of a great thought or who wants to finish that last sentence. We want everyone to feel good about their writing, not frustrated.

Encouraging writers to take a breath is also important because I have seen new writers literally hold their breath while they concentrate on finding and forming words. Some instructors will do deep breathing exercises with students before and after writing, just to help keep everyone’s bodies full of healthy oxygen. I also find that some new writers need time to relearn or to become comfortable with holding a pen or pencil. The fine motor skills required may be a little rusty from lack of use. I worked with one young woman who pressed down on the page so hard with her pencil that it made the loose leaf paper curl! It’s good practice to have people take a minute to shake their hands to relax them after writing.

Read your writing out loud to one another

This is another underpinning of the Writing Out Loud approach to writing. Writers are always encouraged to read their writing out loud to one another, to share the words and thoughts they have written. For some people, this is the hardest but also the most rewarding part of this writing process.



From: Jacqui, British Columbia

I'm not really sure how to tell others about the special experience I feel when I share my freewriting. I know that hearing my own voice talking about something very personal that has happened to me can cause great tears or laughter. That does not always happen when I'm by myself, but when I share with others it does happen. To me it is like when you have some great news to share and nobody is around to hear about it. The experience is not as fulfilling or exciting as it would have been if you could have shared that news with someone.

Following the guidelines discussed in Chapter Four: Feeling Safe, reading any personal writing aloud to others should be voluntary. Writers should always be given the right to “pass.” This guideline also applies to instructors or facilitators who are writing with students.



From: Bev, Alberta

I find it relatively easy to write — it's the sharing of my writing that brings up fears (the process of moving from private to public). I have fears about doing it right, having others discount it or make negative judgments. In the writing that I do with women, I make it very clear that they always have the choice to share their writing or to keep it private. Many women have had their writing violated — diaries read by sisters, mothers, etc... and their words used against them. I need to know that I have that choice, too.

Most writers will be reluctant to read their writing at first. Sometimes writers are not comfortable with reading their writing because they lack the skills or confidence to read. In this case, if they are willing, another person can read their writing out loud for them.

It is important to respect the wishes of the writers if they choose not to read their writing. However, I have found it is also important to provide gentle encouragement to reluctant readers. I came to this conclusion when people would say to me after a workshop — “How come you didn't ask me to read? I would like to have read my story.” In one workshop evaluation a person wrote, “Don't forget about those of us who are just a little shy.” I try to watch for signs of “readiness” (direct eye contact, agitation or laughter) and will ask people if they would like to read their writing, even if they haven't initially volunteered. No one should ever feel pushed, but an invitation to read might be more welcome than we realize.

Fearless Freewriting has a great list of reasons why reading writing out loud is valuable. (p. 8)

Reading what you wrote:

- *Helps you get to know one another.*
- *Is good reading practice.*
- *Helps you to feel good about yourself.*
- *Helps people understand what you are thinking.*
- *Shows that you have some of the same feelings that others do.*
- *Is a way to tell others how you are doing.*
- *Gives people in the group a chance to respond to what you wrote. It's good to hear that other people understand.*

We read our freewriting out loud, as well as any writing we do together. Everyone enjoys hearing each other's stories. Students often find that they're not alone in their thinking when they share their own thoughts and realities. And many people comment on how much they enjoy being read to. A surprising number of people do not have memories of being read to as a child.



From: Bonnie, Alberta

Overcoming the fear of writing helps us know that our life fears can also be tackled. That's what I see in this (training) program and that's what I hear when I listen to the women from the Chapters Program reading their writing. The writing isn't just an expression of thoughts, or an opportunity to get ideas down in a low-threat environment, or a first step towards learning a valuable skill — although all of these are part of it and important. What makes people love this sharing is hearing that others fight the same fight and knowing that it is not an insurmountable task. Knowing there is a road to travel together is what makes this work.

Encouraging Students to Try Freewriting

One might think that the concept of writing freely, without worrying about spelling or grammar, and knowing the work won't be corrected, would be welcomed by students — a relief in fact. This is not always the case.



From: Margaret, Ontario

My current student (I tutor one-to-one) was quite taken aback when I suggested freewriting. "You mean I can write anything I want?" she asked. Boy, that was hard. She had a mental block. "Anything?" She wrote three words and then spent 30 seconds trying to erase them

from the page. “It’s okay,” I said. “Just keep going.” Some more erasing here, a bite of a pencil there and a huge sigh of relief when I said the time was up. It seemed to help that I had written too and each of us shared our writing with the other.

That was a month ago. Now she is quite comfortable with freewriting and looks forward to it as a regular part of our weekly lesson. Through this we get to know each other better and also catch a better glimpse of ourselves.

I have also seen however, that once people get used to the idea of freewriting, they get hooked!



From: Colleen, British Columbia

I have been using freewriting with my evening class twice a week. We usually just write a very few minutes to begin each class. The students find it prepares their mind and gets them writing. The disadvantage for me is that it takes so long to do the sharing. In the past couple of weeks we’ve been skipping over it as we have so many other projects on the go and we’re getting down to the crunch of end of semester. This week in their learning journals a couple of students shared that they are missing freewriting as they think it is very important and enjoyable. I want to quote what Simon had to say:

“I came to school tonight a little late and I am not sure if I missed freewriting or maybe they didn’t do it at all. Anyway for me I feel it’s very important and helpful to have a freewriting every time when we have class. Many times I don’t know what I have to write and I just say, pass, but It’s helpful as well by only listening to other students what they wrote. You can learn new ideas or words. You can also learn new expressions, and in this way my vocabulary is getting bigger.”

This was encouraging for me and motivates me to begin again in January to incorporate freewriting into the program.

Here's a lovely piece that one of Linda Dawn's students in Toronto wrote:

How to Write Fearlessly
by Shirly

When I first started this program it was very hard to get my thoughts down on paper. For me to write like I do it is very hard. Now I have the willpower to write what I want to even if it doesn't make sense to me.

I started the writing out loud program with no idea what I was doing. I was very scared at first but I think I've learned how to cope with it. I just start writing when I feel that little tinge of fear it seems to help some how. I'm so confident in my writing that I'm gonna help run a workshop on fearless freewriting with Linda Dawn who is my writing teacher. I'm hoping by this time next year that I have some of my stuff published for everyone to read.

Freewriting Benefits for Facilitators

One of the things I most like about freewriting is that it teaches us all a lot about life in general. The time we take to do freewriting allows each person to think and write freely, to have a voice (in reading their writing out loud) and to listen quietly, without judgment, to those they are learning with. It's so simple and yet so effective. Everyone has the option (and the right) to have the same opportunity as everyone else to write, speak and be listened to. A facilitator can learn a great deal about group members and group dynamics just by observing how individuals interact during the process of freewriting.

While freewriting, writers often discover thoughts and feelings they weren't aware were on their minds. It is almost a paradox that freewriting teaches hesitant writers how to use writing as a way of thinking, without thinking about writing. Freewriting, while an activity to encourage the actual act of writing, can also be a tool for self-discovery and exploration. Freewriting follows the flow of our thoughts wherever they may lead and they often lead us to the discovery of wonderful new ideas and perceptions. As people write freely, they write in the way that they speak, using the vocabulary and syntactical fluency that is familiar to them. Most writing students have done to date has been stiff, programmed, "correct" writing that doesn't sound the way they speak. Therefore, freewriting may help writers discover the sound of their own voices at the same time they are discovering and documenting their own ideas.

Freewriting can provide facilitators with a wealth of ideas for future writing. In the Chapters Program, most of the curriculum was designed around issues that surfaced during freewriting. Bev Sochatsky who works with women in conflict with the law depends on what her students "tell" her through their freewriting.



From: Bev, Alberta

What I find so valuable about freewriting as a learning strategy in the classroom is that the “curriculum” surfaces out of the words of the women. Over and over again I marvel at how I can get a pulse of the group by their writing. Thank you for sharing this “springboard” that was happening naturally in the classroom — I had to fine-tune my hearing to come to know that everything that surfaced in the freewriting exercises was what we needed to explore whether it was shame, guilt, violence, poverty, depression or addictions...

To become a comfortable writer takes practice, and lots of it. Freewriting produces pages and pages of written words that students can look back on as proof that they can write. It isn't long before students start to recognize that writing actually feels good. They like seeing how prolific they can be, they like the ideas they've written about and they begin to see that writing can be a way to help them deal with problems. They can put the freewriting in a binder or throw it in the garbage. They wrote it; it belongs to them.

A Note on Listening and Responding to Writing

I recently sent a final project report off to Ottawa and found myself quite agitated when I didn't receive a response. In the world of government, no response is a good thing. It means the report was satisfactory. But I had worked particularly hard on the report and secretly hoped someone would notice! I actually surprised myself by how much I wanted and needed someone to comment on the details of the report. Most writers feel this way.

In the exercises in *More Writing Out Loud*, students (and instructors) are encouraged to read their writing out loud to one another. As writers, we need an audience. We need to know that our words have meaning to someone else. Traditionally, we have written and handed in papers for those in authority to correct, mark and grade. Involving our peers in listening and responding to our writing allows for a larger, more open audience.

As Sommer points out in *Teaching Adults to Write*, “(Learners) begin to see the writings of their peers — and thus their own — as living documents that actually affect an audience, rather than as anonymous coded messages that quietly pass between themselves and the instructor and that have no consequences other than a score or marginal comments.” (p. 217) We learn to be better writers from reading and listening to the writing of others.

The way we have traditionally responded to freewriting is simply to acknowledge the writer. When someone reads a piece out loud, the other writers respond with words like, “That's so true” or “I never knew you had a sister in Lethbridge.” or “The sun shining sure makes a difference, doesn't it?”

Everyone quietly nods, gives some words of encouragement, thanks the person for reading, and then is ready to listen to the next writer. If someone has written something that has sparked an emotional reaction, we take time to make sure that person is all right before moving on. (See Chapter Eight: Acknowledging Emotions.)

Some instructors prefer to have all the group members read, and then allow time for “group feedback” where everyone responds in an overall way to what has been read. This takes the focus off individuals and creates a specific length of time for people to practice listening.

Listening is a learned skill that can take more time to develop with some group members than others. Carolyn Krenzler from Whitehorse has some thoughts on this.



From: Carolyn, Yukon

An area that I found touchy is that some people in a group tend to be more vocal and eager to participate than others, to the point of dominating the time and space. It is hard for those more timid and less vocal to be able to break into the group activity even though they may want to. A “rule” may be adapted from parliamentary procedure where a person is invited to present his subject in a given time and then be allowed only one or two follow-up comments/questions. First Nations people have a unique way of giving a person “the floor.” A feather is passed to the person in the circle who is about to speak. It represents an invitation from the circle (group), and as such, their full attention is then given to the speaker; as well, it implies a privilege to the speaker and a duty to not abuse the privilege by being long-winded. The feather is a visible reminder of these courtesies both to the speaker and the “circle.” And this way, everyone gets their chance to participate without having to “elbow their way in.”

Having others listen and respond to our writing is a great confidence builder. We all need to know that what we have written has value. Gentle, kindly worded support can do wonders in helping us overcome fears about writing. And all of this is good practice for giving more specific feedback to writers who are ready to publish their work. (See Chapter Nine: Celebrating Writing.)

Freewriting helps all of us improve our writing, reading and listening abilities. In *Fearless Freewriting*, Sharron says freewriting helps her to relax and “it clears my head and opens my head to the thoughts that are really in there.” Alice says she likes to do freewriting “so I can empty my mind of unnecessary stress.” The time shared writing around a table — whether it’s in a kitchen or a classroom — helps to build trust, friendships and community. If nothing

else, I hope *More Writing Out Loud* leaves you with the desire to use freewriting (for yourself and with students) as a means to improve literacy skills and heighten self-awareness.



From: Bev, Alberta

I love the feeling in the classroom when we begin our day with freewriting. For me it is a spiritual time — we free float in time and space as pens race across lined paper. Almost always the energy in the room shifts after we do our freewriting — there is lightness and we all seem to breath deeper — AHHH...

Fearless Freewriting

Deborah Morgan — Camrose, Alberta

Here's an example of "fearless freewriting". Wanting to challenge a colleague's statement that teenage boys don't like to write, I invited my 17 year old son and two of his buddies to do some freewriting with me. Their writing surprised and delighted all of us, and started a discussion about school and friends and the future, that lasted all afternoon.

Exercise Steps

1. Find a comfortable place for everyone to write. (I worked with one fellow who preferred to sit on the floor with his back against the wall and his notebook in his lap!)
2. Have some paper and pens ready. Remember to date the top of the page before starting to write. Remind everyone that they do not need to worry about spelling and grammar. Freewriting is a chance to write freely, about whatever comes to mind.
3. Using a timer or keeping an eye on your watch, write for a length of time that the writers feel comfortable with — usually 3-5 minutes. Remember that instructors write too! (On the day I wrote with the boys, we wrote for 10 minutes.)
4. When the time is up, let everyone finish their sentences, put their pens down and take a breath.
5. Ask if the writers would be willing to read their writing out loud to one another.

Writing Samples

NB: As suggested in Chapter Four: Feeling Safe, I asked the boys to take an extra minute at the end of our freewriting to write down 5 things they were grateful for.

So, this morning I am woken up by my mom who says that someone has vandalized our car. My first response is, Man, Steve is a jerk! Steve was the only one I could think of doing something like that. I should also add that the vandalism was with "stickie notes" (which he stuck all over the car)! So anyways, I confront him and he says it's not him when it is so bloody obvious. Which

gets me to thinking, why do we always deny doing something wrong even when we know we're caught. Like, if I ate someone's last piece of pizza and they say, Hey did you eat my pizza?, I would say no, even though I'm the only one in the room, and obviously did it, and I would try and prove my innocence for as long as possible until it's proven it was me. I think this is just a thing that friends do just to piss each other off and see what they can get away with.

1. Tang
2. Panago pizza
3. pillows
4. stickie notes
5. Buddskis

Josh, July/01



Since I am entering my final year of high school in a month, all that is on my mind is the question I'll be asked many times next year: "What am I doing after high school?" After years of being told, "You can do anything you want to", I am in need of someone telling me what to study: a push in a particular direction.

Running the risk of sounding pompous and egotistical, I wish I was someone who only excelled in a few areas. Some people are excellent with numbers and functions, so they have a greater idea of what career is best suited for them. Others perform incredibly in sciences, and they as well have more confidence in choosing a career. However, I (as far as my marks have shown) can do well in a large number of areas. Yet I lack the strong desire to pursue only one of these faculties. There are so many things I'd enjoy doing, but nothing (yet) that calls to me.

1. Krista
2. friendship

3. laughter
4. creativity
5. family

Jared, July/01



It's funny how often I am asked to write whatever is on my mind. Whenever the question comes up, all I can think is how this kind of exercise often leads to the one word answers that are seen on so many teenage boy's papers. Not to demonize or insult the technique, but in many cases, especially that of young boys, more direction is needed. Perhaps it's because the boys don't understand the purpose of the exercise. Maybe the boys have important things to think about and write but the ability to articulate them is lost and as such, when given an opportunity to express themselves, they get frustrated and instead of trying, just print as quickly as they can, "Can't think of anything..."

1. Antoinelle
2. my friends
3. my potential
4. my family
5. the fun I get to have

Steve, July/01



I'm so pleased Josh and the guys are here today, that they were willing to try writing with me. Maybe it's just because I brought some pizza that they came! Oh well, whatever it takes!

Their heads are all down. They're all writing. Whew! Well, I guess I better get writing too.

It saddens me to think of how many kids don't finish high school. I think the stats are something like one third of the kids who start Grade 1 won't finish Grade 12. And I wonder how many kids who DO finish high school like to write - to write because it feels good, to write because they want to, not because they have to. I wonder how many will actually become published authors someday. Now there's an interesting thought!

What's most on my mind right now? Pizza, actually - it smells great. (I debated whether to feed the boys before or after we wrote. They decided afterward would be better.) I hope the time's up soon because I'm starving!

1. teenagers
2. my comfortable office/classroom
3. being able to write
4. warm summer days
5. garage sales

Deborah, July/01

Adaptations

Freewriting can be varied in a multitude of ways. Try writing for shorter or longer periods and see how the writers react to the difference. If everyone says, "I don't have anything to write about," have someone pick a subject (like favourite music) and do some brainstorming around the subject before writing. Keep a jar of words on little cards to draw from on days when people are feeling "writer's block". Inspirational "one a day" calendars can be a great source of writing ideas. Go to a local cafe to do your freewriting while you enjoy a good cup of coffee. Some groups do a meditation exercise before they start writing. Freewriting is like a cake; you can ice it any way you want!

Reflections

It is through regular freewriting that writing instructors get to know what is important to students, what's going on in their lives, and what videos are worth renting. I laughed at Josh's definition of friendship (the things that guys do "just to piss each other off"). Jared's angst in planning for the future (the need

for a “push in a particular direction”) is achingly clear, and Steve’s philosophy about boys needing more direction spoke volumes to me about how we need to be sensitive in our approach to teaching writing with different age groups. And look at what the boys stated they are grateful for. Girls, food and friends was no surprise, but I was quite surprised that these 17 year old boys (well, two of them!) said they were grateful for their families.

The content of freewriting provides relevant, fun, provocative curriculum material. Freewriting can provide an instructor (of just about any subject) with ideas for further exploration and learning. Josh, Jared and Steve wrote about relevant social issues and everyday living with humour and genuine interest. What better text book could a Grade 12 teacher work from!

History

I have been involved in the literacy field for 16 years as a tutor, program coordinator, instructor, researcher and administrator. It was while I was coordinating and instructing the Chapters Program (1994 -1997), that I began to truly value the use of writing as a means of self-development as well as a literacy skill. Chapters was a literacy/life skills program designed by and for women receiving government assistance. The women in the program came to love writing, what they learned through writing and how putting words on paper made them feel. It was through their encouragement that the idea for *Writing Out Loud* came about.





Chapter Six

Writing What You Know



For their book, *Propriety and Possibilities*, authors Helen Woodrow and Mary Norton canvassed students to find out what was easiest for them to write about. They found that students liked to write about “the things they chose — things they knew about, their experiences, and for some, their personal feelings.” (p. 27)

It’s pretty tough to write about a subject we know little about. It makes much more sense to encourage writers to write about themselves and what’s important to them. We are all full of fascinating stories and information that is often of genuine interest to others.

I agree with Sommer when he says:

Writing both reveals experience and is a part of it. When a neophyte writer — old or young — stumbles awkwardly around a lofty and abstract subject, his lack of experience with that subject becomes apparent. On the other hand, even a writer who has trouble with fundamental grammatical and mechanical matters can say something profound and moving about a subject with which she has experience. (p. 214)

The students in the Chapters Program often came back from lunch with bags of treasures they had found at our local thrift shop, which was just down the street from the classroom. The thrift shop was a common and known experience for all the women so they found it easy — even pleasurable — to write about.

This is a story that Sharron wrote which we published in a little booklet called *The Hearts of Women — Living, Not Just Surviving*.

Thrifty
by Sharron Szott

I never could quite understand why the close friends I've had for many years chose me to be their friend. Our lifestyles were so different. Not only did they have freedom to do the things they enjoyed in life, they also had the money. I was a little less fortunate. Some would shop in boutique shops that I never even had a desire to browse in. I never envied them for having what they had. I was an easy person to please — my tastes were very different and inexpensive. When we went shopping, we each usually went our own way then we would meet later for coffee. I would always do my shopping between Woolworth's and the Thrift Shop, and if I ran upon a garage sale, it would be the highlight of my day.

My friends called me "Thrifty." I liked the name they gave me. I would pay next to nothing for all my clothes and things for the house. They might have been old to someone else, but they were new to me. I am always complimented on how nice I look. My friends find it hard to believe when I tell them where I bought my new clothes.

I could never understand how people could pass down something that hardly had the tags removed. I can understand today with all the women working that they would need a change of clothes, whereas years ago a woman's place was in the home, or so I believed. I believe now that clothes don't make the person, it's what's underneath those fancy frills and ragged blue jeans that really counts.

In this piece, Sharron is writing about what she knows and what is important to her. I'm not sure if it's possible to write without bringing our knowledge and experience to our writing. Even when we write with our wildest imaginations, totally making things up, we are still drawing on our personal thinking and understanding. We would be making a mistake to try to separate the subject matter of writing instruction from personal backgrounds and histories of students. Part of our role as writing instructors is to find ways to help writers understand and accept that their personal stories are of interest and importance.

The concept that our lives are a collection of stories can be a difficult one to grasp, especially when students maintain that all their memories are bad ones. To illustrate the idea of life stories, I literally helped the students in the Chapters Program create new experiences that later became their stories. On a beautiful sunny day, we took blankets and a picnic and had our writing class in the park. When a local carnival came to town, we played hooky and spent an afternoon laughing and eating cotton candy, then came back to the classroom to write about the sights and sounds and smells of the carnival.

During a municipal election, I discovered that the women had never voted before. They assumed that since they were not employed and didn't pay taxes, they weren't allowed to vote! So we spent a week learning about the different candidates. We compared their platforms and promises, then went to the town hall to cast our ballots. That day, 11 women who had never voted before sat down and wrote about feeling "legitimate" and "like a real citizen" for the first time.

Sometimes we have to help create positive experiences for students to help them see how their lives consist of much more than bad memories. The women didn't know about voting before (or what they knew before was negative because they had always felt left out) but they know now. And now they have the experience of voting as one more story (however small) that makes up who they are.

The more writing we did, the more stories we generated. Some were sad, some hilarious. There were true stories as well as fantasies. Each time a student shared a story or life experience, it was accepted and applauded by her listeners. You could watch people's confidence grow as they discovered that what they had to say about their lives (past, present and future) had meaning and was appreciated by others. Writing gave them a way to bring forward their stories, and a means to tell those stories. By writing about themselves, the students were writing from the heart, writing that did all our hearts some good.

Writing Out Loud and *More Writing Out Loud* are full of exercises designed to inspire people to write about themselves and the world around them. These exercises are only guidelines. It is most important that instructors and facilitators adapt the exercises to suit the understanding and life experiences of the students. We want to draw on life experiences, but we must ensure that the subject is relevant to the student's age, culture, background and gender.

I made a big mistake at a workshop the Write to Learn Project presented in Yellowknife for the Tree of Peace. Hoping to help the group relax, I decided to do a simple writing exercise from *Writing Out Loud* called, "Dinner for Two." I asked the students: If you could go out for dinner with anyone in the world, who would that be and why? This exercise usually gets people started, but no one moved. There were no pens moving. So I added: What restaurant would you go to? What would you have for dinner?. Still almost no response. Finally, an older man, looking down at the blank paper in front of him, raised his hand and said quietly, "We don't go out for dinner. We don't go to restaurants." He looked up at me with round brown eyes, half laughing, half embarrassed. I was stunned for a minute, not realizing how inappropriate my question had been.

Sharron, sitting beside me, asked with genuine interest, "Where *would* you go to eat a special meal?"

“I would go out on the land and kill a rabbit to eat,” he said with more comfort.

I found my voice again and asked, “And who would you like to spend time with when you are on the land?”

“My grandfather,” he answered easily. “He was very smart. He taught me how to hunt and how to survive in the cold. He died a long time ago but I learned many things from him.” I was humbly reminded of the need to make learning relevant to the student’s needs and interests. For the rest of the week that we were in Yellowknife giving writing workshops, we were much more aware of and sensitive to the students’ relation to the land, their ancestors, their families, their culture and their way of life.

I have heard it said that “there is a story in each of us, so therefore there is a writer in each of us.” We need to tap into those stories. Writing is never easy, but writing what we know gives us a natural place to start.

Colour it _____?

Catherine Mochrie — Red Lake, Ontario

This exercise is a great lead-in to poetry writing. It follows a set pattern, but it also allows for individuality.

Exercise Steps

1. Brainstorm a list for:

Feelings, states or conditions; e.g., love, boredom, pregnancy.
Positive and negative touch sensations; e.g., sandpaper, silk, porridge.
Positive and negative smells; e.g., paint, bread baking, garbage.
Positive and negative tastes; e.g., bananas, cough syrup, burnt popcorn.
Positive and negative sounds; e.g., jackhammer, violin, car.
Positive and negative visual sensations; e.g., sunrise, sunset, a frown.

2. Follow this pattern:

Love is a colour. (pick one)

It feels like _____.
It smells like _____.
It tastes like _____.
It sounds like _____.
It looks like _____.

Writing Examples

*Happiness is yellow.
It feels like a soft baby blanket.
It smells like fresh flowers.
It tastes like fresh home made pie.*

*Fear is black.
It feels like a sharp knife.
It smells like garbage.
It tastes like a rotten fish.*

Love is red.

It feels like silk.

It smells like perfume.

It tastes like strawberry shortcake.

Lorelei E. Kakepetom
Red Lake



Happiness is dark red.

It feels like holding a new teddy bear.

It smells like raspberry.

It tastes like raspberry jam.

Despair is dark black.

It feels like that you have a deep cut in your hand.

It smells like rotten meat.

It tastes like burned toast.

Joy is nice pink and red.

It feels like holding a new born child.

It smells like red roses.

It tastes like strawberry cheese cake.

Charlene Kurahara
Red Lake



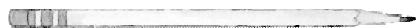
Love is red.

It feels like a warm blanket.

It smells like frying bacon.

It tastes like blueberry pie.

Denise Mamakeesic
Red Lake



*Mad is purple.
It feels like a pounding headache.
It smells like rotten garbage.
It tastes like a rabbit's gall bladder.*

*Sadness is black.
It feels like a wet handkerchief.
It smells like a rotten egg.
It tastes like sour milk.*

*Loneliness is blue.
It feels like a heavy blanket.
It smells like a decaying flower.
It tastes like bitter coffee.*

*Happiness is yellow.
It feels like warm sunshine.
It smells like an apple cobbler.
It tastes like roast turkey.*

*Lorraine Meekis
Red Lake*

Adaptations

This exercise works well with English as a Second Language (ESL) students. It's a great vocabulary-building exercise. All levels of writers would enjoy the brainstorming sessions. This exercise would be a good one for lessons on literary devices like similes and on using a thesaurus. One could also try Colour me _____?

Reflections

My daughter brought home a poem following this pattern from school and I thought it would be a great follow-up to the chapter "Sense ~ able Writing" from *Writing Out Loud*.

We had a great time brainstorming our various lists. Sometimes a positive taste for one was a negative one for another. It was also fun trying to ascribe a

colour to a feeling. We came up with some great imagery. We didn't do "It sounds like ..." because it was too hard for us to think of sounds that would match our feelings.

History

Red Lake is at the end of Highway 105, approximately a two-hour drive north of the Trans-Canada Highway at Vermilion Bay in Northwestern Ontario. The discovery of gold opened up the area's riches and beauty to many. Besides rich gold mines, the area's economy depends on forestry and tourism.

The Red Lake District Adult Learning Centre shares space with the Keewatin — Patricia District School Board, Ontario Works, and Contact North (which brings in post-secondary courses via teleconferencing). Our program is funded by the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. Direction for the Centre is provided by the Red Lake Adult Literacy Board, which comprises community members from various backgrounds.

Our student population varies with the time of year. Some students come to us to fulfill a requirement from the Ontario Works Program. Many of our students come on their own referral. Most are women. Our students work independently on their own academic and computer programs but collectively on the centre's activities. A group of adults from this centre started a community group to address the issue of bullying. The centre has also organized a successful coffee house showcasing adult talent in the visual, written, and musical arts. This coffee house has become an annual event. Several of our adults participate in the coffee house by reading some of their own writing. Others help out in other ways backstage. It's a wonderful team effort.

Day by Day

Deborah Morgan - Camrose, Alberta

Often when our writing group gets together, we find that half of us are having a good day, and half of us are having a not so good day. We've been talking about and learning that the direction of our day can be strongly influenced by our attitudes and choices. We thought it might be helpful to do some writing about the things that can affect our day.

Exercise Steps

1. Brainstorm about things that can affect a person's day; e.g., the weather, behaviour of our children, work/school pressures, health.
2. Ask the students to make lists of all the things they can think of in answer to:
"I know I'm having a bad day when..."
3. Then have everyone finish the sentence:
"I know I'm having a good day when..."
4. Allow enough time for everyone to write at least four responses to each prompt.
5. Encourage each writer to read two (or more) sentences from each prompt.

Writing Examples

I know I'm having a bad day when:

I go to the doctor and discover my appointment was for the day before!

The clothes I hang out on the line in the morning are all on the ground by the afternoon.

I don't get my rest.

Dogs and cats poo in my yard.

My mind is unable to think clearly.

I feel lonely as soon as I wake up.

I don't return a smile.

Everything anyone says sounds like an insult.

*I know I'm having a good day when:
I can cross off at least half of the things on my to-do list.
My kids or grandkids phone me.
I get a new idea for a craft.
Someone brings me a new frog for my collection.
I get my coffee to taste good.
No one phones, and catches me in bed.
I know what to make for supper.
I see a bright, sunny day as I open my window blind.
I get to smile at someone who isn't smiling.
I learn something new.
-Writing compiled by Deborah, Laurie, Sharron and Alice, Camrose*

Adaptations

This is an exercise that can easily be adapted to suit events or activities happening within your group or with an individual student. With a new mom, you could write about good parenting days. In an employment readiness program, you could have the participants write, "I know I'm having a good job search day when...". Students can write about "friend days," "writing days," or "health days." As an example, we were invited to do a writing workshop with folks at the Edmonton Learning Centre as part of their Celebrating Learning week of activities. Sharron and Alice handed out sheets of paper with "I know I am having a good learning day when..." at the top, and encouraged students to jot down their thoughts.

More Writing Examples

(I know I am having a good learning day when) I am at the learning centre. At the beginning I could write only a couple of sentences. I can now write more than a couple of sentences. I can write now almost a whole page. I use to keep my thoughts in my head and couldn't write on paper, but I enjoy writing my thoughts on paper and reading it now. It helps me to get rid of some of my negative feelings that I have from the past. It encourages me to have more of a positive life and I enjoy life much more.

Pauline Fraser
Edmonton



I always have a good day when I am writing. I like it to be quiet so I can get all my thoughts down on paper. I feel so refreshed and relaxed afterwards it is like my day is just beginning all over again. I feel like I loose weight when I do lots of writing. I feel so much better about myself.

Lillian Gallant
Edmonton



(I know I'm having a good learning day when...)
I can do good with people when I can Learn more good things.
I have Learn to ask question.
I have meet new People.
everyone come in with a smile.
it is nice and sunny outside.

Marilyn Dymchuk
Edmonton



It's a good learning day, when I have contributed and I'm exhausted by my ability to conquer a hard day.

Ivan Nikiforuk
Edmonton



(I know I'm having a good learning day when) I get to school on time. and without mishap and I get to class on time and find my assignments from the day before have gone well. I know I'm have a good creative writing day when I edit my work ad find I have not left half a sentance out and don't have to rewrite it agan and agan.

I know it a good learning day when my math assignments do not have errors due to working to fast.

I know I've had a good learning day when I feel good when I leave.

Cindy Lingrell
Edmonton



(I know I'm having a good learning day) when I'm not bugged by students or teachers, or when I feel good that morning, or when I get in to my learning state of mind. Nothing can stop me from it. Once I get going on what ever I'm working on I Just keep on working on it until I'm finished.

Wanda Colgan
Edmonton

Reflections

When our group listed the things that made our days good ones or bad ones, it was easy to see some of the factors that contributed to the tone (and possible direction) of our days. Sharron really needs her rest, Alice needs to feel prepared ahead of time for meals and activities, Laurie likes to have people around her, and I need to make sure I take time for myself each day. We learned a lot about ourselves and each other through this simple exercise, and



especially that it's rarely a bad day, ALL day. There are usually good things that happen in the day as well.

An instructor looking at what makes a good learning day for students might notice things like a student needing to complete work before going home, needing quiet space, or needing to feel a part of the group. Simple exercises such as this often have a great deal of helpful information written between the lines.

History

I have been involved in the literacy field for 16 years as a tutor, program coordinator, instructor, researcher and administrator. It was while I was coordinating and instructing the Chapters Program (1994 -1997), that I began to truly value the use of writing as a means of self-development as well as a literacy skill. Chapters was a literacy/life skills program designed by and for women receiving government assistance. The women in the program came to love writing, what they learned through writing and how putting words on paper made them feel. It was through their encouragement that the idea for *Writing Out Loud* came about.



Next Firaday

Linda Dawn Pettigrew - Toronto, Ontario

I never seem to have enough time lately. Each year goes whipping past faster than the previous one. I thought it would be great to have an extra day every week, so I've created one and called it Firaday (sort of like the old TV show, Queen For A Day). I put Firaday between Friday and Saturday so we can get rested up and caught up, and be in good shape to enjoy the weekend with our friends and families. We tried this writing activity and loved it. We can write about "next" Firaday when we feel rushed for time.

Exercise Steps

1. Brainstorm about what to call your extra day, and when in the week you would put it.
2. As an example, ask learners: "Describe what you will do next *Firaday*."
3. Learners can take turns sharing their writing if they care to. After each person reads their piece, discuss what they liked best and what they found most interesting about each others' writing.

Writing Examples

We'll let's see I work a lot so I think I would probably just sleep the day away. I would take a few minutes to return phone calls and answer my mail that keeps building up. I would go and see my two children on Firaday because they wouldn't be doing anything on this special day. If we had an extra day in the week, how much time would be in this wonderful day?

I just don't have enough time for myself anymore so I think I would like to have an extra day. When I get up from my wonderful sleep I would have a nice hot bubble bath with candles burning on the side of the tub. I would get some nice smelling bubbles for this time for myself. I would tell everyone I didn't want to be disturbed so leave me alone. It is nice to dream about having this extra day. Maybe when the world was made God should have said let there be eight days instead of seven.

we can make time for ourselves if we have to. I've learned to do it so if I can anyone can.

*Shirley
Toronto*



First, I'll go do the stuff I do on Saturday - file, clean, do laundry, and catch up on phone calls and e-mails. Next, I'll have a nice lunch out with a friend, maybe at Loblaws Supercentre. Then I'll pick up a few things, do my errands, and go home.

Finally, I'll get into bed with a good book, reading, sleeping, and snacking on the treats I bought. Before I know it Saturday will arrive. Only now, I'll have Saturdays free for writing letters and stories and for planning the following week's lessons. Firaday, what a wonderful idea!

*Linda Dawn
Toronto*

Adaptations

You can call your extra day whatever you like – for example, My Special Day – and you can put it at any time you want. Students can write about why they chose a particular name, or why they chose its location in the week. I chose Firaday because I like the image and scent of fir – it seems fresh... a new day, a fresh start, or refreshing, the pause that refreshes, Firaday.

Reflections

We really had fun and enjoyed writing about this day, as did my friends and acquaintances who tried this exercise. This is an exercise where you can let your imagination run wild. We found that our Firaday writing really cheered us up and motivated us to find time for ourselves.

History

Three literacy/learner volunteers met with me once a week from November 2000 to May 2001, specifically to participate in the Writing Out Loud Training Project. They tried out new activities, writing mostly at Literacy for East Toronto (L.E.T.), although occasionally, in coffee shops, malls, libraries, and parks. If you are interested in Writing Out Loud groups or workshops in the Toronto area, please contact Linda Dawn at linda.pettigrew3@sympatico.ca.

Now That's Funny

Margaret O'Shea-Bonner - Waterloo, Ontario

Sharing funny stories is always good. It gives us an opportunity to get away from the regular format or curriculum, get to know each other a little better and to have a little fun while still developing our literacy skills. As we share funny stories, we open a door to the lighter side of our lives and ourselves. We let the sunshine in, and surely we all need a little more sunshine.

Exercise Steps

1. Listen for funny stories that students may share in conversation. Tell them what good stories they are and encourage the students to write them down. Ask them if you can share their stories with the class and use the stories as examples of fun exercises. They'll be so chuffed at the fact that they helped come up with a neat idea that they'll be eager to write another one (as Shirley did!).
2. Try this writing prompt with the students: "Tell us about a funny thing that happened to you. It can be real or you can make it up."
3. Share your writing with one another.

Writing Examples

*Hi. This is my story,
about my little red wagon.
one summer day my brother and I asked our parents
can we go outside and play with our little red wagon.
mom said don't go far we said ok, my brother and I went up
to the top of the hill, Floyd would you like to go down the hill
fast,
no lets go down together, we went down the hill it went so fast
it
went over the car and we both fell out of the wagon.
Floyd said are you ok I said yes and I was scared out of my pants,
and I said are you ok Floyd, oh no my wagon is broken,
we went home with our little red wagon.*

dad said what happen I said we went up to the top of the hill and went down it and went over the car and it broke,
mom said you guys could get hurt really bad,
mom said if you ever take the wagon up the hill you will not have the wagon again,
and my dad he will fix it, I said to Floyd
we had fun I said would you do it again yes,
THAT'S MY STORY

Shirley P.
Waterloo



Cat Story #1 (Sept. 23/98)

Did you know that my neighbour dances with his cat in the middle of the night? Yes! His cat! He fills his living room with candles, puts on an Elvis album, and you should see that guy swing. I feel sorry for the poor cat. It lets a shriek out every now and then - a piercing cry for help. I know that if it could talk it would beg me to call the SPCA. You may wonder how I know this. Well, I got up to go to the bathroom one night and heard the music. Ever since then I tiptoe nightly to his window. I've considered selling tickets to this show, but if he found out he might sue me. He's a lawyer, you know. I won't tell you his name, but his initials are K.B.

Cat Story #2 (October 7/98)

Hi there. My name is Ken. I'm a lawyer here in town, and I live with my family on 87th Street, next door to a family who speak with a funny accent. Perhaps it has something to do with having a legal mind, but sometimes I wonder if these people are even Canadian. Should I check with Immigration to see if they're legal? Well the husband probably is, but the wife - now she's a different Kettle of fish. She talks a mile a minute, and there's not much point in saying "pardon" because she'll simply respond

with twice the speed. And you should see the car she drives!
Must have found it in the backwoods somewhere. It looks like a
giant wart on the otherwise perfect street. But that's not the
real problem. The real problem is that this woman gives me the
creeps. We have a sweet little baby who likes to wake up in the
middle of the night, and, in order to tire her out and get her
back to sleep, I have to dance her around the living room. I
don't mind that too much. She looks really cute in her "cat"
sleeper. But what is bizarre is that my neighbour sneaks up to my
window IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT and stares in my
window. Has she never heard of the privacy act? If she continues
to do this, I'm going to sue her.

Margaret O'Shea-Bonner
Waterloo

Adaptations

This kind of exercise can be modified to suit a variety of student levels. You can use it as a language experience activity where the student dictates the story and someone records it, word for word. You can give the students the freedom to write without worrying about spelling or grammar... just get the story down. Or you could use it to develop editing skills. Polish it. Who knows, maybe even publish it. Shirley and I have decided to start a collection of her short stories. Eventually we will do some editing, but for now we're enjoying the flow of funny memories she's coming up with. This will be a beautiful gift for her to share with her son. (She is so proud of the fact that her stories are being considered for inclusion in *More Writing Out Loud*!!) The "Cat Story" can also be adapted in a variety of ways. (I wrote this during my wonderful time working with the Write to Learn gang in Alberta.) Cat #1 was written from one person's perspective, Cat #2 from another's. This is a great exercise in helping us think about where others are coming from. It can also be a great starter for classroom discussion.

Reflections

Many of us carry a lot of heavy baggage around with us – concerns about family, about health, about how we are going to pay the bills. Humour is a wonderful tonic to help us deal with life's stresses, even temporarily. The medical profession is very much aware of this and is starting to incorporate humour into the healing process. Maybe we should get some of these exercises into medical schools across Canada! Sharing our funny stories not

only lifts our spirits but also allows us to share a little about ourselves. It allows us to open up and to let go of the roles we assume every day (student/tutor). It's liberating!

History

Our 1-1 tutoring program operates out of an old house in downtown Kitchener. This location is perfect because it is walking distance from a lot of other services that our students need. We can have 60-100 matches going at any one time, working on such diverse goals as preparing to take the written driving test, practicing filling out application forms, and learning how to read books to children.

Kitchener- Waterloo and Cambridge are located in the beautiful rolling countryside on the banks of the Grand River. German Mennonite families settled here originally, and their influence is still evident. We have the biggest Oktoberfest outside of Munich, Germany (Ein Prosit!). The local Mennonite families farm the land around the tri-cities and still live as they did hundreds of years ago – horses and buggies and all. They're a very gentle people who do a lot of good work to help others, especially through the Mennonite Relief Fund, which raises funds through the sale of the most magnificent quilts I have ever seen!

If you would like to know more about the Literacy Group or about The Waterloo Region, please e-mail us at: read1@golden.net.

Grab Bag

Laurie Kehler - Edmonton, Alberta

This is one of our favourite exercises, one that we bring to most of our workshops. This exercise allows the class to work on visual description as well as creative thinking. The brain is allowed to stretch and create its own meaning. It is great for kinesthetic learners, as they get to touch and hold the subject of their writing piece. While it isn't a get-up-and-move-around exercise, it ends up feeling that way. The best part of this exercise, though, is that it is really fun for people of all ages!

Exercise Steps

1. Fill a bag with various small everyday items like thread, seeds, ornaments, and ribbon. All objects work, but try to get a variety of things.
2. Have each student put a hand in the bag and pull out an item. Half of the fun is seeing what everyone else got!
3. Have everyone write a description of the object they hold. Ask them to describe their item as if they were talking to a blind person.
4. Once everyone has described their treasure, ask the question, "How are you like or not like this object?" Encourage the group to be creative and to help one another.
5. Invite the students to read their descriptions to the group.

Writing Samples

I have a package of sharp, slender, silver needles and several colors of thread. There is grey, light blue, navy, white, brown, pink, red and black. There are nine needles and two white buttons. The compact plastic container they are in would be a great emergency gift for someone who is traveling. You can use it to mend almost anything, from a torn pair of pants to a broken bra strap.

The needles remind me of all the surgeries I've had in past years. Being in the hospital and given needles for pain. The thread

reminds me of all the stitches I've had in my lifetime. Stitches I've had with all of my surgeries, plus a few accidents where I've cut myself and needed stitches to heal the wound.

Sharron (age 57)
Camrose



Sowing seeds of kindness. These seeds grow every year and make a wonderful show for edging. They bloom from July until fall and look beautiful all the time. Reminds me of my big family everyone gets along so well.

Vi (age 89)
Camrose



I have 3 candles they are pink, blue and white. They remind me of my birthday. My birthday is January 29, 1991. I like birthdays especially the presents, and the cake. Candles are like me because they light up when my birthday comes.

Leanne (age 11)
Camrose



I have a box of candles that are bright pink. The box says there are 36 candles in the box. The pink candles show through a tulip shaped opening on the front of the box. There are balloon decorations on the box. The candles are short about 3" in length. They are made by the cakemate company, and are dripless.

I see this box of candles and it reminds me of my birthday that is on Friday July 13th. The box will need a few more candles, if it



is to be used for my birthday cake. Looking at the box of candles reminds me that I will soon be older and maybe a wee bit wiser.

Alice (age 47)

Camrose



I am holding a white ceramic cow with sparkles on and a pink ribbon. Cows are my favorite animal. They kept things going on the farm when the crops were rotten. We always had about 10 to 12 of them. Their cream always bought the groceries. Their milk feed the younger kids, calves, pigs, and kept the money coming in when there was nothing else coming in.

I guess I was like that cow. When there was no money coming into the marriage I always would take care of other children, find ways to cut corner to survive, for the kid to survive when the X was on the booze. So in a way, I'm like that cow. I knew about survival.

Cindy (30's)

Edmonton



I have a small compact pack of pink soft Kleenex facial tissue. These are not just any Kleenex they are extra strong, soft, and absorbant. There are 10 two ply Kleenex, enough for a good cry and one left over to blow the nose.

These Kleenex resemble me in that they come in a compact package much like my 5'2 frame and there is lots of them and there is lots of me. Pink signifies female and so that is what I am. I like to think of myself as strong, able to absorb a lot of what life hands out, but I am able to remain soft and warm



instead of cold and bitter. I like this packet of Kleenex because it means comfort, caring, warmth and compassion.

*Barb (age 38)
Camrose*

Adaptations

This exercise is easy to adapt to any theme or topic. Simply change the items in the bag. For a literacy and health conference, two of our writing ambassadors filled the bag with objects like cotton balls, pill bottles, and prescription pads. Christmas, weather, or child care – objects relating to a theme are quite easy to find. Also, you can try using one mystery object inside the bag for everyone to feel and describe.

Reflections

Everyone seems to really enjoy this exercise. The whole class will groan when asked to compare their objects to themselves, and some people need a little encouragement to shift their brain from description to creativity. However, everyone will be quite surprised at the creative and meaningful results. We all get to know a little more about each other.

History

I started working in literacy as a tutor with Frontier College: Students for Literacy at the University of Alberta. After volunteering for three years, I decided that I would enjoy literacy as a career. I began working with the Write To Learn Project in 1999, helping with workshops and the training of our new Writing Out Loud Instructors. In this time I've had the privilege of writing with people from Central Alberta, Atlanta, North Carolina, Texas, Trinidad, and other places around Canada and the U.S. You can contact me at laurie_kehler@eLit.ca.

By Another Name

Bonnie Ireland - Stettler, Alberta

Our English as a Second Language class had interesting discussions about cultural assimilation when we touched on whether immigrants should alter their names to become more Canadian. There were also some good grammar points brought up with this exercise.

Exercise Steps

1. Talk about naming a baby. How do parents choose a name? How did the students choose the name(s) of their children if they have any. How did the students' parents choose their names? Do they feel differently about their children's names or their own names now than they did in the past? Talk about popular names. What names were popular in the past that aren't popular now? Find a list of the most popular baby names this year. Ask your students to think about what they might choose as a name if they had a new baby.
2. Ask this question: "If you were going to have a baby, what name would you choose?"

Writing Examples

I'm a father of a 25 year old son. If I had a baby, I would give my new baby the name 'don't want'. At this time, I really don't want a new baby. I'm too old and I don't want to change my lifestyle. Of course, I love children very much. When my son was five years old, he asked me, "Daddy, please buy me a baby." It was 20 years ago, and I couldn't keep my promise.

*Dale Kang
Stettler*



*If I were going to have a baby boy, I would name him "Shivam".
In the Hindu religion, Shiv means, "God who created this world."
I have a strong belief in Shiv. That is why I would chose this name
for a future baby.*

*Vijay Kumar
Stettler*

Adaptations

As a variation, you could ask the students to think about a name that they might choose for themselves if they were to change their name.

Example: "If you could name yourself, what name would you choose? Why?"

Reflections

This exercise allows students to share their cultural heritage and personal history. It also allows them to tell about their hopes and values as reflected in their choice of a child's name. If you use the variation where students choose a name for themselves, it allows them to share their view about how they think others see them.

History

Stettler Read and Write is a volunteer tutor literacy program. The program averages about 15 students at any time, half of whom are English as a Second Language (ESL). Some of the ESL students are recent immigrants, but many have been in Canada for ten or more years. In 2000, we started an English as a Second Language class in partnership with the Community Adult Learning Council. Most of the students were fairly proficient in spoken English but wanted to improve their understanding of English and work on reading and writing skills. The class read and discussed high-interest articles, things that were relevant to them. We used *Writing Out Loud* exercises to extend the discussion and encourage writing.

If the Shoe Fits

Deborah Morgan - Camrose, Alberta

This writing idea was suggested to me by Dale Jacobs from Windsor, Ontario, who likes to use this exercise as a warm up activity in his university level writing courses. Interestingly, in trying out the exercise “Favourite Things” from *Writing Out Loud* with many different groups, I found that there were always a number of people who wrote about their shoes. I have now tried “If the Shoe Fits” with a variety of writers and have discovered we can learn a lot about each other through our shoes!

Exercise Steps

1. Ask students to think about the shoes they have in their closets (or piled in the back hallway). Use your own closet as an example. Most of us have favourite shoes, ones that don't fit but that we don't want to part with and ones that remind us of another time or another life. Have the students answer this question in writing:

“Describe the pairs of shoes you have in your closet.”

2. Share your writing with one another.

Writing Examples

Just for fun, I asked the Writing Out Loud Instructors to write about the shoes in their closets.

Here I sit in -40C weather with the wind howling through the window cracks, in my sandals. I go everywhere in them. The car is warming and I am ready to don wicked weather gear. My feet are protected with heavy wool socks because I wear sandals. I am an addicted sandal wearer. Rain or shine, snow and wind, I wear my sandals. Only my socks change. I have fall socks, spring socks, and, today, wicked winter weather socks – all because I wear sandals. This obsession has caught me off guard on occasion. Yesterday was a flurry of have-to-be-heres and many-clothing-changes according to the occasion. I had just zipped the car into a parking space through the haze of crystallizing exhaust, and was

clambering out with my big winter jacket on, rushing to an appointment and clad in business attire, when I felt a draft on my toes. There they were, frozen in pantyhose and sticking out the front of my sandals... I spent the interview covering one foot with the other and feeling very self conscious. I also hoped that the car would start and I wouldn't have to walk anywhere!

Brenda
Yorkton



Well this writing topic is timely since shoes have been on my mind a lot this week. Early Monday morning and I mean early, I wrote a letter to an old friend on his flight to Colombia for the first time with two of his four grown daughters. In it I mentioned my daughter's and my matching platforms, those high seventies sandals we wore to keep our feet raised off the Bogota streets when we lived there. I was wishing we still had them too, being they're in vogue again, even though I couldn't wear them now due to my orthopedic requirements...

Sitting on the table in front of me, despite it superstitiously being bad luck to put your shoes on the table, are the brand new pair of size 9 1/2 triple A soft black deerskin PW Minor runners with their orthodic arch supports. The style name is Katy and I actually like the way they look. I've come a long way since buying the first pair of orthopedics nearly two years ago. They're not just sitting on the table to remind me to winterize them with all-protector but because I have always sat my new shoes up to admire while I'm laying in bed. New leather shoes smell so good and these are actually, buttery.

Oh yes, the receipt's here too, waiting for filing tomorrow. \$337.55 without tax, because my doctor wrote me a prescription. I'm going to wear them out for dinner tomorrow with my good friend Ruth,

unless it's messy. I'm keeping them for good until spring and wearing the others for now.

I'd been in to get fitted and have them ordered a couple of weeks ago. It was very exciting to get the call yesterday on Valentine's Day that they were in and could try them on last night. It is such a pleasure to be fitted for shoes by a person who knows how to fit shoes. It reminds me of when I was a little girl and my dad would take me to Brantford to pick my new glasses once a year. I think he felt sorry for me with the thick bottle lens and ugly frames that were available then, so afterward he'd take me to get new shoes. I'd get fitted on those old xray machines and would choose red or black patent with ankle straps, a real treat as my mother wanted us to wear brown, serviceable Oxfords all the time to look after our feet. Shoes and more shoes, the memories they evoke.

Linda Dawn
Toronto



Shoes! What a funny topic! I was just thinking about my shoes. I just got my feet wet because I wore my favourite mock Birkenstocks on a walk downtown through the meltingest weather we have had all winter.

I like to have my feet nice and cool. At home I am barefoot most of the time - unless it is really cold weather or we are at the cottage. In that case I love to have my woolly socks on my feet and my worn out old moccasins to scuff from one room to the next.

Beside my mock Birks, I like the kind of sandals that strap securely around my ankles and feet and are nice and spongy underneath. I love the feeling of setting out for a good long walk, springing along on the warm dry sidewalks before and after the snowy weather.

My favourite shoes of all time represent another era of my life - back in Toronto in 1984. That year I became pregnant with my first daughter Caitlin. I had the meanest, blackest, sexiest pair of boots. They were a little above ankle height, and closed at the back with a series of metal snaps. I thought I looked really tough in them. Unfortunately, the usual swelling of feet during pregnancy caused my boots to split away from the soles. I guess I outgrew them - in more ways than one.

Diane
Regina



Shoes make me think of my feet. I like my feet, I have cute feet. But every guy who has ever seen my feet (I wear bare feet alot) has giggled at them. I have perfectly formed toes, straight and even, but they are little. My toes are closer to chubby little nubs than long and elegant toes. My toes were made for "This little piggy went to market..." So when I buy sandals (my favorite footwear) I am very careful to make sure that my toes look good in them.

There are tricks to making toes look longer. The placement of the bottom strap is key. If the strap covers the place where you toes meet your feet, it gives the illusion that your joints are higher. There are other factors that make toes look nicer, like the shape of the shoe under the toe, and the angle the foot is to the ground (if you are wearing heels).

My favorite sandals are a sexy pair of heels. They are black with two tiny straps holding them onto my feet. The straps are covered in pretty, reflective beads. The bottom strap is placed for optimal toe maximization. The angle of the shoe makes my feet look long and slender (which they are not). And all you see are

two shimmery stripes, no bigger than ribbons. They are my favorite shoes.

Laurie
Camrose



I have a variety of shoes in my closet, but I have to tell you my favourite ones are the suede ones. I have navy blue suede sandals great for summer walking. They are the lightest, most comfortable sandals I have ever worn.

I also have a pair of black suede oxfords that I often wear to work. Of course, I have to be extra careful of the salt and slush in the wintertime but they are holding up well.

My all-time favourite pair are my blue suede dancing shoes. They have been the best shoes for dancing and have served me well at country and swing dances. Alas, they are wearing out and I cannot find another pair like them!

I guess we all have pairs of shoes that we never wear (and yet cannot seem to throw out) and pairs of shoes that we love and wear to death because we can't replace them.

Sue
Fairview

Adaptations

I have taken this idea and written with students about other “collections” we have — like the food we have in our cupboards, what we have in our purses (that was really interesting!) and what magazines we have in our house. Everyone came up with an idea. Then we put the idea on a piece of paper and put them all in a hat. We took turns pulling ideas out of the hat. I’ve also discovered that most people, especially as adults, collect something. One student I know finds the funniest frogs at garage sales, my mom collects teddy bears that are like people, another student has butterflies all over her house and I have a love of vintage flamingos! We can also learn a lot about one

another (and the fun of collecting) through writing about the objects around us that bring us joy.

Reflections

As an instructor, I find that the students really enjoy writing about things they have in common. Through writing about everyday, simple and familiar things, they learn something new about each other at the same time that they learn how similar their interests are. On one occasion, a student talked about her love of tea cups and another student replied, “Oh, I’d love to show you the ones my grandmother left to me.” Another chimed in about her favourite tea pot and suddenly we were planning a tea party together!

What we have around us — shoes, magazines, books and other collections — can certainly tell a lot about a person.

History

I have been involved in the literacy field for 16 years as a tutor, program coordinator, instructor, researcher and administrator. It was while I was coordinating and instructing the Chapters Program (1994 -1997), that I began to truly value the use of writing as a means of self-development as well as a literacy skill. Chapters was a literacy/life skills program designed by and for women receiving government assistance. The women in the program came to love writing, what they learned through writing and how putting words on paper made them feel. It was through their encouragement that the idea for *Writing Out Loud* came about.



Chapter Seven

Encouraging All Writers

Does the Writing Out Loud approach to writing work for everyone? Not necessarily, but it is worth a try. I have seen amazing writing come from children in Grade 6, seniors, ESL students and men in prison settings. It is too easy to assume that certain students wouldn't like "this kind of writing." I was really reminded about how incorrect our assumptions can be when I sat in the audience of a workshop that Sharron, Alice and Barb gave a couple of years ago at the Alberta Provincial Literacy Conference.

Sharron lead a freewriting exercise with a group of 30 people. When she asked for volunteers to read what they had written, one of the first to raise his hand was a young, long-haired Native man who stood up and read an honest and moving piece about being at the Conference because he wanted to make changes in his life so that he wouldn't "just be a stereotype" anymore.

I was sitting behind this young man, and for the first half-hour of the session, he had looked out the window watching the airplanes take off from the nearby Calgary airport runway. I didn't think he was "present" with the group, but he was the first to read his writing. I had made an incorrect assumption that as a man, he probably wasn't interested in the writing we were doing.

Many people assume that male students aren't as willing to put their thoughts on paper as female students are. There may be some truth to this, but that doesn't mean that we should assume that men don't like writing.



From: Janet, British Columbia

Men are a part of my classroom. And yes they also share those fears of "what to write" and "how to write" However, women catch onto the idea of freewriting quicker then men do. Men tend to write from their head, while women write from their heart. It's hard to get the men to

write about their feelings — it's uncomfortable for them. I find that when we share writing, men listen to men and women listen to women. They can relate to it and understand it; therefore listening is easier.

Janet has observed that men write from their heads, while women write from their hearts. This is a gender reality that we need to be sensitive to when we're working with men in a writing group. For generations, men have been raised to be strong, to hide their emotions, to never let anyone see them cry. It only makes sense that men will have a more "left brain" approach to writing. My experience has been that men, just like women, come to writing with a whole mixture of beliefs and values that influence their overall learning. Even though it might take longer to develop the trust required to create the safety necessary for more personal writing in a group that has both male and female writers, I agree with Bonnie Ireland from Stettler when she says, "Men and women have the same need to express themselves authentically, and can find the writing exercises equally rewarding."



From: Susan, Alberta

I work with men in the writing group and have noticed a bit of a tougher outer shell that I need to break through. Of course not all men are the same, but there seems to be a bit more defensiveness about their writing. I think I have noticed that it is harder for the men that I work with to feel okay about including emotional aspects in their writing. I did an activity which combined a nature hike with the five senses. I was so impressed with everyone's writing. The men in my group need a bit more encouragement to "let loose" and include more than descriptive components in their writing. After having said all that, I am now thinking of one man in particular, who uses his writing as therapy to come to terms with his death, his loneliness, and his illness (he has AIDS and Hepatitis C). He is a high-level writer and is not fearful about his writing AT ALL. So perhaps everyone's situation is slightly different.



From: Colleen, British Columbia

Over the past few years I have had a number of men in my classes who opened up and wrote from the heart. It seemed each semester I had one who was really exciting to work with. Usually he was someone who had had a lot of life's knocks and was now in recovery mode. He'd already begun to do some work on himself and my class just gave him another avenue to express what was happening. I have kept a few sample pieces of writing from these men that touch my

heart and still bring tears to my eyes when I read them.

After the three years we spent with the Write to Learn Project promoting writing in literacy programming across Canada, we were excited to learn about writing groups that developed on their own in a wide variety of settings. We are aware of women-only groups for women recovering from abusive relationships; groups for single parents (moms and dads) who write about the difficulties and joys of parenting; seniors who come together to write as a social activity while they explore and document life histories; and a street kids writing program that helps teenagers learn valuable communication skills as they “hang out” and write together.

Most of these groups (and others we’ve learned about) have a focus or common ground of interest to act as a starting point for the writers to connect with one another. However, in any writing group — male, female or mixed — there will be individuals with special needs, different cultural backgrounds and varying levels of learning readiness. There will always be students who find writing from the heart difficult, and some for whom personal writing will never be comfortable.

As writing facilitators or instructors, we have a responsibility to be sensitive to the needs and realities of all students. We need to reflect on our own biases and assumptions about writing and the writers we work with. Everyone deserves a chance to try writing from the heart. Our role is to continue to provide opportunities and encouragement to those willing to take the risk to put words on paper, whether those words are heartfelt, easily written, painfully scribbled or logic-driven.



Real Love

Deborah Morgan - Camrose, Alberta

I overheard my son and his friends (age 17) talking about their high school English class and how they thought the writing they had to do was “really lame.” When we talked about it, they said they wished they could write about things that mattered to them (a basic premise in adult education that doesn’t necessarily fit into the Grade 11 curriculum!). Out of curiosity, I asked the boys if they would do some writing with me.

Exercise Steps

1. With a group of teenagers, it’s always helpful to do some brainstorming about events in the community or at school. (We started our conversation with the news about a friend who got drunk at a recent dance. As a punishment, he had to attend a counseling session with an addictions counselor! We had a great discussion as to whether or not this was fair or effective punishment.)
2. Decide on a topic that has relevance for everyone. It just happened that all three of the boys (who have known each other for many years) were seeing girls that they were quite smitten with. When I asked them if they would be willing to write about being in love, they quite surprised me by saying yes. So I asked them:

“How do you imagine being in love is different when you’re a teenager than when you’re older?”

3. Write for 5 to 10 minutes and share your writing with one another (with some pizza if possible!)

Writing Examples

I think what most people want is to NOT have it change. They wanna still have the high school romance feeling when they see each other. They would wanna keep the love feeling fresh and special. Dating is dating I think. That is always going to be the same. You still want to impress the lady, want to look your best, if your in school or your 28, dating will be similar. but love? Define love... or does the definition change when we get older. Maybe love becomes more to plan around when your older. Think about it. Love when your older means: wedding, sex, house, kids,

dog, money handling. I'm not saying that's all love is at all but compare that to high school love: dances, movies, sex, and hopes for the future. There is a lot less to worry about in high school so that's probably why these faster moving relationships occur. It's just a big thrill ride in high school when you're flying. I'm scared to death that we'll be too caught up with growing up and planning the rest of our lives to receive the same thrill when we get older.

Gosh Martin
Camrose



I think love as a teen is no different than love as an adult or senior. I don't think love changes, but it's the behavior of the individuals involved that shifts. As a teen I find love exciting. It is my first, and I am always learning new and interesting things about the one I love, due to the incredible comfort and openness I get when I am with her. When you are older and married, love is different only in the way that you have already learned the quirks of your loved one, and now you are experiencing them. However, in the situation of an adult who is going for a second or third try at love, I think it would be just as exciting as a first love because you are once again sharing and learning with your partner and developing higher levels of intimacy and open conversation. You then shift into experiencing each other, and your love grows.

Jared McKenzie
Camrose



This is often a personal debate for me. It's hard to say what something will be like until you experience it. It's possible that right now I have no concept of what love is, and that later I will look back at myself and laugh. However, I'd hate to think that these strong feelings I have are immature and going nowhere. So instead, I like to think of it as an evolution of sorts, steps to

falling forever in love. When I say, "I love you" and when my girl says "I love you" back, we are really saying to each other, "I feel stronger about you than anything else, and I hope that our feelings can evolve and mature together". In this mentality love is like a journey, a road that you and your partner navigate together, starting from a point and moving on as you age.

Stephen Kambeitz

Camrose

Adaptations

Even though love is a universal topic that most people can write something about, many people have experienced hurt and disappointment in their love relationships. This is a topic that should be approached gently, with sensitivity and understanding that love is not always about hope and "feeling good."

Josh and his friends were comfortable with writing about love. They in fact suggested it. If there had been more time, I might have taken the writing further by asking the boys to write about the feelings they experienced when they liked a girl who didn't return their affection, or what their first kiss was like.

Reflections

I was quite honored that Steve and Jared and Josh trusted me enough to share their very real and honest thoughts about love. When I told them that most writing instructors have a difficult time getting men to write about their feelings, their response was that "you have to feel comfortable" and that it's important to be able to write about ANY feelings, not just good ones. Jared said: "When you get a group of teenage guys in a classroom, let them write about what really pisses them off. Bad drivers or outdated laws or dumb rules. They'll have lots to say if you don't tell them what they have to say."

History

I have been involved in the literacy field in Alberta for 16 years, working with adults wishing to improve their literacy skills. Many of the adults I have worked with were once kids who dropped out of high school. It financially and emotionally tough to make it through high school. More and more we are seeing much needed alternate delivery programs that help kids complete their high school requirements at their own pace and in their own time. My experience working directly with young adults is limited, but I know that the time I have spent encouraging writing with teenagers has been some of the hardest but most rewarding work I've done.

Authority List

Dale Jacobs - Windsor, Ontario

This is a writing activity that I have used with different levels of university writing classes. The Authority List always reminds me that students have a lot of knowledge that I don't have and that I can learn from them as they learn from me. It helps to remind me that education should be a horizontal dialogue between all members of the class.

Exercise Steps

1. The Authority List is a very simple exercise in which you ask the class to take a few minutes to make a list of the things that they are authorities on – basically what they know a lot about.
2. I usually go around the room and have each person read a couple of items on his or her list (allowing for people to pass if they want).
3. Then I ask each person to choose one item on the list for a 10-minute freewrite.

Writing Examples

I am an authority on my body. It would seem to me that this is an obvious fact, and yet my doctor persistently tells me otherwise. She knows where my pain is, why it is there, and how to get rid of it. She is not interested in any feedback on this - she will not validate my authority, but insists on my validation of hers. To make matters worse, she has an entire institution and societal belief system backing up her authority, while mine continues to be ignored. My body only communicates with myself - no one else can feel its pain, or savour its joy. Despite my doctor's extensive efforts, this is a power that can never be taken away.

*Deborah Templer
Windsor*



I am an authority on:

Mushy foods

Hot mushy breakfast cereals

Hot mushy non-breakfast foods that also can only be served in a bowl and eaten with a spoon.

Examples of these mushy foods upon which I am an authority include oatmeal and/or porridge, cream of wheat, grits, red river cereal, hunter's stew, cornmeal, mushy peas, bread pudding, plum pudding, fig pudding, oat bran, wheatlets and all varieties of soup.

Do people appreciate my knowledge of mushy foods? Well, no. My expertise is not "cool" or "hip" or even (really) socially well looked upon. I cannot share what I know with others. I can't even prepare a bowl for a friend - because my efforts are rarely appreciated. The food sits uneaten, cooling.

I think that people want their food in segments or slices or clearly delineated layers. Sometimes, people want chunky. At most, they might accept small fragments of food. But eats that are congealed, seemingly homogeneous... you know, mushy... well, these foods are not fashionable. Mush is what happens to food in our stomach, thus it is unacceptable as a state of predigested sustenance.

And I say this is wrong. But I say this quietly, and to myself, when no one else is around.

Jay Domage
Windsor



Things I am an authority on:

- myself, my family
- dancing and how to get others to as well
- crashing into street lights
- making coffee cake
- caesar salad
- sarcasm and other remarks
- B.S. (my high school teacher named me "Queen of B.S.")
- cats
- service work
- interesting answers to drunk proposals

Katie Campbell
Windsor



childhood illnesses

lung cancer

baking

Agatha Christie

moving household

painting a room

cooking prime rib

income tax

killing plants

I'm an authority on lung cancer. Of course, this expertise developed, like so many, out of necessity rather than desire. Last year my mom was diagnosed with extensive and terminal lung cancer. She wanted to stay at home for as long as possible and my dad and I had no idea what lay ahead. I decided to take control of the situation in the only way I could - I read everything I could get my hands on. Ultimately this expertise proved essential to helping my mom - in dealing with her doctors, the hospital

and understand the progress of the disease. It allowed me to ask questions when my mom couldn't and to explain things to the rest of my family that they needed to know.

*Jayne Coulter
Windsor*

Adaptations

The Authority List is an exercise that can be adapted for any kind of writing group/class. I have used it with first-year university writing classes and upper level writing classes. It also works well as an icebreaker activity.

Editor's Note

Making lists can be a very effective way of starting writing and getting ideas on paper. We can make lists about what makes us feel good, what we like to eat, what we remember from childhood, what we dream about, what we hope for. Some other fun ideas are listing your favourite lost items, the items you carry in your purse or wallet, the things you hide when you are expecting visitors, the people you would like to yell at, and your favourite childhood games. As you can see, the "list" is endless.

Reflections

As a result of Deborah Morgan's visit to our campus and class, the group decided that instead of just talking and theorizing about literacy, we should be engaging in literacy learning ourselves. We decided that we would devote the last 20 minutes of each class to working on writing exercises and sharing our writing with each other. Initially, we used exercises from *Writing Out Loud*, but then also branched into other exercises that I have used over the years with my writing classes, including the Authority List. After we started doing these exercises, literacy theory and practice began to come together for everyone as we experienced the way writing and reading can be used to explore and communicate our worlds.

History

The course I was teaching at the time of Deborah's visit was Literacy, Democracy, Education at the University of Windsor. There were nine students enrolled in the class, most of them upper-level English majors.

I was very pleased when Deborah asked if I would be a guest contributor to this publication. I have been teaching writing for nine years at the University level, at the University of Alberta, University of Nebraska (where I received a Ph.D. in Composition and Rhetoric), East Carolina University, and the University of Windsor.

Dr. Dale Jacobs
English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing
University of Windsor



Animal Crackers

Deanna Arelis & Colleen Hanscom - Kelowna, BC

This idea came from Glenda Turner, a Lifewriter for the past two years. It was probably inspired by the "I See, I Feel" exercise in the "Starting Out" chapter of *Writing Out Loud*. Glenda has written many affectionate pieces about her cat, and one day she showed up with a file of animal pictures she'd clipped from magazines to present as an exercise idea. We all had a hilarious time writing and listening to the pieces we wrote.

Exercise Steps

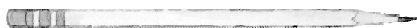
1. Create a file of pictures of animals with "character." Buy some animal crackers just for fun.
2. Hand out pictures with animal crackers as a snack for thought food.
3. Ask the participants to:

"Become the animal in the picture and write a story from a first person point of view."
4. Enjoy the laughter sharing this animal zaniness as you read your stories together.

Writing Examples

I'm feeling really nervous right now. I really, really, really want the part on the Grinch who Stole Christmas. They're gonna love me! I've got a pair antlers and a collar with Christmas bells all over it and a cool tattoo on my eye. They'll love me. Sniff. Sniff! What's that smell? It smells like a doggy biscuit! It IS a doggy biscuit! It is! It is a doggy biscuit! I got a doggy biscuit! Yum Yum YUM! It's mine, all mine! Yum Yum Yum! Right on! It's my turn for the audition. Nice leg, miss!

Colin Sherlow
Kelowna



As I peek out of my hideout from being disturbed from my silly games, I see my friend, my owner with this ridiculous look on her face. She grabbed her camera and took a picture of me. I'm mad and disturbed because she disrupted my game! Now I can't wait for tonight when she crawls into bed. She will feel how I felt when I jump on her head. Of course, she will yell and scream for she had been disturbed, but I will look at her and turn away with my tail in the air wishing I could say, "Now we are even so Kiss my butt!"

Norman Love
Penticton



Don't they know I'm a Great Dane, not a circus clown? That tutu is itching my backside. What did I do to deserve this? I hope they don't try to take me outside like this - the other dogs in the neighbourhood will all laugh at me. Oh, how they'll laugh - deep belly laughs while they're rolling around on the ground. This silly god hat on my head looks like the kind a cat would wear. Beads and more beads and ribbon around my middle make me look fat. Those ribbons on my legs look like I'm trying to be a cute little poodle. Well, I'm just going to stand here until someone takes it all off. There is no way I am doing anything or going anywhere like this.

Fundamental student at
OUC Learner Event
Kelowna, 2001

Adaptations

Any pictures for this kind of exercise would work. The key with this exercise seemed to be the humour aspect, so any set of magazine/calendar pictures or photos of characters that would allow for people to write with a sense of fun and imagination would work well.

Reflections

Everyone especially appreciated this exercise because it was participant-generated and directed. It brought out the playfulness of each writer. If we have another Lifewriting group, one of our goals would be to encourage more and more participant facilitation of exercises.

History

The Okanagan University College Learner's Event is held in the spring and is planned and organized each year by a different group of fundamental students attending the various campuses of the College. Approximately 100 students (and instructors) from the Adult Basic and Fundamental Education and Literacy Programs from Vernon, Salmon Arm, Penticton, Armstrong, and Kelowna attend the Event. In 1999, the Event was hosted by the women in the Kelowna Lifewriting Program. The focus of the gathering that year was writing. The women from the Write to Learn Project in Camrose were invited to Kelowna to help present writing workshops with the Lifewriters. Everyone who took part in the Event went away with a new (or renewed) appreciation of writing.

Armchair Travel

Linda Dawn Pettigrew - Toronto, Ontario

What do I like about armchair traveling? First, just getting away from the day-to-day and seeing places where I've never been, learning new things. Second, I find living in the city stifling sometimes. I long for fresh country air – the smells and sounds of nature. I feel rejuvenated watching travel videos and reading travel books. This is what I do often, to help me relax and sleep.

Armchair traveling is cheap and comfortable. Besides you don't have to pack – just get a video at the library. Try it. You just might like it!

Exercise Steps

1. Get both colour brochures describing an adventure from VIA rail and several coffee table picture books at the library.
2. Review key vocabulary such as place names.
3. Find the main destinations, following the route on the map on the back of the brochure.
4. Brainstorm what you might expect on the trip.
5. Read the description on the brochure aloud and have learners follow the text.
6. Get comfortable in chairs (popcorn optional) and watch the video.
7. Discuss and respond to any questions.
8. Write for approximately 20 minutes.
9. Share your writing with one another.

Writing Examples

Today I was looking at a videotape about a train trip to Alberta. It was a group of people on the train going from one part of Alberta to another part sightseeing. It was very interesting because there is lots of interesting places you can visit, or things you can learn about Alberta. I think it is fun to be on the train tripe exploring all those beautiful part of country. Traveling along the train you can see the rivers as it flow along the

streams, and the mountain cover in snow also fishes in the river and farm house along the way.

Angela
Toronto



I went on a trip in the train to Jasper for a second honeymoon. There was Linda and Angela on the train just going nowhere. I and my husband Fred decided a while ago to take this trip. But to my surprise there were Linda and Angela in the train as well. The four of us sat in a non smokers car where we could eat and drink if we wanted to. I've always wanted to go on a trip on a train far away. It amazes me of all the beautiful mountains and the clear water where you can go fishing.

I enjoyed staying at the Prince George Hotel for our first night. The train ride is so peaceful and calming that it just clears your mind and you forget all your problems. The tall mountains and clear water was so relaxing I didn't want to get back on the train for our next stop. I hope someday I could really go on a train trip to the Rockies just for a wonderful peaceful time.

Shirley
Toronto



Today we are armchair travellers, sitting here watching a video of a trip up the Skeena River. There are about 130 bridges on this trip.

This train starts in Jasper in the Alberta Rockies and follows the Fraser at first, a large salmon river. I didn't know there are 5 kinds of salmon - chinook, coho, red, pink and sockeye.

The scenery is exquisite: majestic mountains, lovely green forest, pristine lakes. You can see fish jumping, the water is so clear.



I have always loved train trips, finding them so relaxing. I could almost smell the clean, fresh air on this trip.

For me the scenery and food would be the best part. I love fresh mountain air. After you leave Prince Geo you go down to Smithers and then through this mystical valley - very remote, and over and through the coastal mountain range to Prince Rupert Harbour on the Pacific. I like meeting people on the train and playing games like Scrabble. I have never taken this trip but if I could, I would. The best part for me is imagining the air - I always feel best when I'm high - high up that is - Bogota, Quito, Denver - The Andes, The Rockies - I feel most comfortable at 10,000 feet which I've always found interesting.

*Linda Dawn
Toronto*

Adaptations

You can use this idea over and over with diverse groups of learners in a variety of programs. Most learners seem to enjoy “traveling,” given the opportunity. Learners become interested when presented with the idea of going on a “trip” together. I am an avid armchair traveler myself. You can visit anywhere. Libraries will get you videos and/or beautiful coffee table picture books. Along with a simple map, you can easily visit wonderful places all over the world – Niagara Falls, the Grand Canyon, Machu Picchu, the Pyramids.

Reflections

Armchair travel is a morale booster and a great way for learners to relax. It is a superb way to improve integrated literacy skills and broaden horizons. The world is your oyster!

History

Three literacy/learner volunteers met with me once a week from November 2000 to May 2001, specifically to participate in the Writing Out Loud Training Project. They tried out new activities, writing mostly at Literacy for East Toronto (L.E.T.), although occasionally, in coffee shops, malls, libraries, and parks. If you are interested in Writing Out Loud groups or workshops in the Toronto area, please contact Linda Dawn at linda.pettigrew3@sympatico.ca.

The Magic Wand

Brenda Sherring - Yorkton, Saskatchewan

As the Writing Circle members wrote more and dealt with issues of being an adult, we started to lament the magic of childhood. Keeping in mind that “dreams never die, just the dreamer,” we pondered the difference between childish and childlike. Children believe in magic; maybe we adults should, too.

Exercise Steps

1. Discuss how sometimes we take life so seriously that we put up negative blocks of reality without allowing ourselves the magic of dreams. Maybe if we believed in our dreams, they could come true because our whole beings would be focused on them! To facilitate the action of wishing and dreaming, we used a magic wand.
2. Ask your students to think about what they would change in their lives if they possessed a magic wand.
3. Share your writing with one another.

Writing Examples

The things that I could do if I had a magic wand, imagine the possibilities. First thing that I would do is fix my bathroom because the landlord still hasn't finished it yet (two weeks and counting) and then I would wave my magic wand and there would be a bike (need to exercise and lose weight, biking seems like a fun way to do it). Now the bike wouldn't have to be the most expensive bike in the world but since this is pretend it would be the best in the world! (not that I could ever afford the best in real life - but this is the magic of using your imagination). I would also use the magic wand to get rid of my grey hair permanently. Normally I wouldn't mind them but they are just going crazy like you wouldn't believe, pretty soon I am going to have that skunk thing going, the white streak through the black, not something I am looking forward to. I am only 25 and this is a very cruel thing to have happen, like the weight problem and poor vision weren't

bad enough, now I have to be cursed with the skunk syndrome.
Now I wish I could wave my wand and disappear.....just kidding!
I always have to remember that no matter how bad my life gets it
will always get better, eventually. RIGHT???!!??!!

Loretta
Kamsack



If I had a magic wand, I would take away all different kinds of
pains on all aspects of being a human, Physical, Emotional,
Spiritual, and Mental. We would all belong to the same
government that would put different laws into order about our
technologies and pollutions. I could probably get really intense
about this and go really deep. But I won't because it's a
conspiracy, and the government will erase my thoughts with their
thought control telepathic ray satellites, damn where did I put
that tin foil hat?

Kerrrie
Kamsack



If I had a magic wand... I would go crazy, just kidding. There
are so many things I would do. First off I would give everyone a
caring heart. I'm sure that every one has a caring heart just
think that they forgot how to use them, or they don't know how to
care. I would stop the violence that I see everyday, even , and
foremost, starting with our communities. I mean why are we so
quick to hurt or put each other down? I'm not saying I haven't
done this myself; you live in a community for so long, you
eventually pick up habits. I'm not blaming anyone; I just don't
like being so negative. I would help people that needed help, I
wouldn't give them money, because money doesn't solve everything,
in fact in some cases it might make the problems we face even
worse. The next thing that I would do is heal myself, I have a lot

of things in my life that I need to fix, I would mend old hurts, and have, make new beginnings, I don't need a wand to do that. It's good to pretend but let's face it this is life and there is no pretending. But if I were to pretend I would give myself a big house with all the luxuries possible, and give all my family a beautiful place to live.

Laverna
Kamsack



If I had a magic wand I would like to be a little girl again. It is quite sad when you grow up and have to face the problems of growing up to be an adult. When your a child life is carefree with no responsibilities and when you have a hurt you always have someone to care and love you to tell you everything will be alright and then you cry the pain goes away and you carry on being a child. This is what I miss as being a child. Now that I'm an adult there is so much responsibilities to life for example bills, house chores, other people and the negative things they say, how to choose the good from the bad, understanding the hurts in life through relationships. When your a child you don't have any of this input about growing up except to do house chores. Even that is minor when your a child not like cleaning a whole house by yourself every day. That would be my wish with the MAGIC WAND!!!!

Tricia
Kamsack



Hi! the magic wand. hope i did ok today i done the g e d today. the magic wand has to be thier. i need a geographic escape. there so much turmoil in my life right now. if only my children will listen to me. there's alot of distractions for them. if only they would try to understand. that this is not to be messed with. then they would be in termiol. this must be god's way of teaching.

them a lesson. hope they dont blame me for there temiol. thats one thing i can t handle right now. i can take my own blame , thats for sure.

Nellie
Kamsack

Adaptations

A magic wand or a magic penny is a wonderful symbol of possibility. You could also use a teapot or vase as a vessel to rub and then make three wishes. (My group was on-line, so I could have included a picture of a magic pot that they literally could have rubbed on the screen to prompt their imaginations.) You could ask questions like, “What three things would you change with your three wishes?” Or more specifically: “With your three wishes, you can change one thing in the past, one thing in the present, and one thing in the future. What changes would those be?” For a really positive exercise, ask the students to write about good wishes they might have for one another, their children or family.

Reflections

Students in the Writing Circle jumped at the opportunity to fantasize about being able to use magic. Most of us can probably get caught daydreaming about “what would happen if...” from time to time! Writing down those thoughts put reality into perspective; we could then see what dreams were attainable and which were merely wishes.

History

The Writing Circle was an on-line *Writing Out Loud* class delivered using FirstClass conferencing software. The students were located in Kamsack, Saskatchewan, in a Computer Assisted Learning Resource Centre of the Parkland Regional College. Kamsack is a town of less than 5000 people. It is a community that is rather remotely nestled in Saskatchewan lake country and is very close to the Manitoba border. Unemployment rates are high, and so is domestic violence; racial tensions between native and non-native groups are very apparent. The Writing Circle came about in answer to a need for a Family Literacy program for a group of students enrolled in Basic Education, which could be delivered from a distance. It was piloted over April and May of 2001. Student interest indicates that it may become a part of regular programming. I facilitated The Writing Circle as a practicum requirement for certification as a Writing Out Loud Instructor. The experience was invaluable to me, and I am looking for opportunities to expand the circle. Please feel free to contact me at Brenda_Sherring@eLit.ca. I would be more than happy to hear your comments and answer any questions.

Quality Quotes

Susan Devins - Edmonton, Alberta

This exercise was developed after looking through a few books of quotes from famous people. I looked for quotes that would be interesting and meaningful to the students I worked with, who have a broad range of levels and backgrounds. I chose proverbs or quotes written by familiar famous people. I have always liked quotes because they are humorous, insightful, truthful and inspiring. They always lend themselves to good discussion, and that often leads to productive writing.

Exercise Steps

1. Type out quotes in a large font (size 14), photocopy, and cut them into individual strips.
2. Ask students to work individually, in pairs or in small groups.
3. Have students read the quotes and select one that interests them. Have students consider whether they agree with the quote, what experiences they have had in their lives that may be similar, what they know about the author or origin of the quote.
4. After students have discussed the quote and thought about it, have each person write a response.
5. Allow 15-20 minutes for spontaneous writing. If some students finish early, encourage them to choose another quote and write a second reflection.
6. Ask students if they would like to read their writing aloud.
7. Demonstrate how to provide good feedback by asking questions based on the writing and less on the content.
8. Mention particular wording and difficult vocabulary in the quotes, and try to link the style of writing in the quote to the origin and author. Discuss double meanings and give some examples.

Writing Examples

"It doesn't matter who my father was, it matters who I remember he was." - Ann Sexton

My father was an alcoholic. He harmed us in many ways since we were all young. My mother never stopped him. I tried to love

him for who he is. It is very hard. He was never there for me. I tried to move on but he kept coming back into my life. It became life or death. I said goodbye to my Dad when he was still living.

Jim
Edmonton



"You don't get to choose how you're going to die. Or when. You can only decide how you're going to live. Now." - Joan Baez

You only get one life and you have to live it to the best. Some people never understand that and waste their life. I made mistakes but I faced my family and myself. I don't care what people think. If I see someone who needs help, I give my hand. I don't know how long I have. I might be dead tomorrow. If I want to be happy it's up to me.

Simon
Edmonton



"He who is afraid to ask is ashamed of learning." - Danish proverb

You have to ask a question if you want to learn. If someone is afraid to ask any questions they cannot learn. We all don't know things and need to ask a question. If you ask a question then you are brave and will learn.

Danita
Edmonton



"We learn to walk by stumbling." – Bulgarian proverb

It's like my baby, she didn't know how to walk when she was born. Slowly, she tried to learn to walk, she fell lots, she got cuts and bruises. She cried when she couldn't walk. But after time, she could walk. She crawled everywhere first and then she ran. Now she laughs when I tell her about how she couldn't walk.

*Bev
Edmonton*

Adaptations

All types of quotes can be used. There are quote books specifically for women, quotes about work, and interesting idioms. This exercise may encourage more discussion and less writing for a lower-level student. Students can be paired up to include a mixed skill level, and those with higher skills may be comfortable doing the writing.

Reflections

As the facilitator, I found that students were willing to write about specific events, family relationships, and lessons they had learned in their lives. This all stemmed from allowing them to select the quotes they were interested in and making time for discussion before writing. Some students disclosed painful and personal events in their lives. The quotes seemed to be a trigger for therapeutic writing and healing. Students really appreciated reading out their writing and hearing from others. They often clapped and cheered someone on after they read. I was impressed with the support and genuine interest students extended each other. Sharing their writing was always optional.

History

This activity was facilitated with students in two community-based programs: the Edmonton John Howard Society and the Edmonton Learning Centre. The Writing Circle is a group of students from both programs who meet once a week for the afternoon to work on writing. The Writing Circle group was large, often numbering 15 or more students. We met at the Learning Centre in Edmonton. We also went on outings to write about nature, observe people and write about the senses. I looked for activities that could be adapted for individual, paired, or small group work. There was a range of skill levels in the Writing Circle, so activities had to be flexible to enable lower, middle and higher level learners to be challenged but not frustrated.

More Quotes

- “Failure doesn’t hurt you. It’s the fear of failure that’s the killer.”
— Jack Lemmon
- “Happiness is good health and a bad memory.”
— Ingrid Bergman
- “Tact is rubbing out another’s mistake instead of rubbing it in.”
— Farmer’s Almanac
- “Temptations, unlike opportunities, will give you many chances.” — O.A. Batista
- “Time spent laughing is time spent with the gods.”
— Japanese proverb
- “Well done is better than well said.”
— Benjamin Franklin
- “Never let the fear of striking out get in your way.”
— Babe Ruth
- “A dog wags its tail with its heart.”
— Martin Bauxbaum
- “The discontented man finds no easy chair.”
— Benjamin Franklin
- “Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.”
— Victor Borge
- “Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.”
— Ralph Waldo Emerson
- “What upsets me is not that you lied to me, but that from now on I can no longer believe you.”
— Friedrich Nietzsche
- “If you don’t want anyone to know, don’t do it.”
— Chinese proverb
- “Don’t be afraid of failure, it’s a stepping-stone to success.”
— Oprah Winfrey
- “Please all and you please none.”
— Aesop
- “Shared joy is double joy and shared sorrow is half-sorrow.”
— Swedish proverb
- “Dig the well before you are thirsty.”
— Chinese proverb
- “Nothing makes a woman more beautiful than the belief that she is beautiful.”
— Sophia Loren

Ode to Oprah

Deborah Morgan - Camrose, Alberta

I included this writing exercise because a number of people in the Writing Out Loud Instructors training had mentioned what a useful and inexpensive resource Oprah's magazine had been. Each monthly magazine highlights a theme around personal strengths and values — wonderful prompts for writing from the heart.

Exercise Steps

1. Find some copies of Oprah Winfrey's "O" Magazine. You can borrow them from the library, friends or find them at garage sales.
2. Give each writer a copy of the magazine and have a discussion about the topics or themes presented on each magazine cover.
3. Ask students to write their thoughts on the established theme of the month.
4. Share your written thoughts with one another.

Writing Samples

The following writing samples came from Linda Dawn's students in Toronto. After the exercise, Linda Dawn told me, "I'm pleased to report that the Oprah magazine activity I tried last night was truly successful. The learners loved it. I think you will find our freewriting reviews quite interesting and revealing!"

April 2001: Set Yourself Free

*"It doesn't matter what anybody else thinks, just what you think."
I just finished saying that to Angela & Shirley. We each chose an issue of Oprah's magazine - the theme of mine is "Set Yourself Free." In this issue, Oprah talks about limits - not limiting yourself, putting yourself in a box. e.g. "I can't go back to school now, I'm too old." She writes about choices - being aware of the choices we do have and making the choices that suit us, not others. In other words, be yourself - don't put reins on your dreams.*

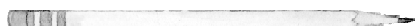
*Linda Dawn
Toronto*



February 2001: Comfort

I was reading Oprah Magazine about comfort and it is very interesting. Because all of the things she talks about is true. In life we all try to be some thing or some one we really not. Sometimes we push our self to act like some famous movies star or try to lose one hundred pounds. but in life we can not please people we just have to be who we are and be happy about that.

Angela
Toronto



March 2001: Self-Esteem

Self-Esteem to me is being able to get up and read or talk in public. My self-esteem use to be low at one time where I wouldn't even think about even talking or reading in public. I've never taken any courses in self-esteem or even asked for any help to build mine up. I've learnt by joining this Writing Out Loud group that I can do anything if I set my mind to it.

Shirley
Toronto

Adaptations

When Linda Dawn tried this exercise with her students, she discovered they were unfamiliar with magazine use and layout.

Neither learner knew what the table of contents was — where to find it or how to use it. After we discussed its purpose we looked at the magazines' spines which they also said they would find to be helpful. I guess we often take learners knowing such information for granted. I'll be making sure all my students understand how to use the spine and contents page of a book or magazine from now on. You could 'see' the delight in their faces, knowing what to do. I think there are two more magazine readers in the world today!

Using magazines could be a starting point for helping students learn how to get the most out of other print materials such as newspapers or the TV Guide. A tour of the local library would show students where they can find other magazines and local and national newspapers. Many students I worked with

thought the library was only a place to find books. They didn't know they could borrow magazines and CD's and even talking books.

Reflections

Oprah has had a huge influence on students I've worked with over the years. The women in the Chapters Program often watch Oprah on television in the evening and would come to class the next morning talking about Oprah's guests and the topic of the day. I eventually started taping Oprah's show and watching when I could so that I could keep up with the interests of the students.

At one point, members of a women's writing group I was facilitating decided that they wanted to write to Oprah. They put together a very professional package of their bios (with photos) and this letter.

May 4, 1998

Oprah Winfrey
c/o Harpo Productions
P.O. Box 909715
Chicago, IL 60607

Hello Oprah:

We would like to introduce ourselves to you. We are members of a Women's Writing Group which is part of the LeapFrog Women's Cooperative in Camrose, Alberta, Canada.

One day in our writing class, we were talking about people who inspire us, people (especially women) who are role models for us. You were on the top of the list because we feel we have a lot in common with you. Many of us have lived (or are still living) in poverty, most of us have experienced many different forms of abuse. Some of us have struggled with weight loss, too. The one big difference between us is that you're rich and famous and we're not!

But there's another big difference between us that surprised us. When we were reading about your life in a copy of *Life Magazine*, we saw that you are not comfortable with your own writing. That made us sad because writing is so important to us and has really helped us to learn about ourselves and the world around us.

So we thought we would send you a copy of *Writing Out Loud*. This is a handbook that we were part of writing that is designed to help literacy instructors and their students write and learn together. We thought it might encourage you to try the kind of "writing from the heart" that we do. We never thought we could write either, but now we can't imagine NOT writing!

Thank you for your interest in women and the things that are important to us. You have given us a lot of hope and encouragement to follow our dreams.

With our love and best wishes,

Barbara MacTavish, Sharron Szott, Alice Kneeland,
Deborah Morgan, Stephanie Harder, Jenna Keil
LeapFrog Women's Cooperative

A number of months later we received a note from Harpo Productions saying that our letter was read and appreciated but that “due to the overwhelming amount of mail that Ms. Winfrey receives, she regrets that it is impossible to answer each and every one personally.” The students were perhaps more gracious than I was, and were pleased to receive any acknowledgment at all. They had simply enjoyed the process and were proud to have taken the steps to write a letter to Oprah — something they said they would never have attempted to do without the support of the group.

As writing instructors, we can learn a lot from students' “heroes.” The people that students admire often have traits, personalities, strengths that they aspire to. Many people (like Oprah) also have websites that can be explored. More great ideas for discussion and writing!

History

I have been involved in the literacy field for 16 years as a tutor, program coordinator, instructor, researcher and administrator. It was while I was coordinating and instructing the Chapters Program (1994 -1997), that I began to truly value the use of writing as a means of self-development as well as a literacy skill. Chapters was a literacy/life skills program designed by and for women receiving government assistance. The women in the program came to love writing, what they learned through writing and how putting words on paper made them feel. It was through their encouragement that the idea for *Writing Out Loud* came about.

Chapter Eight

Acknowledging Emotions

When we are writing from the heart and trying to express our true feelings, there are bound to be times when emotions surface that take us by surprise. As literacy instructors, we may feel anxious about seeing a student struggle with their emotions. This is natural. Most of us have limited or no training to feel adequately equipped to deal with such occasions. There are, however, steps we can take to help the students (and ourselves) deal with emotions in positive ways.

There was such good discussion about dealing with emotions during the Writing Out Loud Instructors training that I would like to turn the floor over to the trainees for the next few pages. Instructors and tutors are the ones in the field, the ones who deal with this reality on a daily basis. Their observations and knowledge are based on real experiences. Here are two stories from literacy workers who work in classroom settings.



From: Janet, British Columbia

Yes, I have lots of experience with tears. Like many other instructors, I feel a little uncomfortable (like I'm to blame) when it happens. At the same time, however, I'm excited about the magic behind writing. I also love to watch how the rest of the group handles it. That is also magic. When you have safe, comfortable dynamics this is not an uncommon experience.

One of the first times this happened, I was using one of the ideas from *Writing Out Loud*, on "Character Development." Everyone had their cards with notes on them and we were all busy writing. Five minutes into the activity, I noticed a very quiet, shy woman, wiping her eyes. I went over to her and she said she was okay. Later, when we were sharing our writing, the same woman volunteered and began reading.

All of a sudden the tears came again. She left the room and I asked one of the students to take over and I went to find her. She explained that the descriptions on her card reminded her of her own mother, who had died many years earlier. She hadn't thought about her or cried about her in a long while. After a few minutes of talking and comforting I returned to the room and so did she. With her permission, I explained what happened. Since that day, she's been writing and writing and writing!

Some students want hugs, others want to leave the room until they have regained their composure and some just continue on, through their tears. I think it is important that they know that sometimes this happens when we are writing and that it is okay.



From: Susan, Alberta

I have a story to share about writing about something emotionally revealing. In one of our group writing classes, I introduced the writing topic, "What people assume about me". That was a hotbed for writing, let me tell you. There were five adult literacy learners present that day. They each wrote amazingly piercing accounts of what they thought people assumed about them. I also wrote and we all ended up sharing our writing. Everyone's writing was sad and touching and humorous. After the quiet writing time, and the sharing of writing, we had an hour-long discussion about assumptions we make about others, and things people assume about us. Luckily, the five members who were present that day were very open and supportive. I don't think this topic would have worked if the group dynamics were not conducive to a supportive environment.

When tearful moments, sad accounts, and hurtful stories came up, everyone instinctively gave the reader a few moments of silence before providing encouragement, or reflections of their own. I am not sure how that buffer of silence came to be, but it provided a mountain of support. I was unusually quiet in that class and was careful not to try to give any solutions, or quick fixes. I was very impressed with everyone's behaviour. I think it made me aware that some things need to be taught and some don't.

Dealing with difficult or emotional situations can be intimidating and uncomfortable for instructors. People often ask, "What should I do when someone becomes emotional?" This is indeed a delicate area as each situation is unique and needs to be handled differently, depending on the individual involved, the facilitator, the group dynamics, and the level of comfort within the group.



From: Kathy, Nova Scotia

It's impossible to say what you will do until it happens, because what would be appropriate for one person/situation is not appropriate for another. You have to let your relationship with the person/group guide your actions. Having said that, it is obvious that you must give all the support you can to the "emotional" writer.



From: Colleen, British Columbia

In mixed classes particularly, the men may have some difficulty seeing emotion in the class, but I've found them to be quite good with it as long as I am and as long as I acknowledge that it's quite normal and acceptable. I actually had a young man last night share what he had written about a memory of a time with his mom (he is a landed refugee and hasn't seen his mom in five years). He openly shared that he was feeling quite emotional and concerned that he might cry. Another wrote about being 15 and his mom teaching him to dance. He then went on to say she died a year ago. The class applauded after his reading. When emotion does happen, I generally remind the person to breathe and then make it okay for them to continue reading or leave it, whichever is their preference.



From: Sherry, Ontario

One of my writing group members shared that she had just come from the doctor yesterday and she was told that her blood pressure was off the charts. She is only 28. She bravely kept reading through tears. I was amazed that she would share so quickly and so deeply. But as I said, this group had been together in job readiness — and she had been a client here at the centre in the past. Everyone was very respectful. I like to make sure that the person sharing knows that I am listening, so I pay close attention while trying to remain casual. The Native group I work with is very good at listening to each other anyway. After the sharing I usually thank the person for trusting me with this very personal information. I also tell them that I think they are courageous to share in this way and remind them that they have shown much strength by doing it. I also encourage others to comment in support if they wish.



From: Carolyn, Yukon

Some people, if they are like me, would rather not attract any attention if their emotions run rampant. The best way to deal with me, then, would be for the group to continue on without making mention of my tears or my withdrawal into quietness or leaving the room. I would normally re-enter the discussion or participation when I felt I had myself back in control, and would rather not have to explain why I came unglued. In fact, because this is usually not the way a situation like this is handled, I shy away from group participation where emotional issues could be involved. People like me find it hard to share deep personal pain and trauma with a group. We deal better in a one-to-one situation, once we feel the other person can be trusted.

Most people, I'm sure, appreciate someone to notice and care, or even want group sympathy in their distress. They may welcome the opportunity to talk about it, and it may be just the therapy they need. However, there may be other members of the group who do not feel comfortable hearing about another person's problems or feel that it may somehow get them involved in someone else's life simply by being part of the group. They may not be ready for that, and we need to respect their views, too.

Carolyn mentioned the need to respect the views of people who don't feel comfortable hearing other people's emotional writing. This brings us back to personal and group guidelines and creating a safe environment for learning. Writers (and listeners) need to be reminded that they have the right to pass or to excuse themselves from the room if emotions or certain subjects prove difficult. (See Chapter Four: Feeling Safe).



From: Lynn, Yukon

(In dealing with emotional situations) I am even more aware of the importance of establishing "Group Guidelines" whereby each participant feels comfortable expressing themselves in a variety of writing/learning situations. At the very least, a heightened emotional response by one participant, and the subsequent reactions of other group members, provide an opportunity to "revisit" the group's guidelines and determine whether or not they are helping to create and maintain the best possible learning environment for all involved.

Because we care deeply about those we teach, it is hard not to get involved or drawn into traumatic situations. We have to remind ourselves that we are not counselors. We are however, often the first one to hear a student's difficult story. We therefore need to be good listeners.



From: Sylvia, Manitoba

I have also encountered situations when some part of the group discussion has triggered a memory of a traumatic event for one of my students and I think the best thing we can do is just “be there”. We have to remember that not everyone wants more than that from us. I had an occasion where one of my students thanked me for just listening and not doing more than that. She said she never expected nor wanted more than that. For her it was enough just to have someone to talk to, to get it “off her chest.” Sometimes someone will want more than just an “ear,” but you can usually get a sense of that when you have a private discussion with them after class.



From: Linda Dawn, Ontario

For me, this question speaks to individual creativity and variability, characteristics that first and foremost categorize us as human beings. Naturally, we exhibit uniquely humane responses in emotional situations, regardless of education, training, work experience, employment policies and so on. My strategy, coping mechanism, facilitative approach, by whatever name... is to try to be wholly present, to listen between the lines and not to be afraid to act on my intuition. Really listen and respond accordingly. I seem to appear calm and be calming to others. I feel calm when I follow my heart. In a word, listen.

We need to listen, really listen. But this isn't always easy or possible. As Jenny states in *Too Scared to Learn*, “a half listener, a reluctant listener not truly able to hear may be worse than no listener at all. Literacy workers must learn how to say when they cannot listen. When a literacy worker cannot listen, she needs to support a learner to find someone who can — counselor, therapist or other literacy worker.” (p. 249).

As facilitators, we are not “failures” if we are unable to listen. And our inability to listen may vary from day to day. I remember doing some freewriting on a really dreary spring day with the women in Chapters. As each of the women read their pieces, I was overwhelmed by the sadness they were expressing and literally felt energy draining from my body as I listened to them read. I finally said, “You know, all this sadness is really getting me down. Do you think we could write about some good things today.” My expressing my need for balance in hearing sad stories led to an idea that has now become a very important part of our writing time. We do ten minutes of freewriting, then take an extra minute to list five things we are grateful for. It’s amazing how that one minute of “switching gears” has helped us all appreciate and remember the balance of good and bad in our lives.

Facilitators need to be reminded that the act of listening does not mean being a therapist and that it isn’t our responsibility to fix other people’s problems. One of our most important roles as facilitators in group settings or in one-to-one tutoring settings, is to act as good resource people. We need always to be aware of what support agencies and networks our communities have so that we can offer suggestions and encouragement to students to seek outside resources that can offer them a variety of assistance.



From: Diane, Saskatchewan

There have been times that a group member in the Second Chance Seniors Literacy Project has become upset and tearful in a group session. One senior revealed that the doctor had told her “her days were numbered” as she was having a lot of heart and kidney problems that were growing worse. She was having to make a decision about whether to take dialysis or die sooner! The other group members were quiet but comforting. It was a lot to take in. We each said a few words of comfort to her. I asked if she had family support to go through this difficult decision, which she had. I sat beside her and held her hand through the rest of our session.

I think that all we can do is be there at the time, comfort and listen, and perhaps after the session talk to the individual about their options for support.



From: Linda Dawn, Ontario

I also feel strongly that we should provide “informal counseling” that includes helping learners to either directly or indirectly access the variety of information they need whether it be housing, legal advice, or anger management. I have made up a form at work for the three of us

who teach, in order to track what sorts of information and referrals we make on a daily basis and how long it takes. For instance, today I spent “counseling” time with four learners, totaling 50 minutes. One needed an eye doctor, one advice about a minor family situation (what would you do?) and one needed information about Parkinson’s. The other has a problem with her child’s teacher. I have found that if this stuff doesn’t get dealt with, learners can’t concentrate, so I set time aside for it (most of my breaks, unfortunately).

A question that triggered a lot of discussion during the Writing Out Loud Instructors training was what to do (and was it okay) when facilitators of writing groups felt their own emotions getting out of control. What do you do if the emotional writer is the facilitator?



From: Colleen, British Columbia

Everyone is always surprised when it first happens to them (feeling, expressing emotion) but afterward they are smiling through the tears and giving thanks for the support. I saw all of this happening with students and thought it was wonderful for “them,” but never expected it to happen to me personally. My entire life has been spent keeping myself controlled so I would never look foolish, so it was very difficult to have this happen even though I knew it was okay, and was, in fact, showing the great progress of the group. Still I hold back, and if I know a piece I’m writing may have some personal reaction, I’ll refrain from sharing, at least until I know I’ll be in control. This, of course, defeats the entire purpose, and whenever it has happened to Deanna or I, the bonding the group does with us goes one step stronger. They see us as one of them. Still, I want to stay in control.



From: Lynn, Newfoundland

One day our journaling group was writing about “what we wanted to be when we grew up.” One of the group facilitators shared her writing, which was quite personal, quite poignant and very difficult for her to express, as she was struggling with some decisions in her life.

Immediately and very gently, the writers in the group shared their insights about her and how they felt about her. Some questioned her about various things, which helped her clarify her thoughts and gain some new knowledge.

Often as facilitators, we see it as our role to “take care,” support and encourage. This incident, was perhaps the most beautiful example of adult education I have ever seen from the perspective of shared leadership, support for group members and learning from the “students” in your rooms. It was really “as good as it gets”!



From: Deanna, British Columbia

I think it is equally important that the facilitators “break down” because otherwise, they remain somewhat the overseers, or the voyeurs, watching, listening, analyzing, offering advice and even consolation, but remaining aloof, safe. Only then are facilitators imitating counselors, which is not our aim.

At the beginning of this chapter, Janet talked about “the magic behind writing.” I also believe there is a magic, something special that happens within us when we allow ourselves to tap into the well of feelings and emotions we have and to let those feelings surface and become words on a page. We don’t need to fear our emotional responses. They’re a sign that we are alive and that our minds and our feelings are awake and connecting.



From: Deanna, British Columbia

More often than not, a participant’s expression of strong emotion is a move forward for the individual and the group, whether that emotion is traditionally thought of as positive or negative, and regardless of whether the “situation” is handled discreetly, clumsily, or professionally. The exception to that would be the facilitator/members trying to squash the expression, or deny its validity — that would be reacting insincerely.

If a member of a writing group feels safe enough to have written the piece, and read it aloud, then there is every reason to trust that the person is ready to share the emotion that comes out of its recollection. It would seem that a key difference between writing from the heart and the writing one would produce in, say, a typical English class, is that its purpose is to dive deeply beneath the surface of the words, to look at the issues and incidents that have shaped who we are, and to “resurface” anew through the experience, and the sharing of it with others who are going through the same process.

So, when the emotions burst forth, whether in the form of a howl of pain or of laughter, all the group members can join in the celebration. How to celebrate? It hardly matters, as long as no one is shushing the individual, but rather, pays attention, witnesses.



From: Gayle, Nunavut

For me, dealing with emotion speaks not so much to that particular situation, but to the atmosphere that has been created in the class/group to that point. My experience is that, if a student consciously or subconsciously, finds themselves writing about something deeply moving, it means that they felt safe enough to do so. This means that they feel secure enough to let it out. A lot of this stuff is intuitive — if the student is one who would feel okay about a comforting hug, I have done that. If he/she is one who needs privacy at such moments, I have given them the space to do that. My experience has been that the group rallies around the writer in the appropriate way and I have often taken the cue from the group. Often, this has led to a closer feeling in the group.

During the training, the Instructors talked about the benefits of co-facilitation. Those who had had the opportunity to work with someone else found their jobs easier, less stressful, and more productive.



From: Carolyn, Yukon

I think it would be wise for every facilitator to have a co-facilitator in workshops or groups sessions where emotions could run high, not only during the session, but after the participant leaves the workshop. If an emotional situation happens, the facilitator would then continue with the group activity while the co-facilitator approaches the distressed member with tactful kindness and quietly inquires if the person is okay, if they need someone to talk to, if they would like the group's listening ear or advice, or if they would just like time out for a few minutes by themselves.

Depending on the person's response, the co-facilitator may suggest appropriate group action. The group could take a coffee break (water break, stretch break, washroom break) to give the distressed member time to regain composure and not miss out on the group activities. If the distressed member has indicated he/she wants group input, I think it would be appropriate for the co-facilitator to ask the group if they would be willing to participate in that way, leaving plenty of

unembarrassed room for dissenters to decline. If the group agrees, it may mean cutting the activity short and dealing with the issue right there. It could mean arranging for time after the session if that is feasible. Never should a facilitator let a group member leave visibly upset without one-to-one inquiry as to that person's emotional state. In my two years as acting chaplain for our local prison, I learned the danger of leaving a person with wounds reopened to deal with them alone.



From: Deanna, British Columbia

I would say it's much better to have two facilitators who work together with a writing group. As a single facilitator, it's much more likely you'll feel that you must maintain control at all times, because who will if you "lose it"? When there are two people, it's more likely that both will relax a bit, and be able to become "real," writing freely more often, moving more quickly to the core of things. I understand that having two facilitators is a luxury that doesn't happen often, but if it's at all possible, it sure makes the group work more effectively. Not to mention that having two different perspectives is great — the members of the group may relate more to one than the other, and may see the two facilitators openly having different takes on issues, and yet still working well together, and I think that's a good thing to experience.

We talk of co-facilitation as a luxury — but serious consideration should be given to this idea. Those who work in colleges or institutions have other staff members to debrief with. Others who work in more isolated settings find it much more difficult to "leave their work at the office." We all need peers to talk to, to tell OUR stories to, to help keep us balanced in our work.

At a conference in Minneapolis, I was co-facilitating a workshop with friends from Montreal and Chicago. One of the facilitators was an artist, so halfway through the workshop, we pulled out some art supplies and did some artwork that we would later write about. I had fun with stars and shiny paper and coloured pens and watching everyone create around me. When it was time to write I started writing about my son who hopes to be a professional dancer (sparked by the stars, I think) and suddenly I was completely overwhelmed by the sense of loss I felt as I wrote about his leaving home to dance. I got up from the table, went to the corner of the room and literally crumpled into a chair sobbing hard — hiccup hard. I was mortified, but there was absolutely nothing I could do. I explained to one of my co-facilitators that I had to get some air and thankfully, she was there to carry on in my absence.

The two lines I wrote that afternoon are two of the most powerful I've ever written, and I hold them near to me all the time. I am so grateful that I had the opportunity to let those feelings out; I had obviously been holding them back for a long time. I felt lighter, more free, more at peace. And I will always be grateful for the simple, kind support I received from the group members, most of whom I will never meet again.

As literacy workers, we are not therapists even though we recognize that writing can in fact be therapeutic. We encourage people to write from the heart, to get in touch with what's important to them, but we are not asking writers to bare their souls so that we can counsel them or fix their problems. Writing can give light and energy and even a voice to emotions that up until this point may only have been felt. Just as I experienced when I wrote about my son, these emotions can surprise us. As writing instructors, we are there to affirm and support the writers and to honour and respect the words they write. Our intent is not to push people to tears or to open old wounds or to force people to deal with situations they are not ready to deal with.

It is also not our intent to insist that people listen to the writing or stories of others if this makes them uncomfortable. In the Chapters Program one of the students brought in music to play while we did our freewriting. She had chosen the song "The Rose" sung by Bette Midler. A few minutes into our writing I noticed another student, Carol, starting to cry. She said she needed to go and get some air. When she came back she explained to everyone that "The Rose" was the song she and her sisters had chosen to play at her mother's recent funeral. All the women in the class immediately felt or related to Carol's pain and there were suddenly a number of people in tears. After passing around the Kleenex box, the women quieted and appeared to be okay. We talked about Carol's choice to leave the room and how that was good "self care". And we talked about our own emotions and how both the choice of music and Carol's sadness had affected us. We even had some good laughs about the well traveled Kleenex box and how the office workers down the hall must wonder what we do in our classroom everyday!

We did another exercise that afternoon, and then before it was time to leave for the day, we went around the room and did a "check in". I often did this on days when strong emotions had surfaced. I simply ask each person if they are okay and if there is anything they need or would like to talk about before they leave the classroom. That way no one goes home with raw feelings or feelings of not being listened to.

The office workers down the hall from our classroom wondering what we were up to in the Chapters classroom was always a humorous topic with the students because some days we would laugh over the silliest things or scream with delight when someone came in with a new haircut. As we discuss the ideas around dealing with emotions, we need to be reminded that not all emotion is tears and sadness. As human beings, we also laugh and feel joy. We feel pleasure and comfort and moments of great insight. And yes, I've

experienced people's anger, frustration, denial, grief and resentment, but I have never been faced with a situation that was unmanageable. Writing may evoke an emotion, but it doesn't usually escalate it. Most emotions that surface are not ones we need to fear. Be gentle with yourselves and with your students, and be aware of the wide variety of genuine emotions that stem from writing from the heart.

This is a piece from Sharron's travel journal that speaks to all the students we work with:

We never know when it's going to happen, but some workshops we give are very emotional as the students share with us their hardships hurt and pain. I admire them all so much when I think back to when I first became a student in Chapters over five years ago. I never thought then that I would be here today helping other students overcome their fears and moving forward in life like I have. I would like to reach out and encircle them all with a big hug and let them know that it's o.k. to show your feelings, its o.k. to cry. Its when we push past our fears that we begin to learn. I know because I've been there. (July 1999)



From: Bev, Alberta

There is something very powerful that happens when a woman reads her writing and the group responds. This process is often coated in tears and the unfolding of other stories that have been unlocked because of the emotional connection that happens. So, a very important guideline in my work is that tears are okay — in fact they are a gift. An Aboriginal colleague of mine says that tears are sacred water — a gift from the creator and necessary for our healing work.

Synchronicity

Bev Sochatsky - Edmonton, Alberta

I use this writing activity in my women's group to open up dialogue about being in sync in our lives. How do we know if our lives are unfolding as they should? How aware/alive are we? What do we need to pay attention to? What are we pushing down or stuffing? This writing activity provides an opportunity to pay attention to the multitude of details that are often brushed off. It acts as a wake-up call!

Exercise Steps

1. Select a range of print materials (poetry, short stories, magazines, tabloids, newspapers, daily meditation books) and display them on the table.
2. Invite the group members to select one of the items that appeals to them. Suggest that they invite the print materials to speak to them. Talk about the intuitive part of ourselves that knows what we need. Oftentimes we don't pay enough attention to the things that catch our eye, or cause our stomach to turn or our fists to clench.
3. Ask each woman to flip through the book, magazine, or story that she has chosen and ask her to select one piece of writing that has meaning to her. Have the participants simply respond from an intuitive/gut level without getting too intellectual about the selected piece. It could be the colour of the advertisement, a word that jumped off the page, or the smile on a child's face.
4. Encourage the participants to copy down one line from the article, poem, or advertisement and then begin to write about it in their own words.

Writing Examples

Inspiration source: *Each One of Us: A Collection of Writings and Art Work* – A project of Edmonton John Howard Society.

A Friend

"A friend is someone who is close to your heart and from that place they will never part." (line from a poem)

My dearest friend of all to me, Sally Ann, was taken from me tragically. I miss her more than words could ever express, but I think if I hold her close to my heart, that she'll never be gone from me, that the bond of our friendship will never be severed.

All I can do is hold on to the good times and the bad and hold on to the memories even though some are sad.

I will miss her dearly forever, but a friend is someone who is close to your heart, and from that place they will never be apart.

Pam
Edmonton

Inspiration source: *Meditations for Women Who Do Too Much*, Anne Wilson Schaef.

Love

"Many women who do too much believe that there are tricks to loving. If we can just look sexy enough, we can make others love us. As I love myself it is only a short step to the loving of others." (inspirational lines from the daily meditation book on the topic of Love)

I love myself because I am on my way to a new me. I am clear on my goals and I know I can achieve them. The improvement of my life brings hope for my future.

I love myself because of the constant will and eagerness to learn. To learn new things brings self-awareness and completeness. The more I learn, the more I grow.

I love myself whether others love me or not. I love myself because my God and my angel Alesha love me.

I love myself cause I strive for success, never to let anyone stand between me and my dreams.

I love myself cause I am a daughter, sister, a niece, a granddaughter.

Moreso, I love myself when I hear I love you too Mommy. All that matters is the love of myself and the love from people that love themselves in order to love me.

Tracy
Edmonton

Reflections

This writing activity provides an opportunity for participants to tune into and focus on their own “stuff.” They chose writing that resonates with their experience and this gives them permission to explore their feelings in more depth.

Pam’s writing provided us with an opening to talk about loss and grief. Others in the group talked about coping with losses in their lives. We explored the feelings associated with loss and healthy ways to cope with emotional pain.

Tracy’s insights about love and the notion of loving ourselves before we can love others prompted lots of healthy discussion.

Adaptations

Explore the notion of synchronicity in other ways: why am I in a program with each of the different participants in the classroom? Is there a reason? What am I learning about myself as I hear others’ stories? Whom do I feel most comfortable with in the room? Why? How can I take this awareness of synchronicity and use it in other areas of my life? How can I come to know that there are other ways to live my life?

Editor’s Note

Bev’s group had been working together for a while when they did this exercise. The group members trusted one another and they felt safe in exploring their inner thoughts and feelings through the pieces of writing that “spoke to them.” This exercise may be a little advanced or a higher risk for some. As you work with the students in your classes/groups, you will sense what feels safe and what doesn’t. It is our job as teachers to be awake to the needs and limits of the students, and to adapt learning activities to gently challenge the learning needs and abilities of the students.

History

Changing Paths is a program of the Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton. Women in conflict with the law are mandated to participate and are referred to the program by probation officers, social workers and the courts. Historically a life skills focus, the program has been transformed into an integrated literacy and life skills approach to learning grounded in participatory education. Creative and free-flow writing is used as a pathway to identify and take action on life issues that influence and have contributed to women’s offenses. Literacy becomes a vehicle for women to speak out, grieve losses, celebrate successes, advocate, build self esteem, and experience connectedness.

I Remember... I Forget

Diane Mullan - Regina, Saskatchewan

This is a writing idea that works well with older adults but would certainly be a good exercise for all groups. I used this exercise with tutors and learners of varying literacy levels in the Second Chance for Seniors Program.

Exercise Steps

1. Begin the exercise by writing the story prompt: "I remember..." on a flip chart or blackboard.
2. Ask the group to write their responses to the prompt for three to five minutes. They can write in point form or write a short story depending on how comfortable they are with the task.
3. After five minutes are up, invite the writers to read their writing to the rest of the group.
4. The next step is to write a response to the story prompt: "I forget ..." on a flip chart or blackboard.
5. Again, have the group write for three to five minutes about the things they forget. If they are comfortable, ask members to read their writing to the rest of the group.

Writing Examples

I remember...

I remember how every child that came to our home, always ended up with my father. They sat on his knee, played with his pocket watch or took his pen from his pocket. He never read them a story, but he made up silly poems or told them about Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby. Everyone loved my mother, but still all children would be around my father. He had been a school teacher, and was then a school superintendent. I remember how wrong he thought it was to take children away from home and send them to residential schools. He said the only place for any child was with its parents.

I forget...

I forget why I wanted to study Chemistry at university. Somehow my father and I were there seeing if I could be accepted into the Chemistry program, but he did all the talking. Soon we were at the Dean's office, and he and my father had entered me in the Honours program. I was scared and confused. My dad knew many of the people there and I began to think I was being pushed in a way I wasn't even sure I wanted to go. But even though I don't remember why I chose Chemistry, I'm glad I did.

Jean Bray
Regina



I remember...

I remember the day I took a bike ride down a flight of stairs. My bicycle was a chalkboard, without a frame, set on edge. I was about four years old and my legs were barely long enough to reach the floor when I sat on the chalkboard.

Why on earth would I do such a thing, I hear you ask. Well, my sister, who was nearly three years older than I, told me how much fun it was. She was always trying to finish me off one way or another. It never occurred to me to ask if she'd taken this wonderful ride herself. I suspect she hadn't.

So that Saturday morning I took off on my slim bike. Down the stairs we went at a faster and faster clip. There was no way I could stop, or even slow the thing down. Until we reached the bottom of the stairs, that is, when chalkboard and I landed in a bawling heap. What hurt me most was that Mom and sisters found it very amusing.

I forget...

I forget where I found that old box, but it was filled with surprising objects. It was very difficult to open because there were several little fasteners that all had to be loosened at the same time. It seemed that every time I unfastened one and went on to the next, the earlier one fell closed again.

Finally the lid was free to open. But I completely forget what was inside. In fact, if this situation ever did occur, I've completely forgotten about it. How else can I write about something I forgot, except to manufacture it out of the whole cloth and simply say I forgot?

*Joanne McDonald
Regina*

Adaptations

Some interesting (but perhaps riskier) adaptations would be ask the students what they would like the people around them to remember or forget. For example, "I wish my children could remember..." or "I want my family to forget..." It might be an insightful exercise to write from a personal standpoint such as, "I want to remember..." or "I wish I could forget..."

Reflections

Memory is a stronger quality among older adults than people might think. That's why "I remember" works well with this age group. Working with older adults, I have found memory to be a deep reservoir, rich with texture and color. I have noticed that older adults who feel they have nothing to say light up when asked to talk or write about something from their past. Asking them what it was like to live during the Depression years brings vivid descriptions of dust, wind, and "making do." Prompting seniors to write about their experiences in the war years, whether at home or overseas, brings surprising results. Individuals often describe some of the conditions they lived in and the dangers they faced, which are fascinating and make great stories.

The "I forget" exercise can be quite humorous, as many seniors will say they forget everything and go on at length about everything they forget — their keys, their purses, and people's names. It is a chance to poke a bit of fun at a common ailment, as we all grow older. It is a relief to know they are not alone

in their annoyance about forgetting the little things, while memories from 50 years ago are still strong. Some have been quite puzzled by the exercise and have asked, “How can you write about what you forget?” One older learner, when asked what came to her mind in response to the “I forget” prompt, said with a twinkle in her eye, “I don’t know... I forget.” This bit of humour brought the house down with empathy and laughter in our group.

History

The Second Chance for Seniors program is located at the Seniors’ Education Centre at the University of Regina in the prairies of southern Saskatchewan. The program addresses the literacy needs and interests of older adults through peer tutoring and community learning groups. The tutors and learners are all over the age of 50. Our oldest learner is 83 years of age, having joined our program just before her 80th birthday. She had never had the chance to go to school as a young Metis growing up in the 1930’s. A group of tutors and learners in the Second Chance for Seniors Program are involved in our “Writing Project.” We are using exercises from *Writing Out Loud* to encourage members to write their own stories that will be included in a plain language collection of stories written by, for, and with older adults. Our first collection, “Something of Ourselves,” is available for \$10 plus shipping and handling. If you are interested in learning more about our program, you are welcome to contact me at (306) 585-5847 or by email at diane.mullan@uregina.ca.

Stuffies

Deanna Arelis & Colleen Hanscom - Kelowna, BC

This idea came from Janny Audette, a participant in the first of the two-year women's Lifewriting Program at Okanagan University College. This was the first of many ideas Janny brought to our class.

Exercise Steps

1. At least one class before, ask participants to bring their favourite stuffed toy to class.
2. Ask each participant to write a piece about the history and importance of her "stuffy" in her life.
3. Share the writing with one another.

Writing Samples

(edited)

Bilbo Baggins

"Hello-o-o-o!" I heard the little voice calling me. Where is it? "Hello-o-o!" There it was again. I stopped, looked around, couldn't see anyone I knew, but I did know this was a definite call for me. "Down here, I'm down here." My head dropped. What was it? Where? My eyes fell on some toys: some plastic cars, wooden blocks, and a teddy bear (the light bulb goes on in my head). A teddy bear! I stood there looking at it.

"Take me home please." Did I really hear that? "Take me home please." I felt a tug at my solar plexus. Gently I picked him up. It was an instant love match, his funny little face sending all kinds of softness into my heart. I couldn't stop looking at him.

How much was he? I pulled at the tag on his ear. "Ow!"

"Sorry!" One dollar, he was one dollar. Great! He was going to be mine. I cuddled him close. "You're coming home with me."

"Look what I've got," I gleefully say to the Granny behind the counter. "I have to have him."

"Oh, he's a nice fellow," she said with a smile to the little girl, me, standing in front of her. Proudly I put him in my bag making sure that his little head was sticking out. I didn't want him to suffocate; I also thought he would like to look at the scenery on the way home.

Suddenly I didn't feel lonely. "Hey... What's going on here?" I brought him into the house. "Hi cats, look what I have. It's a new member to our family."

"What is it?"

"Oh, that! How boring."

"I am not."

I'll find a special place for him, I think. "When was the last time you got so much attention?" He doesn't answer. I feel sadness. "Okay, forget the past. We'll start a new life together. Your name is Bilbo Baggins. How do you like it?" I see a smile light up his face.

I spent some time cuddling him last night. When did I last do anything like that? I can't believe my reactions to this little stuffy. Little girl energy emerging and it's wonderful.

Recently I drew a picture of myself, head bent, turned away in tears; the word innocence falling to the ground in broken fragments. Yesterday in finding a new friend I feel that I have touched upon my little girl time... the return to innocence has begun.

Janny Audette
Kelowna

Adaptations

This is not an exercise just for women. In a mixed group with male participants, you could ask, "What was your favourite toy as a child?" or "What did you like to take to bed with you when you were little?" At one of our Learner Events, while writing about our favourite things, one young man wrote about his "blankie" which (at age 19) he still kept behind the seat of his pick-up truck!

We have also had everyone bring in her most precious treasure and write about its significance.

Reflections

The emotional power of this activity surprised us. We had no idea people were so attached to their stuffed toys, nor that so many actually still had them as adults. The stories that poured out amidst tears and hugs were heartrending. These stuffies were security blankets, confidantes, babies, and physical representations of the hurting inner child. Our first sense of the group bonding occurred as we shared these stories. We took pictures of ourselves with our stuffies, and those pictures became a real treasure for everyone to keep.

History

We formed our Kelowna Lifewriting Workshop in October of 1998. We were a group of ten women dedicated to writing from the heart. Themes for writing initially came from *Writing Out Loud* and a workshop we attended at Okanagan University College given by Deborah. As our confidence increased, we introduced our own themes. We wrote about any number of topics, from our favourite stuffed toys to what we thought a tarot card interpretation meant. Everything was enlightening. As the name of the group implies, we wrote about life, its ups and downs and ins and outs. Through it all, we learned. Whether the topic was an event from the past or a hope for our future, it was all written from the heart.



Letter of Thanks

Linda Dawn Pettigrew - Toronto, Ontario

This writing idea, “Once a Week, Write a Heartfelt Letter,” came from the book *DON’T SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF... and it’s all small stuff* by Richard Carlson. Learners have really liked this exercise and may be inspired to write quite a few letters. This writing activity is also a positive way for writers to reach closure or find peace with some relationships. It is not necessary to send the letters, but many learners found it rewarding when they did.

Exercise Steps

1. Make a list of five people you would like to thank for something in particular. For instance, maybe an older neighbour was kind to you when you were a child. The person doesn’t have to be alive. Perhaps you haven’t seen this person in years or have any idea even what the last name is. That’s okay.
2. Decide who you would like to write to first, second, third, next, and last.
3. Write to the person you most want to thank. Tell him or her the specific reason you are grateful. Give a concrete example such as, “Thank you for taking time off work without pay to attend my father’s funeral.”
4. Share your writing with the group.
5. Provide note paper, pens, and stamps for final drafts.
6. Offer to help with revisions if writers want to send their letters.

Writing Examples

Dear Susan and Lurana,

I am writing this thank-you letter to say how much you both have for helped me out with my reading and Math. The first time I came to this program, I felt like I was at home. Both of you know how to make people feel well come. Sue I love the way you listen to me when people think I didn’t want to work. Do you remember when I told you I didn’t pass the test to get in George Brown College? You told me it wasn’t the end of the world. You told me not to give up there’s always another time. As

for Lurana when you send me to a different location I was upset. I hated it but now I am learning more and more.

I am now learning how to write business letters and how to take proper phone call messages. I am really working hard to get where I want to go. I really appreciate your help.

I only know Linda for a few weeks but I thank her too: she told me don't let no one get in your way of learning. I like her because she is so down to earth. Don't forget my words THANK YOU

Karen
Toronto



Dear Ruth,

You are such a good friend! Today, in our writing group we are writing heartfelt letters of thanks to someone who we feel we haven't properly thanked. So, here you are, the lucky recipient of a letter!

First of all, I want you to know that I appreciate all of the things you give me. The computer was obviously the 'biggest' gift and it deserves a special mention. It would have been much more difficult at university without it. And I wouldn't have been able to participate in this distance literacy writing project which I love so much.

Second, the clothes. You have given me such lovely clothes. I really appreciate it. Honestly, you have kept me dressed during the past few years. Then there's been the lunches, dinners and snacks, most of which you've paid for. And that's not to mention the beautiful fresh vegetables from your garden.

Ruth, you helped me write a new resume and launch myself in a new career; you've helped me prepare assignments and lessons and workshops and you've always listened to me. You are a wonderful friend. I couldn't ask for a better one and I really appreciate you. Most of all for believing in me and listening.

Thanks again.

Love,

Linda Dawn
Toronto



Dear Ali;

I am just writing to say thank you for every thing you've done for us. We are very happy to have a friend as nice as you. How is the family doing? We are doing just fine. We are kept busy by doing flyers, working at the food bank, and just working. Shirley has gone back to school to help her get her business diploma in Hotel and Restaurant. We are hoping to be able to own our own business someday. We really miss our Christmas dinners and our night out together. We have to get together to come up to your new place for a summer barbare and just a little visit. I hope Lisa's doing alright in school. Carol & Freddie are still fighting like any brother & sister do. I hope the world is treating you and the family well. Looking forward to coming up to see you again at your office.

Yours truly

Shirley
Toronto

Adaptations

There are many ways to use this exercise. Carlson suggests writing to a favorite author, inventor, or politician that you would like to thank. This flexibility allows this exercise to fit easily into any lesson plan. When talking about Christmas, you can write to someone who made Christmas special for you. The point of the exercise is to be thankful for the good things we all have.

Reflections

This is one of my favourite inspirational writing tools because it is so empowering. After writing a letter, some people feel a relief, as if a huge debt has been paid (it can restore a sense of balance and give and take in relationships), while others feel joy from the simple act of saying thank you.

History

Three literacy/learner volunteers met with me once a week from November 2000 to May 2001, specifically to participate in the Writing Out Loud Training Project. They tried out new activities, writing mostly at Literacy for East Toronto (L.E.T.), although occasionally, in coffee shops, malls, libraries, and parks. If you are interested in Writing Out Loud groups or workshops in the Toronto area, please contact Linda Dawn at linda.pettigrew3@sympatico.ca.

Challenges

Kathryn MacCuish - Sydney, Nova Scotia

The idea for this exercise originated with something that I saw one day when I was on my way back to work after doing an errand. I was driving down a busy street and caught a glimpse of an attractive, well-groomed, and smartly dressed young woman on crutches coming out of a bank. I immediately thought that she must have broken her leg, and as I came closer to her, looked again to see if I was right. What I saw was that her left leg was missing and that, far from trying to disguise this fact by wearing trousers or a long skirt, she wore a very short miniskirt. I was immediately struck by the courage being demonstrated by this young woman. A few moments later when I met with the students, I couldn't help but tell them about what I had seen. Our discussion of this young woman and the courage she demonstrated gradually evolved into the realization that people demonstrate courage in response to challenges. The students helped me to develop this exercise.

Exercise Steps

1. Tell a story about someone you know who is dealing with a challenge in their life and ask everyone to tell a similar story. Have a conversation about the many different kinds of challenges there are to overcome. Have the students write about a challenge they have overcome and how they feel about it.
2. Share your writing with one another.

Writing Examples

One of the most challenge to me would be to make it possible for my two kids to go to college at thier joist (choice) and not own any money when They finish because today you spend so much money on student Loans you will be in your thirty or fortys and you will not enjoy life as much as people today do because by the time you buy a house and get it paid for its too late to do the things you like to in life

Stanley
Sydney



For so long you've been absent. Staring, gazing and wondering into the outside world. You listen to words that no one can hear. Where do you go is what we want to know. For many we see only a challenge, but you learned to cope. It was so long for you, so tough but you made it. So for us we see bravery and courage in your deportment. If only we could see your world.

*Amy
Sydney*

Adaptations

Some variations include:

- Write about a challenge you would like to overcome and how you could do it.
- Write about the ways people have to be in order to overcome a challenge.
- Write about someone you know who has overcome a challenge.
- Write about all the different everyday challenges there are to overcome and tell about the one you have the greatest difficulty with.

Reflections

I found it interesting that most of the students had never really considered that they faced challenges or that they could overcome them; yet they have all overcome major challenges in their lives. I imagine that it is the same for most people — we think that courage is something demonstrated by others.

History

The Cape Breton Literacy Network sponsors classes in six different communities in Cape Breton and southern Victoria Counties on Cape Breton Island. The region has suffered greatly from the demise of the steel and coal industries and the failure of the Atlantic fishery. There is a chronic high level of unemployment, and many people survive on social assistance. Sydney is a small city in the centre of what was once and is still called “Industrial Cape Breton.” These students attended classes at the Network’s Learning Centre at 216 Charlotte Street, in the middle of Sydney’s downtown district. They all hope to attend higher level upgrading programs at the Marconi Campus of the Nova Scotia Community College in the near future. The CBLN can be contacted at (902) 564-8404 or at cbln@ns.sympatico.ca.

Message in a Bottle

Sally Lavern - Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island

This is an exercise I did with students towards the end of our writing project. It was a really good way to end the class.

Exercise Steps

1. Ask students to reflect on the writing they have done. What was the most valuable thing they learned? What was the best part? What was the worst? What advice would they give to next year's students?
2. Ask students to write a message to next year's students.
3. Share the writing with each other.
4. Seal messages in a bottle or container to be opened by new students.

Writing Examples

The most valuable thing I learned was to open up and talk in class. Opening up is a very difficult thing for me to do. The best part of my writing has to be the improvement it has had on my writing. The worst part of writing was the reading out loud which made me uncomfortable at times. My advice to anyone entering this program, would be to take the challenge. It will only improve you.

*Laurie
Charlottetown*



The most valuable thing I learned this year about writing is that I could write. I never thought I could write before, but with writing daily in my writing journal, I know I can write on any topic given to me. It took me a lot of practice, but it has paid off.

My advice to next years students is write as often as you can and don't give up. Writing like anything else, comes with practice.

Paul

Charlottetown



I have learned in the past year that it is never too late to improve your self. If you were young or old you can still learn. With a caring instructor, self motivation, positive out look, an a family support, you can succeed. You CAN teach an old dog a new trick.

George

Charlottetown



Going back to school this year was a goode experience for me. I learned about "Canada Our Country" which I really enjoyed. Doing math was quite a challenge for me. I really liked my teacher and also enjoyed the class I was in. Overall, I enjoyed school quite well and meeting new people. My advise to next year students would be it's never to late to go back to school and get more knowledge. It also gives you confidence in yourself.

Barb

Charlottetown



The most valuable thing I learned was my writing skills. When I started I could hardly write. With practice I have come a long ways and a good teacher sure did help. My advice to new students is to apply yourself, and to keep your attends up.

Ira

Charlottetown



Adaptations


Other writing could include sending a message in a bottle while being stranded on a deserted island. Also, the reverse could be adapted. Tell the students they just picked up a bottle from the ocean and there's a message inside (easy for us here on Prince Edward Island.). Ask students what the message would say. Here's another thought – if you were going to send a message to anyone, who would it be and why? And what would the message say? You could also have them write messages to other groups; for example, one women's resources center to another resource center.

Reflections

As an instructor, I found the students' confidence soared after being involved in the writing project this year. I believe their first thoughts were that they couldn't do it, but they soon learned they could, and they really enjoyed it.


History

The P.E.I. Institute of Adult & Community Education is an affiliate of Holland College, located in Charlottetown, P.E.I. The Institute includes approximately ten other sites across the Island. Programs offered are Adult Education, a variety of language courses, and Life Skills Coaching Training. The Institute is dedicated to providing lifelong learning opportunities for residents of Prince Edward Island.



Chapter Nine

Celebrating Writing



The first time I referred to myself as a writer was on a form I was filling out for something a number of years ago when I was working on the book *Opening Doors*. When I came to the blank on the form that asked for my occupation, I hesitated. I was working on a book, I was writing daily (and getting paid to do it), but the book wasn't published yet. So was I a writer? An author? I finally wrote down the word "writer," but I felt so awkward I think the word looked more like "wwriter" and was probably unreadable to the man I handed the form to!

A writer is someone who writes. People we work with who are taking challenging steps to put words on paper are writers. They however, probably feel as I did the day I declared myself a writer. What right do I have to call myself a writer? Writers are published authors with books — scholarly, wealthy, famous people revered by society. I've worked with students who were uncomfortable going into a bookstore because they thought only "smart people like authors" go there. What really helped me to rethink what it means to be a writer, was reading stories written everyday in the Chapters Program by people whose writing was more enlightening, entertaining, and thought-provoking than works I had studied by so called "famous authors."

When I sang in the "Sound of Music," I was certainly no Julie Andrews, but I was a singer. Maybe I was a "small s" singer on our community stage, and maybe we are "small w" writers on the bigger scale of literary society, but we are still writers. Given that we are writers, it follows that we, too, can publish and celebrate our writing.

Linda Shohet, Executive Director of the Centre for Literacy in Montreal says, "There is only one letter's difference between the words 'literacy' and 'literary,' but in the settings where most of us work, there is a chasm between the worlds of 'adult literacy' and the 'literary.'" (Community Writing: Connecting

literacy and the literary, LAC/MF Special Insert, Vol. 14 No. 3&4, pg. 2)
Deanna Arelis, Writing Out Loud instructor in British Columbia also makes a good point:



From: Deanna, British Columbia

Just as there were all sorts of people fussing that the “wrong sort” would end up reading books and getting educated if books were published in native languages instead of Latin, so perhaps some people are fussing now that the “wrong sort” will actually write and share stories now that technology makes it possible to do so more easily than before. Well, I don’t like the idea of hoarding knowledge as if it were a commodity, so let’s Storm the Bastille! The more people writing the better, I say, and the more people the writing is reaching, the better.

Publishing gives writers a greater purpose for writing. So far we have been concentrating on the basic steps of getting words on paper, writing from the heart, becoming familiar with the writing process, overcoming fears and building confidence and writing skills. Now it’s time to celebrate all that hard work! And publishing work can be very rewarding experience for the writers.



From: Kathy, New Brunswick

It has been my experience that students feel very, very proud when they see their words in print; it is an extremely affirming experience for them. Readers very much enjoy reading student writing — much of it is very powerful stuff. Proof of this is that students’ favourite things to read are things that another students have written.



From: Deanna, British Columbia

Having work published and read by others legitimizes work and “professionalizes” it. Students tend to work harder and longer on pieces that they know will be typed and published. How the piece looks — its “packaged” presentation — suddenly becomes a consideration.

By now, you have probably spent a lot of time with your student(s) producing a good amount of writing with a wide variety of themes, ideas and content. From this pile of uncorrected raw material, students can pull out some favorite pieces to take through the polishing process. It is unreasonable to imagine

editing and correcting every piece of writing a students does. As you write together, suggest to the students that they mark the pieces they like. Then when it's time to publish, they will have a collection to draw from. After students have done a lot of writing and are getting the hang of it, I have found that they are more willing and ready to think about grammar, spelling and what is required to improve their stories.

Audience

When students get to the point of wanting to publish work, there is something very important they need to consider: Who will the audience for the writing be? Who will be reading the finished piece?



From: Sherry, Ontario

Every time our town council tries to do something about the street people loitering, peeing, or drinking on our front street, the race card is played by some bands in the area. The problem is that not all people get a chance to be heard as to how they feel. A writing group where we could put writing in our local paper under editorials would be a way to help.

Audience can determine the length, the tone, the vocabulary and the content of a piece. It is important for writers to understand that even if we are the only ones who look at the words on the paper, without readers, there is little point in writing. There are three main audiences — ourselves, our peers (classmates, family, friends), and the general public. Some students are willing to have their work read by friends, but not by people they don't know. Some keep a journal just for themselves. And others take the step of putting their thoughts and ideas out there, for all the world to see. This is a very brave step.



From: Deanna, British Columbia

When students have an audience for their work, it places their work in a different category altogether from work they have written and then stuffed in a binder, or a drawer. An audience that extends beyond the confines of the workshop or classroom complicates and enriches one's role as a writer. When the work is published it becomes interactive — public property. People can react to it in a multiplicity of ways, bringing themselves, with all their prejudices and opinions and life experiences, to their understanding of the piece. It inevitably becomes

political. Social. Open for business. Works can elicit strong responses, positive and negative. It's risky.

Application

Part of determining the audience for published work is deciding on an application for the writing, a venue to showcase the work. Most of us think that publishing means putting words into book form, but there are many different ways and venues for celebrating writing. A definition that I like for the word “publishing” is “to put into circulation,” to put work “out there” for others to enjoy. To publish their work students can:

- Post writing on a bulletin board.
- Display writing on classroom walls.
- Send a letter to a friend or someone they admire.
- Write a column for a newspaper.
- Submit a letter to the editor.
- Submit an article or story to a magazine.
- Write a story for their program newsletter.
- Send writing to a provincial literacy newsletter.
- Write a story for their church bulletin.
- Enter a writing contest.
- Create or contribute to a family history book.
- Write captions for pictures in photo albums.

The National Adult Literacy Database (NALD) has a Story of the Week website at <www.nald.ca/STORY/story.htm> where student stories can be submitted by literacy instructors for publication on the web. There is also an archive of past stories that can act as good reading resource material for students.

There are so many different applications for writing. Writing can make a wonderful gift. I have two sons who write me a letter every Christmas as their gift to me. Those letters mean more to me than anything they could possibly have found in a store. For Mother's Day one year, Sharron wrote a poem for her mother that was published in our local paper as a tribute to all mothers. And last year for Christmas I wrote a story about each of my family members, based on my favourite memories of them. The possibilities are endless. Here's another idea.



From: Bonnie, Alberta

Last year the learners in the program produced their own cookbook. Each person brought a favorite recipe. Those working on computer skills helped type it out. It was very low-stress writing, but people really enjoyed seeing their work in our publication. We included some

student stories and poems in the cookbook which were on a Christmas theme. The cookbooks were given out as Christmas gifts to everyone in the program.

Polishing

I was unsure in which order to put the information in this chapter. Some writers write on a subject or story of interest to them first and then decide where they want to have their work published. Others identify the audience or the venue first, and write to suit that audience. Diane Mullen and her seniors group knew they were writing stories to be used as a resource for other seniors. They had a specific purpose and goal. But they also did a lot of writing on many different topics to eventually generate enough material to draw from.

Let's talk about the polishing process or that dreaded word, "rewriting." (I said earlier that "writers are people who write." Some would argue that writers are people who "rewrite"!)



From: Deanna, British Columbia

A huge difference between my fears about writing and the fears the students feel is that I have no fear of rewriting, and know that a first draft is only that. I am totally convinced that it's in the rewriting, after group critique, that one finds revelation about oneself, which allows for change. Everybody in our first Lifewriting group had big-time fears about looking at stuff again and reconsidering it, knowing what to keep and what to change and what was good and what wasn't... it froze people up just thinking about it. All were more than willing to correct spelling and grammar, but that's all they thought revision was about. The whole notion of taking an idea further, or (gasp) SCRATCHING OUT whole sections was pretty well inconceivable. I've found when I give anybody anything typed up with no technical errors, they treat the piece like it's written in stone — they can't bear to start scribbling on that tidy sheet!

There are many different ways to approach the process of revising and rewriting pieces of writing. The following is a step-by-step process that has worked well for the (now published) writers I have worked with over the years.

1. Choosing a piece of writing: When they are ready to publish, each writer chooses a piece they want to work on. The written pieces are typed, double-spaced, to allow for notes and changes. The students often type their own pieces on the computer or have a fellow student do it for them.

2. Personal reflection: Students spend time reading and reflecting on the writing they now have in print to decide if they still like the piece. If not, they choose another one.
3. Peer review for content and clarity: The next step is to read the piece to an audience. As a group, we sit around a table and listen to each other's stories. Everyone tells the writer what they liked about the story, and asks questions to clarify details or information that might be missing. Suggestions and encouragement are given to each writer.

With the feedback they've been given, the writers rework and rethink their ideas and rewrite the story. Then we go through the peer review process again. Following the same "round table" discussion format, the students read their stories again, and listen to the responses from their audience. The writers do not have to follow the suggestions of the listeners; they are just ideas for consideration. I totally agree with this quote by Robert Sommer from his book "Teaching Writing To Adults."

A writing student who is listening to and then commenting on another's work is learning as much as the one whose work is under consideration, for listening and analytical skills are as important to effective writing as understanding the rules for grammar and punctuation, probably more so. Further, the development of such skills enhances motivation. Writing students are accustomed to trying to please teachers, but most need to be encouraged to want to please themselves and one another. A teacher's best ally for encouraging such desire is the community of a classroom. (p. 84)

4. Grammar and spelling: Students work on their pieces a final time, this time paying special attention to grammar, spelling and punctuation. Because of the positive feedback they've received to this point, they are quite willing to do the work to make further improvements to their writing. The finished piece is retyped and if possible, desktop-published to have a polished, professional look.

Some group facilitators type up each piece a student writes so that the student develops a sense of himself as a writer from the very beginning. This works especially well for new writers who are uncomfortable with the way their handwriting looks. The facilitator collects writing from the group members at the end of the class and hands the typewritten pieces back to the students the next day. Some facilitators edit the work at the time they type out the work so the student can see "what's possible," and others type the work "as is" so the student can begin to see where changes might be appropriate.

Many writers and writing instructors, see editing as a complicated and intimidating process. We know that when we learn a song, we're going to hit some wrong notes before we get it right, and we know we're going to fall many times before we are able to tackle a ski hill with ease. It sounds funny to think

that if the first time we sang a song (no matter how it sounded) we said, “That’s it, I’m done.” It’s natural to try something many times before we get it right. Writing is like that, too. The words we put on paper are a starting point. Few writers get the words exactly as they want them on the first try, just as few singers are willing to record a song they’ve sung just once before.

It seems that most of us were taught that writing is the finished product, not a process of writing, thinking, rewriting, envisioning an audience and wanting to be so clear that no one ever has to read a sentence twice to understand what we mean. Our greatest learning comes through allowing ourselves to work with this process and not against it.

A lot of people think that rewriting means starting from scratch — throwing out the first draft and starting all over again. That does happen (a wastebasket can be a writer’s best friend), but most of the time, the words we started with are good ones. The raw material is there; we just need to structure, reshape and rework the material until the writing is clear and exactly what we want to say.

In groups where the students have stronger literacy skills, I have done an exercise where everyone gives a group mate a piece of their writing to be “corrected.” Instead of using red pens to draw attention to mistakes or what’s wrong with the writing, everyone uses a green pen and marks or circles what’s GOOD about the piece, what they like about it! This exercise focusses on the positive and really helps students get over “red pen anxiety.”

Group Projects

Over the three years that the Chapters Program was in operation, we produced six booklets of stories written by the students. These publications were a big success and a huge confidence-builder for the women who took part in each booklet project. Following the school calendar year, we did one publication in the fall and one each spring. The women chose the theme or topic, designed the layout and cover of the publication, learning to use computers as a tool for polishing their work. (We had a computer consultant who worked individually and with the group to do these publications.)

Working on a group publishing project brought up some interesting issues that had to be talked about with each publication. The students had to work together to agree which pieces would be included and which ones would have to be left out. They all had to feel comfortable with what was written in the booklets, since their names were connected with the publication. We would have to go back again to group guidelines and the idea of respecting each other’s ideas and needs. One student had written a very sad story about the death of her one-year-old daughter. She really wanted to include this writing, but the rest of the group was unsure because the booklet was entitled *Rainbows of Hope*, and they felt it was just too sad to put in the book. After a lot of discussion, the writer agreed to add a positive paragraph at the end of the story about how her baby daughter had been a blessing to her and how she now feels she has a guardian angel with her always.

Some writers will choose to use their full names, first name only, or a pen name. It's important that people have a choice as to how they want to be recognized when their work is published. I do encourage people to use their full names, however, because a number of writers I worked with were so proud of the publication that included their writing that they were sorry later that they only used their first names, and hadn't let themselves "show off" a bit more.

Colleen Hanscom and Deanna Arelis were facilitators of the two-year Lifewriting Group in Kelowna, British Columbia. Jacqui Hammett was a student in the program and later went through the training with Deanna and Colleen to become a Writing Out Loud Instructor. The Lifewriters produced two excellent publications that the students were very involved in and very proud of.



From: Colleen, British Columbia

Publishing work is risky, but neither Deanna nor I have ever had a student regret the decision to put their work into circulation. As far as I know, nothing horrible has happened as a result (of being published), and I've never seen any of the published writers later tearing their hair and howling: "Why did I do it? Why did I do it?" Quite the contrary. Most of the women came back, asking if they could get more copies of their book to give as gifts.



From: Jacqui, British Columbia

I have been lucky in the fact that I have been a part of getting my own work published in two different books. I know how wonderful it feels to see your first poem in a book that other people will be reading. I used to just stare at my work in total disbelief that it was mine. I was really high the day that we had our book launch. I bought copies for some of my family to show them what I did and they were in a way happy for me but they didn't really express how they felt. My friends thought it was really good and I was glad to hear it from them. The feelings are different for each individual. I think that if a person hasn't had that much success in their life they tend to really feel good and scared at the same time. People who have had a fair amount of success in their life might just see this as no big deal but it was a big deal to me.

Audiences really appreciate the honest, real writing found in student publications. Lynn Best in St. John's talks about what it was like to listen to students reading their writing.



From: Lynn, Newfoundland

While I personally have not been involved with publishing students' writing, I did have the opportunity several weeks ago to attend a launching of some new learning resources for Adult Basic Education. Four learners each had a book published and read excerpts from their books.

I was truly impacted by each of the readings. One man read about his road to and from hell as an alcoholic, another read about growing up on the Great Northern Peninsula, another about her family's history of being away from home. The fourth writer, an Innu man from Davis Inlet (a now infamous community re: gas sniffing among children) wrote about his experiences in that community. It was a powerful presentation and a wonderful learning experience for me.

What struck me most was the impact this had on the writers. There was a tremendous sense of pride and accomplishment in putting together this resource. While they seemed nervous at reading from their books, after a few sentences, it seemed to me that they were walking in a pair of very comfortable shoes. Listeners were blown away!

It was a tremendous experience for me as a listener; I felt I shared something important with the writer

I'd like to end this chapter with two heartwarming accounts of recent writing celebrations, one held in Red Lake, Ontario, and the other in Regina, Saskatchewan.



From: Catherine, Ontario

(March 2001) Our group has started plans for a coffee house. We want to invite the public to showcase their writing, their art work or their music. The high school will be invited to participate. They too need a chance to showcase their work. My learners are already talking about what they're going to write about!! Some are quite nervous about the idea of speaking in front of a group, but we'll see. I was talking with the high school about making a "smoky" atmosphere without the smoke. They even have that angle covered. There's some smoke machine that puts something into the air but it doesn't smell!! Evidently dry ice dissipates very quickly. The high school also will do the lighting and provide sound. We aren't going to charge admission, but we will charge for coffee and goodies. We're looking at Saturday April the 28 or May 5.

We're hoping to promote our Literacy Program as well as give the adults a chance to "publish" their work by reading it aloud to an audience — a chance to shine. It should be fun.

(April 2001) Seeing the individuals get up on stage at our Coffee House and read their writing and then hearing them talk about the experience was a "learning moment" for me as it really solidified the importance of "show casing" your work — reading it for an audience. A day doesn't go by when the topic of the coffee house doesn't come up and you can see people glow all over again. This weekend Literacy Northwest will be hosting its annual conference in Dryden and ALL of our learners that are attending will be reading something they wrote. And I didn't have to twist any arms!!

(February 2002) Last Saturday we held our second annual coffee house. It was a tremendous success. We had double the attendance of last year. We had displays of local artists' work — pottery, painting and drawing — some amateur, some professional. At seven o'clock we started the entertainment. We intermixed readings of poetry, short stories and essays with musicians and singers. We also had a mini fashion show by a woman who designs clothing and embellishes them with Native motifs from our area and that of the West Coast. Absolutely stunning. We also had two hilarious comedy routines. One by a high school senior and another by one of our learners. What a hoot! We also had a woman who did an interpretive dance. Beautiful. The audience was great. I noticed whenever it was one of our learners reading, you could hear a pin drop — it was that quiet. All comments have been positive. Everyone liked the variety.

One group said that they came only for a couple of hours but then stayed until the end — 11 p.m. because it was so good! Another commented on how the coffee house gave people a "voice" — those who wouldn't normally have one. Talk about writing out loud! Another said she couldn't get over how one of our learners had changed. She felt we had performed a miracle. I wasn't sure if two of our adults would actually get up on stage and read their writing, but they did. They were nervous, but they did it and they were beaming when they came off the stage. A painter sold one of his paintings, an art teacher made several connections with possible future students and a music festival organizer found some new talent!! All this for free, plus free coffee and goodies!! Not a bad deal, eh? We're still walking tall here at the Adult Learning Centre.



From: Diane, Saskatchewan

I'm on a high. We just did the book launch for *Something of Ourselves* — *Easy Reading for the Young at Heart*. This is the book that grew out of my involvement in the Writing Out Loud project and out of the desire for the tutors to produce suitable material for older Canadian literacy learners. The book includes 80 wonderful stories and memoirs written by, for, and with older adults. About a quarter of the submissions were written by learners. We are all so proud of our book. We have sold over 100 copies to date. The muse was with me when I wrote my words for today's presentation. I'll include them here. The name of our book launch was "Writers in Our Midst."


There are writers in our midst
Yet you would never know.
They don't wear colourful garb to stand out from others.
They are not long suffering artists in ivory towers.
These people may appear to have lived rather ordinary lives
Yet these are the writers in our midst.

Many of them learned how to make do with little
and sometimes less.
They had to be brave in the face of danger.
They raised children, had childhoods themselves.
And whether they struggled in school or excelled,
learned English first or later, the common bond is that
they are the writers in our midst.

(After all the writers had read — I came back to the first stanza of my poem:)


There are writers in our midst, etc...
They are not long suffering artists in ivory towers —
These people have lived!! And they have lived quite extraordinary
ordinary lives —
And these are the writers in our midst.

I had fun. It was a great event, and everyone was praised and
recognized. We will even be written up in the *Regina Leader Post* on
Friday. Woohoo!



Chapter Ten

Looking Back, Moving Forward



The following is a journal entry of mine that was included in the opening chapter of *Writing Out Loud*.

My journal entry February 28, 1997

Most of the students who came to the Chapters Program were discouraged with life. They were tired, bruised, scared and ready to give up. I have watched 30 women over the past 3 years gain confidence, laugh again, rediscover themselves as learners and build a new relationship with life and the world around them. I watched them wrestle with their thoughts and feelings as they put them on paper, and watched them smile when they read something out loud to others in the group that made sense and felt right. I still marvel at the fact that I was lucky enough to be part of all that.

I know that having a positive outlook works. And I know that writing works. I remember feeling really sure of that when one of the Chapters students returned from the U of A Hospital in Edmonton with a handful of pages she had written while she sat in a doctor's waiting room. She couldn't find any paper, so ended up writing 6 pages of thoughts and fears on the back of hospital maps that were on the table in the waiting room! Rosemarie laughed as she told us how she "just needed to write" and how she did whatever she had to do to find some paper to write on.

I am so grateful that being part of the Chapters Program meant that I also had the opportunity to write. Three years ago I only had a vague idea about what it meant to write from the heart. And now I can't imagine my life without time to write everyday. The brave spirited students I worked with are not the only ones to have found a voice. I, too, have discovered that I have pages to write and so much to say. I love writing out loud. I love the way it feels to scribble down the words on the page. Magic? (There's that word again.) Who knows.

Maybe I don't need to question it anymore, the magic I mean. So many people have told me that writing has come to mean more to them than they ever thought it would or could. They have found their own reasons for writing, their own magic, and that's all that matters.

I wrote this piece exactly five years ago and I still identify with and believe every word I wrote. I knew I was on the right track with my thinking about the benefits of writing, and also knew we still had so much more to explore and learn. This book, *More Writing Out Loud*, is proof of that. We have continued to build a community of writers who share in the basic premise of the Chapters Program — that writing helps people “gain confidence, laugh again, rediscover themselves as learners and build a new relationship with life and the world around them.”

I love the cover of this book. I love the peacefulness of it — the quiet but powerful thoughtfulness, solitude and reverence. When I look at the cover I see the music and the magic of words.

When Barb Hartmann was working on the painting for the cover design, we were brainstorming ideas and we both remembered the words of a John Denver song that we both loved.

Music makes pictures and often tells stories
all of it magic and all of it true.
And all of the pictures and all of the stories
All of the music and the magic is you.

Even with *More Writing Out Loud* now in circulation, we are not finished talking about the magic and the music of stories. We continue to believe in the magic that comes from the experience of writing and sharing words and stories with others. We are already working on a book that will help students with special interests discover the pleasures of writing. We are continuing to work with students and instructors in programs for seniors, women's groups, people in correctional institutions, and specially designed programs for youth and families. We are also very excited about new on-line writing programs that are being developed for people living in remote northern communities in Canada.

I am humbled and so pleased to learn that *Writing Out Loud* is also being used in high schools and other academic settings, as well as in social programs in women's shelters, government agencies and church groups. Our goal now is to create a National Writing Network to provide support to all the people who continue to bring their personal and professional energy and commitment to promoting the value of writing in literacy programming and beyond. More possibilities; more magic.



Practicums and Practical Examples

A key component of the Writing Out Loud Instructors training, was having the participants do a practicum — a hands-on opportunity to use what they were learning in the training. Some of the Instructors presented workshops in their communities or work settings. Here are two reports from two trainees who are now Certified Writing Out Loud Instructors. Both of their reports clearly indicate how effective the Writing Out Loud approach to writing can be.

Lynn Best — St. John's, Newfoundland

The Brother T. I. Murphy Centre in St. John's, Newfoundland has been offering a Journaling program for participants and staff of the centre since November of 2000. As the facilitator of the group, I would like to share our experiences with *Writing Out Loud*.

The Murphy Centre

The Brother. T. I. Murphy Centre was founded by the Irish Christian Brothers in 1984 to address the needs of the youth-at-risk population in the St. John's area. The Centre, which operates as an alternative environment, has evolved over time and currently offers three services to participants: Academic training through the High School Credit and Adult Basic Education Program; Career Services; and Life Style Education. The Centre is located in the downtown area of the city and currently has a population of approximately 250 participants involved in the various services. (For further information, website address is: www.murphycentre.nf.net)

Background to Journaling

The Murphy Centre has always had a vested interest in literacy and literacy development, and has sponsored a number of programs related to literacy. In October of 2000, we were very fortunate to have a visit from the Chapters group from Alberta. Several of our participants attended, as did individuals from other agencies. We quickly realized the power of this tool for literacy development, as well as personal development and group development. In November of 2000 we began our own writing group relying heavily on the *Writing Out Loud* resources.

The feed back from the group was very positive. In February, when our new term began, we invited newer and past participants to participate, and we currently have a group of 10 to 12 regular writers who attend weekly writing sessions. The average age of the group is 20 years old and they bring a wide variety of life experiences to the table.

What Worked

I think there are many keys to making our program a successful journaling program. Perhaps the most important one is the group guidelines. Using the ideas in *Writing Out Loud* as a guide, we asked the group what it would take for

this group to run smoothly. Not surprisingly, they identified many of the same points that are contained in the suggested guidelines. As facilitators, we sometimes had to gently remind individuals of the agreed upon guidelines, but eventually the group began to take responsibility for this themselves.

Following the development of the guidelines, we explained the process of journaling and how a typical session would run. For our first session, we developed a number of activities that would allow people to write about other things they would like to write about and how they would like to write about them. This formed the basis of our planning the sessions. Involving participants in the process helps them feel part of it and keeps their interest because sessions can be designed around specific group and individual interests.

Equally important, we found respect for individuals and their writing is a huge part of having this work well. All participants in the group are equal members, including facilitators. Fortunately, the Murphy Centre has at its very core, the concept of respect ingrained into the mission statement and philosophy, so it is not a foreign concept to participants.

We have a number of individuals who come regularly to the group, who write ferociously, but who share nothing. At first, I was a little concerned, however, I found that checking in with participants like this after the session is beneficial because they will tell you if the process is going okay. And I must remind myself that they are still coming, so it is good for them.

We recently took a field trip to the Fluvarium, which is a freshwater resource centre, complete with underground views of the trout in the Rennies River. We went there to provide another venue for writing and have people reflect a little on nature and what we do not usually see. This was a wonderful trip, that produced some interesting writing on ourselves and nature. Getting out of our usual four walls is very good!

What Didn't Work

In retrospect, I think the only thing that did not work was people not reading their writing, but getting sidetracked into telling their story. Often the story was part of the writing, but might go into something more conversational. This had the potential to take us to unsafe places. To address this, we reinforced with the group that we wanted the focus to be writing, not conversational storytelling. A participant could, however, tell a story through writing.

What I Have Learned

Where to begin? Forgive the random notes, but here I go...

- Everyone can write!
- Writing helps people connect to themselves, one another and their environment.
- We are complex, multifaceted creatures

- We can learn from others all the time if we take the time.
- Writing brings out huge revelations from within ourselves.
- Young people have important things to say.
- Humor is healing.
- Writing is a great escape from whatever you want to escape from.
- Writing increases self-esteem because other people are genuinely interested in what you write.
- Participants will commit to longer programs if it meets their needs.
- “Writing Out Loud” is an excellent resource that has many applications!

Recommendations

My only recommendation is, and this will sound suspiciously like a Nike commercial, but “Just do it!”, and keep on doing it. Given all things, the background work with the group, the training, the guidelines and the development of material, I think this is important work for literacy development as well as personal development and it needs to be done.

Sally Lavern — Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island

The Writing Out Loud project² was an experience I will not forget, nor will my students. It was a journey that increased self-confidence and self-esteem. While going through the modules we reflected on our pasts and we contemplated our futures. We found humour and we found friendship.

Every year I see adults who begin school in the fall with low self-confidence, low self-esteem, and who are extremely afraid. A huge part of my job is to help them build their confidence and believe in themselves. Most of the time I see them “bloom” throughout the school year. It always amazes me each year when I literally see the transformations take place before my eyes.

I am convinced that using *Writing Out Loud* contributed to increasing their self-confidence level. The learners began to believe in themselves — they could write! One male student shared with our group that before going to school he used to break out into a cold sweat at the thought of filling out a form. He suffered a great deal of anxiety when he had to write. He now tells me his fears have diminished and his confidence has increased since being involved with Writing Out Loud.

As an instructor I found the *Writing Out Loud* exercises to be user friendly. The step by step instructions made my job very easy. I liked the fact that I didn’t have to do them in order. It was a refreshing break from a sometimes rigid curriculum for me as well as the students. In an ever changing world the flexibility of *Writing Out Loud* works well in today’s classroom.

² Sally ran a writing program for adult students at The P.E.I. Institute of Adult and Community Education called the Writing Out Loud project which used *Writing Out Loud* as a key resource.

Since our program started in late September, the group was nicely bonded by the time we started Writing Out Loud in November. Probably because this group bonded so well during the initial startup of the program, adding Writing Out Loud to our day seemed to go smoothly. There may have been a few fears, at the beginning, but everyone was at least willing to try. I believe the guidelines and the option to pass put everyone at ease.

It wasn't long before it was just routine to them. First thing every morning I would pass out their journals to them and we would begin our day with writing. I remember the day I walked into class and they all had their journals at their desks waiting to begin. I knew at that point that they liked Writing Out Loud.

Naturally there were some ideas in the book that turned out to be more difficult than others; some we enjoyed more than others; some gave us lots of laughs; some gave us tears. From the module, "Taking Risks," it became a catch phrase in our classroom, "Why do you know this for sure?" One of my personal favorites was, "Things I do not miss." Here's my entry for that module:

I do not miss my ex-husband
I do not miss garter belts and nylon stockings
I do not miss paper \$1 and \$2 bills
I do not miss black and white TV
I do not miss telephone with cords

We had a lot of laughs with this writing exercise. Most of the learners thought I was telling my age by what I had written.

Through all the writing modules I saw a new writing confidence develop. The student's writing improved in all of their work. By January when they were asked to write essays, they no longer had a pained look on their faces that had been there back in the fall. It also seemed we were learning spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and the parts of speech. They wanted to know how everything fit together. They were eager to learn because they knew more knowledge would help them polish their written pieces.

Sharing their written work, in my opinion, had a profound effect. Probably in the beginning there was more fear in reading their pieces out loud, than writing them. However, as time went on their confidence soared. Their nervousness lessened, stories were validated, we really got to know each other, and lasting friendships were formed. We were sharing our lives together and learning together.

As I reflect on the school year there are several things that come to mind. I believe the guidelines for any writing group are essential. Adults entering into any literacy program are coming in with a variety of issues, different life experiences, and perhaps coming from another country. It is imperative to create safety, comfort, and respect. Group guidelines help to achieve this type of environment.

In the classroom environment I always have lived by this; never ask a student to do something I wouldn't do myself. *Writing Out Loud* allowed me to stay true to what I personally believe in. We wrote together, read together, laughed and cried together, shared together, and we learned together. Does it get any better than that? I think not!

Another thought I have when I reflect on the year is whether I'm teaching math or the parts of speech, I always tell my students this: when you first started to ride bicycle you probably weren't very good. In fact you probably fell down a lot, but you got back up and tried again. The more you practice the better you become. The same goes for this writing project. The more they wrote, the better they became. It was a great journey for all of us!

Throughout my years of teaching adults and during this project it is clearer to me than ever before that confidence and belief in oneself are key. When students enter our program and their confidence and self-esteem levels are down on the floor, academics is the last thing I'm going to be able to teach them. I may as well go home and teach my dog a new trick. Deborah says it so nicely in the "Building Confidence" chapter, "Some people say that people gain confidence once they learn new skills; I would argue that once confidence (or faith in oneself) is established, new skills are learned with greater commitment and energy." I would also argue that same point. Building confidence is the key. When it is established everything else will follow.

What It's All About

I wanted to end *More Writing Out Loud* with this story about a writing workshop held in a correctional institution. It is a story of hope, courage and humour, and one instructor's determination. Written by Carolyn Krenzler from Whitehorse, Yukon this story is very simply, what it's all about.

Almost a month ago, the instructor of Yukon College campus of Whitehorse Correctional Center agreed to let me present my writing workshop to his class during their afternoon classes on Thursday, March 22. I would have approximately two hours. I had worked as a level one instructor for this campus for about six months a few years ago, so I basically knew what I was letting myself in for.

The enrollment varies: all levels of academic achievement, ages 18 to ?, possibly both genders as it is a co-ed prison, hard exteriors with attitude, probably FAS or FAE or other learning disabilities in at least 30%, and attendance in 75% of the students motivated by being paid (however small a sum it may be) and receiving other rewards such as access to computer games instead of boring no-TV-during-the-day dorm time. Yukon Learn's tutoring program, which is what I am responsible for in this prison, services the same population. Oh yes, I knew!

- My group that day consisted of one female and anywhere from six to ten males, the variable being:
- one requested absence for a bathroom break that lasted one-half hour (when he returned, one or two of his classmates suggested that he write about **that** experience).
- one definite dropout (fifteen minutes into the workshop).
- three or four less-obvious dropouts (accomplished by successive smaller moves towards the door or the coffee pot rather than one grand exit).
- two or three late stragglers (who will be docked one-half day's pay for being late).

After a brief introduction to the course and stating the reason I was there, I started by identifying fears people have about writing, adding reassurances why these fears were unfounded or how they could be overcome. I shared some of the testimonials provided in the Writing Out Loud course as proof of the benefits to be had from writing. I searched faces for a flicker of interest. I had prepared handouts from *If You Can Talk You Can Write* by Joel Saltzman, and briefly touched on some of the key phrases. Then I enthusiastically launched into "Fearless Freewriting." That launched my first dropout right out of the door. The rest put pen to paper. At the end of the five minute writing time, no one would read what they had written — except me, of course, but one student did say that he thought the words were starting to come easier after the first two or three minutes.

Encouraged, I bounced into "Sensory Writing." I went over another handout with them in which I had summarized and gave examples of how to use the five senses. This produced one voluntary exchange with a student. He said, "This example contains mixed metaphors. It's an example of poor writing. Jalapenos don't sting your tongue or bite and claw their way down your throat." I allowed that maybe it wasn't the best example of good writing, but it was only intended to serve the purpose of giving the idea of what was meant. I felt a little more encouraged! At least he wasn't playing computer games in his mind or doodling bare-breasted women on his paper.

Great! So, how about a little descriptive writing now, guys (and gal). Describe, but don't name, some object. Again all pens to the paper. Five minutes. One complains, "I'm not done yet!" Ten minutes. He's still not done, but everyone else was 1000 volts on pause. Okay. Anyone want to share what they've written? Dead-faced silence. The assistant instructor verbally wiggled the paper from a student sitting next to him and silently read it. When he expressed his obvious and sincere approval, the student reticently agreed to it being read out loud.



"I'm staring at this white object. Little black lines and dots and squiggles magically appear..." it began. He was describing the paper he was writing on. I got the GBT's!³ Another student, when pressed by the assistant instructor, read out a lengthy algebraic equation he's been working on. Unwittingly, he'd scored! We told him it was a unique descriptive sentence. (So what if he was doing math during writing class!) I read my description — they all guessed what it was and seemed to intone that it shouldn't be **that** easy to guess, as though you scored points if you stumped your readers (listeners). Hmmmm...what did I miss here! A quick review to clarify. Whatever!

Fact vs Feeling. A bit of definitive preamble, and then a simple fill-in-the-blanks exercise. I handed out a short, widely-spaced paragraph of the "bones" of an accident involving a pedestrian and an automobile. First, fill in the details as a reporter would for a newspaper. Second, re-word it as you would tell the incident to a friend in a letter. Pens to paper for detail exercise #1, and wallah! The mixed-metaphor-identifying student offered to read his. He had added a few basic descriptives — drunken man, green truck, etc. Sand, sand, sand — and then there it was: the gold! "...he stepped face-first off the dirty curb." Wow! More GBT's. A second student volunteered to read his writing without any prompting at all. Good detail, not astounding, but good. Definitely getting the idea.

Okay, how about detail exercise #2? Blank looks. Okay, let's do this orally. Five minutes of student-inflicted monologue from me, and okay, let's not do this at all. Feeling isn't something you do in a jail (why didn't I remember that! duh!), at least not openly in public — unless, of course, you count angry profanity for which they could be sent to the "hole." But that in itself is a positive statement, raising their status in the "tough" department by several points in the eyes of their cellmates.

Recovery mode. Blackboard time. Noun/verb lists. Lots of participation! Some coaching produced excellent coupling of nouns and verbs: computer thinking out loud; book painting pictures in my mind; car fighting off traffic. I'm on a roll! Branching. I used the topic suggested in the example given in "Writing From the Heart": upset. I began to branch. Aha! They can relate. I get suggestions as fast as I can write. Lots of causes for "upset" in prison. Maybe a good time to take a stab at group discussion before we write about it. "Anything you want to add or suggest?" I look around tentatively. "Any questions?" A brief, but total silence. Then from the paper-describing student in the corner, "Yeah. Are you through?"

³ "GBT's" is an expression that came from the students in the Chapters Program. When the women heard writing that moved them, or got to them in some way, they got goose bumps. They rated writing they liked by the Goose Bump Test or the Goose Bump Theory or whether it gave them "GBT's".

Well, come to think of it, I probably should be if I'm not. I distribute my last handout on "Writing is Re-writing" (you're not getting rid of me **that** easy) while speeling out as much encouraging prattle as I could muster. I projected their afternoon's writings, 90% of which I had no idea of their content, into a glorious future of endless possibilities. Then a deep breath, and I courageously ventured, "Has anything we said or did here today changed your opinion of writing?" Two or three headshakes, one or two mumbled declarations of "Nah! I still hate it!" and the rest blank looks. "How about I let you out fifteen minutes early," I smile. The room half-empties in record-breaking fire drill time — the most enthusiasm I've seen all afternoon.

While I was collecting my papers and composure, the instructor came over and asked me, "Did you learn anything today?"

"Lots!" I grinned. "Never a day goes by that I don't learn something." Then, pensively, "What I **really** need to learn is how to pass on the love of writing that I feel."

He smiled wanly, shrugged, asked me for the unused copies of my handouts, and cordially invited me to return, "anytime." Then he, the assistant instructor and I talked "writing" for the next ten minutes. From the corner of my eye, I noticed three or four students lingering within earshot. Later, walking to my office, I saw one of them hand a piece of paper to the assistant instructor. "Here's a story you can use in the project," he gruffly let out. I chuckled. I love those guys. Today's seeding will germinate with tomorrow's sunshine and rain.





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Sharron, Barb, and Alice. (2000). *Fearless freewriting*. Edmonton, AB: Learning at the Centre Press.

Sommer, R.F. (1989). *Teaching writing to adults*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Suggested Readings

Albert, Susan Wittig (1996). *Writing from within*. New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons

Our life stories shape who we are and how we relate to the world. Albert has provided a guided writing program to help women write about their lives, chapter by chapter.

Ayres, E. (2000). *Writing the wave*. New York, NY: Perigee Writing.

A book full of writing ideas, *Writing the Wave* takes you through easy, short exercises to help you begin writing. These wonderful exercises are meant to be prompts for memory and further writing.

Ballenger, B. and Lane, B. (1996). *Discovering the writer within: 40 days to more imaginative writing*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books.

Donald M. Murray writes, "Ballenger and Lane are master teachers who stimulate and instruct... Their exercises are practical, workable and fun with a purpose. And this text isn't just for beginning writers."

Bender, S. (2000). *A year in the life: Journaling for self-discovery*. Cincinnati, OH: Walking Stick Press.

This book takes you through an entire year of journaling. The book is split into four seasons. At the end of each season there is time set aside to reflect on what has been written. Through the processes of introspective writing and reflection, you begin to understand your memories and your life.

Bender, S. (2001). *Keeping a journal you love*. Cincinnati, OH: Walking Stick Press.

Bender provides the reader with instructions, examples, writing prompts, and inspiration for journal writing. She shows us how to create a sanctuary for writing about our lives, digging into our memories, and growing mentally and spiritually.

Bender, S. (1995). *Writing personal essays: How to shape your life experiences for the pages*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books.

Following the themes of "writing what you know" and "everyone's stories are important," Bender gives us insights on how to find the threads that connect our life stories to each other. Through examples and instruction she shows us how all experiences, even everyday ones, become interesting and readable stories.

Berg, E. (1999). *Escaping into the open: The art of writing true*. New York, NY: Perennial.

"With wit and honesty, Elizabeth Berg provides numerous exercises that will unleash individual creativity and access and utilize all of the senses."

Bryant, R.J. (1999). *Anybody can write: A playful approach*. Novato, CA: New World Library.

Bryant shows the reader how to play with words and enjoy the activity of writing. Through various “write-brain” activities, she inspires writers to pick up their pens to enhance their lives.

Calgary John Howard Society. (2001). *Selected writings and activities*. Calgary, AB: Author.

This book was written by the Students of the CJHS Literacy Program. The Calgary John Howard Society can be contacted at (403) 543-7824.

Cameron, J. (1999). *Right to write*. New York, NY: J.P. Tarcher.

This uplifting book is organized into a series of themed essays, each with an “invitation” to write on that theme. The writing ideas are a helpful way to examine the reasons why we write, and discover how much we really gain.

Canfield, J., Hansen, M. V., Gardner, B. (2000). *Chicken soup for the writer’s soul*. Deer Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc.

This book is full of inspirational stories about writing and sharing words.

Davidoff Kelton, N. (1997). *Writing from personal experience: How to turn your life into salable prose*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer’s Digest Books.

“Nancy Davidoff Kelton takes you step by step through getting it down and getting it out.” She describes the process of uncovering your memories and emotions through exercises and personal stories.

Elbow, P. (1998). *Writing with power: Techniques for mastering the writing process*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

“Elbow provides the reader (and writer) with various methods: for getting words down on paper, for revising, for dealing with an audience, for getting feedback on a piece of writing, and still other recipes for approaching the mystery of power in writing.”

Elbow, P. (1998). *Writing without teachers*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Elbow describes an alternate “writing process” avoiding planning, outline and other pre-writing strategies in favor of getting the words on paper. He goes on to explain how to set up a classroom situation without a teacher and how to respond to writing.

Engstrom, E. and Tullius, J. (2000). *Word by word: An inspirational look at the craft of writing*. Eugene, OR: Writers House Books.

The book is comprised of essays that were originally presentations at the Maui Writers Conference. Over 35 writers, including Jackie Collins, Richard Paul Evans and Mitch Albom, describe how they see the craft of writing. The book is an interesting insight into the business of writing as well as the personalities of some of our favorite authors.

Farris Hughes, E. (1992). *Writing from the inner self*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.

Hughes combines the ideas of meditation and self reflection to provide the readers with a number of exercises. The exercises are organized into sections with titles like “Clearing Out,” “Seeing Deeper,” and “Pushing Beyond.”

Golberg, N. (2000). *Thunder and lightening: Cracking open the writer’s craft*. Toronto, ON: Bantam Books.

This sequel to *Writing Down the Bones* and *Wild Mind* describes the process of taking inspiration and creating a polished work. Goldberg shows us how to preserve our one-of-a-kind voice and the way we see the world while producing a clear piece of writing.

Goldberg, N. (1986). *Writing down the bones*. Boston, MA: Shambhala.

Through personal anecdotes and clear prose, Goldberg breaks down the writing and creative process for all writers and would-be writers. Her direct and humourous approach to writing makes you want to grab your pencil and dive in.

Golub, M. (1999). *I’d rather be writing*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer’s Digest Books.

Golub describes her book as “a guide to finding more time, getting more organized, completing more projects and having more fun.”

Heffron, J. (2000). *The writer’s idea book*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer’s Digest Books.

Heffron gives us over 400 writing prompts and exercises to help us generate ideas and turn our writing into something wonderful. With chapter titles like “I Yam What I Yam and Other Lies” and “Minding Other People’s Business,” this fun book offers lots of writing ideas and inspiration for aspiring writers.

Horsman, J. (1999). *Too scared to learn*. Toronto, ON: McGilligan Books.

Horsman examines learning and teaching through the impacts of violence in women’s lives. From research gathered from learners, instructors and therapists she gives a new insight into how violence changes the way we learn and teach.

Klauser, H.A. (2000). *Write it down, make it happen*. New York, NY: Scribner.

This dynamic book uses writing as a means to set goals and to reach them. She describes how to create balance, look inside yourself and see what you really want out of life. It is an energizing book that helps your writing as well as your sense of where you can go.

Lamott, A. (1995). *Bird by bird: Some instructions on writing and life*. Toronto, ON: Anchor Books.

"A gift to all of us mortals who write or ever wanted to write... sidesplittingly funny, patiently wise and alternately cranky and kind – reveille to get off our duffs and start writing *now*, while we still can." — Seattle Times

Maisel, E. (1999). *Deep writing: 7 principles that bring ideas to life*. New York, NY: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam.

"*Deep Writing* reveals the seven principles that break through mental roadblocks and slay psychological demons, freeing you to write with passion, purpose, and meaning."

Messer, M. (2001). *Pencil dancing*. Cincinnati, OH: Walking Stick Press.

Pencil Dancing shows us how to free our creative spirit. Messer uses writing as her example, but shows how everyone – painters, parents or scientists – can be just as creatively productive.

Moon, J. (2001). *Stirring the waters: Writing to find your spirit*.

Boston, MA: Journey Editions.

Through nine weeks of exercises, Moon inspires readers to find their spiritual selves. It shows how writing can change our lives.

Morgan, D. (2001). *Writing out loud*. Edmonton, AB: Grass Roots Press.

The preceding book to *More Writing Out Loud*, this book of simple, interactive writing exercises is geared toward the literacy field. The book takes the reader through easy starter exercises through to more introspective and personal themes.

O'Conner, P. (1999). *Words fail me. What everyone who writes should know about writing*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Inc.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution says O'Conner is "smart about the little things as well as the essentials...This isn't just nuts-and-bolts mechanics. It's the deft touch that makes craftsmen of carpenters and artists, sometimes, of workaday writers."

***Personal journaling*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest.**

This magazine is full of information about writing. However, the section called "Prompts for Your Pen" is especially helpful as it offers pages of great writing ideas.

Phillips, J. (1997). *Marry your muse: Making a lasting commitment to your creativity*. Wheaton, IL: Quest Books.

Following the format of the Artist's Creed, Phillips shows us the creative process from the inside out. She inspires artists of every medium to create, and express with new clarity and consistency.

Ramsland, K. (2000). *Bliss: Writing to find your true self*. Cincinnati, OH: Walking Stick Press.

Ramsland shows us how, through various writing exercises, we can open our hearts and souls to discover who we are and what we want. With this personal clarity, we can discover the paths that we should follow in career and life.

Reeves, J. (1999). *A writer's book of days: A spirited companion & lively muse for the writing life*. Novato, CA: New World Library.

This book is full of ideas, inspiration, advice, and activities. There are daily writing prompts, as well as mini-workshops and information on writer's block and getting to the heart of your writing. A very readable, accessible book.

Saltzman, J. (1993). *If you can talk, you can write*. New York, NY: Warner Books.

This practical guide to dealing with the "Killer P's — Perfectionism, Paralysis and Procrastination" is written in short, humorous chapters. Saltzman inspires the reader/writer to let go of grammar rules and have fun with writing.

Selling, B. (1998). *Writing from within*. Alameda, CA: Hunter House.

Selling provides the reader the inspiration and motivation to begin writing about one's life. Through practical ideas of recording and examining memories through childhood to adulthood, he encourages the reader to put pen to paper and share it with a group.

Sher, G. (1999). *One continuous mistake: Four noble truths for writers*. New York, NY: Penguin Arkana.

Using the "four noble truths," Sher describes her approach to the creative process. Sher helps both novice and experienced writers to develop relaxed alertness, avoid distraction... and develop a daily writing practice."

Sobel, E. (1994). *Wild heart dancing: A personal, one-day quest to liberate the artist and lover within*. Toronto, ON: Simon & Schuster.

Sobel provides a step-by-step program allowing the reader to play at ways of expressing him or herself through writing, painting, and other fun arts. It is an inspirational way to learn about our own creative processes.

Stone, R. (1996). *The healing art of storytelling: A sacred journey of personal discovery*. New York, NY: Hyperion.

Stone discusses the need for a storytelling tradition to help us heal, grieve, build esteem, and face uncertainty. He shows us how writing our own small stories brings clarity and purpose to our lives.

Ueland, B. (1987). *If you want to write: A book about art, independence and spirit*. Saint Paul, MN: Gray Wolf Press.

Women's Review of Books says "Brenda Ueland demonstrates her message: she writes with love and enthusiasm, in a direct, simple, passionate and true way. I only have to read a few sentences and I am infected with the desire to follow her."

Walton, T. and Toomay, M. (2000). *The writer's path: A guidebook for your creative journey*. Toronto, ON: Ten Speed Press.

Long time writing partners Walton and Toomay offer down-to-earth guidance for writing. Their book of “exercises, essays, and examples” covers everything from creating intriguing characters to starting a writing group.

Zinsser, W. (1994). *On writing well*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.

Written in a technical but comfortable manner, this book provides excellent information on style, audience and other mechanical concerns. Writing is described as thinking and talking on paper. Zinsser explains that while clarity is important, so is finding your own voice.

Zinsser, W. (1989). *Writing to learn*. New York, NY: Perennial Library.

Zinsser tackles the subject of clarity in writing about any subject, while describing how to use writing as a learning tool. Through discussion and examples he describes the benefits of writing across the curriculum as a means to master new material.

Guided Journals

Guided journals are a helpful way to work through our thoughts and feelings in a structured format. They focus our thoughts and give us the prompts we need to put our hearts on paper. There are many great guided journals out there, but these four are especially well done.

Conley-Weaver, R. (2001). *What really matters to me*. Cincinnati, OH: Walking Stick Press.

By focusing on what is really important in our lives, we are more free to enjoy life.

Mazza, J. (2001). *From dreams to discovery*. Cincinnati, OH: Walking Stick Press.

This is a wonderful journal to record your dreams and begin connecting common symbols and themes to develop meaning.

Mazza, J. (2001). *Things that tick me off!* Cincinnati, OH: Walking Stick Press.

This book gives us a safe place to vent our daily frustrations and look at what we can do to minimize anger in our lives.

Shreeve, C. (2001). *Life is good*. Cincinnati, OH: Walking Stick Press.

This bright gratitude journal is filled with wonderful quotes, writing ideas and illustrations that help us look at the good things in life.



Tiberio, M. (2001). *The book of self-acquaintance*. Cincinnati, OH: Walking Stick Press.

Tiberio helps the reader open up memory and do an in-depth look at our belief systems.

Web Pages

Writing Ideas

www.richmond.edu/~wac/grpwrite.html

There are lots of ideas for group writing exercises.

www.prairievoices.com/write/writpage.html

It is designed to inspire children to write, but the writing ideas can be adapted to any age group. There is even a space to type in a response to the prompts.

www.uoregon.edu/~leslieob/pizzaz.html

This fantastic website is full of writing ideas. The page is easy to read, and the information is very helpful.

teenwriting.about.com/mbody.htm

There is lots of information on writing fiction but also some good writing ideas. Use the menu on the left of the page to navigate to what interests you.

www.jot.org

The Journal of Ordinary Thought is a journal of student writings and art produced four times a year. The submissions are amazing, and provide great material writing prompts. It is also a wonderful example of how strong and professional student publications can be.

www.storycircle.org

The Story Circle Network, founded by Susan Wittig Albert, is interested in helping women to write and tell their life stories. This page provides a safe place for women to share and create their stories. The on-line writing circles are personal and supportive.

Literacy Services and Organizations

www.literacyservices.com

Grassroots Press webpage.

www.nald.ca/lca.htm

Literacy Coordinators of Alberta Web Page.

www.nald.ca

National Adult Literacy Database webpage.

aaal.ab.ca

Alberta Association for Adult Literacy webpage.

Author's Sites

www.campsark.com

This is a wonderful web page about the world of Sark – uplifting and fun.

www.mystic-ink.com/index.html

Click on Site Contents and choose from many writing-related topics from Writing Tips to Conferences. There is also lots of information on Julia Cameron and her book, The Right To Write.

www.nataliegoldberg.com

This is Natalie Goldberg's personal site, with information on her books and workshops.

www.creativewritingcenter.com

This is the site for author Elizabeth Ayres Center for Creative Writing. It lists books and workshops and encourages creative writing.

www.henrietteklauser.com

This author of Write It Down, Make It Happen offers workshops and consulting.

www.wvu.edu/~lawfac/jelkins/writeshop/elbow.html

This site is full of notes from Peter Elbow's book Writing Without Teachers.

Other interesting sites

www.soulfulliving.com

This site is an on-line guide to help you find your inner self and soothe the soul. There is lots of interesting reading on personal and spiritual growth.

www.ncte.org/teacherfest

This is a web site offering information and support to teachers. It is based in the U.S., but it has interesting information including lesson plans.

www.forthelittleonesinside.com/

This is a beautiful site about women finding and building a protected place for their inner children, with lots of great personal stories.



About the Author



Over the past 16 years, Deborah Morgan has worked in the field of adult literacy as a program coordinator, tutor, instructor, researcher, writer, program developer, and special project manager. She is the Past President of the Alberta Association for Adult Literacy as well as Past President of the Literacy Coordinators of Alberta. Her first book, *Opening Doors*, documented the lived experiences of literacy workers in Alberta, Canada. Her well-received second book, *Writing Out Loud*, has gained a following in Canada and around the world.

Deborah received the Canada Post 2000 Educator's Award in recognition of her groundbreaking work with the nationally acclaimed *Write to Learn Program*. She has also been honoured with the International Reading Association Carl Brawn Literacy Award in 1996, the Alberta Literacy Award of Merit in 1998 and the Camrose Chamber of Commerce Education Award in 1999.

Deborah lives in Camrose, Alberta with her family. She welcomes your comments and questions: deborah_morgan@eLit.ca.

Check out the Writing Out Loud website at writingoutloud.ca