

**TEN Ideas
That Get Kids
Writing**

from the National Writing Project

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About the **National Writing Project** . . .

For almost 30 years, the National Writing Project has been working to improve the teaching of writing in the nation's schools. Central to our effort is the belief that successful teachers are the best teachers of teachers. We believe many of the most useful ideas about teaching writing emerge from the classrooms of teachers who are doing the work.

Every day of their teaching lives, NWP teachers and all writing teachers must confront a key question: How do I motivate my students to want to write?

While the NWP does not believe there is any single "correct" way to teach writing, we are pleased to offer strategies that NWP teachers have found successful.



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Writing need not begin and end at the classroom door.

Judith Ruhana, a teacher-consultant with the Chicago Area Writing Project, built a writing unit around the Skokie Northside Sculpture Garden. At the garden, her students from Evanston Township High School in Evanston, Illinois, immersed themselves in over 50 works of outdoor sculpture. Working in groups, students examined all the pieces, then chose one for their focus. They photographed it, rendered it in an artistic representation, and wrote poetry, songs, descriptions, and short stories inspired by the piece. Each group contributed to a performance, attended by family members, that spotlighted the class's work in the garden. In addition to the written work, there were poster presentations, a video show, musical compositions, and even a dance.

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Writing can connect kids to their communities.

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Diane Babcock wanted her third-graders at Olivia Park Elementary School in Everett, Washington, to better understand the world their grandparents had known. Babcock, a teacher-consultant with the Puget Sound Writing Project, paired her students and prepared them to visit the Seabrook Assisted Living Center in Seabrook, Washington, where each team interviewed one of the residents.

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Students had brainstormed questions that led seniors to talk about everything from World War II to daily life in 1930s rural America.

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Ultimately, students wrote a narrative about their senior partners, adding photos and other imagery, and presented their creations to the folks at Seabrook.

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Kids like to write to other kids.

Myron Berkman was teaching a polyglot group of students at Newcomer High School in San Francisco. Out of this diverse group, he wanted to create a community while advancing the English skills of these immigrant students. It occurred to Berkman, a teacher-consultant with the Bay Area Writing Project, that he could put himself in the background and allow the students to write to one another about what they were learning. His peer journal project soon had paired students from cultures as diverse as Vietnam and India, writing to each other about the holiday traditions of their lands of origin and evaluating the life and work of Mahatma Ghandi, the personality they were studying in their social studies class. Says Berkman of peer journaling: "Focusing on important communication with a friend, students are thinking not at all about the writing proficiency test, yet with most every exchange they are becoming demonstrably more proficient writers."

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Students write best about what concerns them most.

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Janet Swenson, director of the Red Cedar Writing Project in Michigan, is one of the creators of Write for Your Life. The core idea of Write for Your Life is that important issues in students' lives should be at the center of their learning. After brainstorming what these issues are, students spend time in a reading/writing workshop setting, researching and writing on their concern, be it a toxic landfill in the area of the school or the prevalence of asthma among the student population. Swenson and her colleagues believe that whatever writing students do should seek an audience beyond the classroom. For example, one student created a firsthand chronicle of her journey through anorexia. She wrote to her teacher, "I wanted to let you know that I let my doctor read my paper and he is now using it to show the other patients. I felt very proud of myself. In a small way I accomplished my goal, to help other people not go through what I have gone through."

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Students are motivated to write when good writing is recognized.

At the Oklahoma Writing Project, which she directs, Janis Cramer and her colleagues sponsor a writing workshop/contest for students. The event occurs in two stages. In the fall, up to 250 students of writing project teachers attend an instructional and motivational workshop. Writing project teacher-consultants give demonstrations with titles like, "I Would Love to Write If Only I had Something to Say" and "Life Sentences: A Journey into the Interior." Then the students are on their own. They submit writing in a number of categories and they return in the spring for another workshop and announcement of the winners. As the contest is a yearly event, those who do not receive top awards one year are usually motivated to try the next year. Said one parent of her son: "This is a boy who is a good student but who never goes above and beyond what the teacher demands in class. When I asked him what he was up to, he told me 'I plan to win next year's writing contest, so I better get to work now.'"

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Young writers need to do real writing.

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Karen Brown, a teacher-consultant with the Oregon Writing Project at Eastern Oregon University, had a problem. She wanted parents of her students at Columbia Middle School in Irrigon, Oregon, to be familiar with the rubric used to score the Oregon State Writing Assessment. Unfortunately, according to Brown, the rubric was written in “polysyllabic eduspeak.” Her solution: Why not have some of her students translate the document into language the community at large would understand, and, in the process, get a better grasp on the rubric themselves? So her students created explanations like “Organization: In organization we look for an introduction that would make the reader interested. The paper tells things in an order that makes sense. Details in the paper need to go together. The paper needs to have a conclusion that does not go on too long or stop too abruptly.”

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Children benefit when parents are part of the literacy loop.

Toby Curry, a sixth-grade teacher at the Dewey Center in Detroit, Michigan, and a teacher-consultant with the Red Cedar Writing Project, has created the Roving Parent Journal, which she describes as “a doorway into the classroom.” The journal is a sturdy spiral notebook that circulates among parents, who write entries in response to Curry and to each other. As to what parents write, there are wide parameters. One parent wrote about girls in sports, another stressed the importance of multicultural education. When a parent makes an entry, Curry answers in the journal and also sends a copy of what she has written directly home to the parent.

“I try to nudge the conversation,” Curry says. “When a parent makes a long entry, I synthesize it, looking for points of general interest. A parent asks ‘what about spelling?’ and this gives me a chance to discuss how to do a spell check with kids.”

The Roving Parent Journal, “about as low tech as you can get,” creates a virtual classroom community where parents have a chance to connect with one another, modeling literacy for their children and a variety of approaches to writing for each other.

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If a school recognizes the importance of writing, so will the students.

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For several years now, Jackie Wesson, a teacher-consultant with the Mobile Bay Writing Project, has organized a week-long writing fair at Robert E. Lee Elementary School in Satsuma, Alabama. For its most recent fair, Wesson and her colleagues received more than 4,000 submissions of writing intended for publication on the walls of the school. These submissions were written not only by Robert E. Lee's students but also by parents, grandparents, government officials, local business people, and others in the community. A state representative created a poem and a local pastor wrote a moving personal story. Kindergartners composed "Letters to Daddy," and their pieces were posted next to their fathers' responses. Some of the upper-grade students contacted celebrities to ask for writing samples. And several famous people, from race car drivers to professional wrestlers, wrote in support of the program.

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Wesson says, "The fair is highlighted by a midweek program, which provides a forum for us to talk with members of the community, reaffirming our commitment to the improvement of writing while celebrating our progress."

A published student writer is a motivated student writer.

Carol Booth Olson, director of the UC Irvine Writing Project in California, has helped her teacher-consultants design a summertime Young Writers Camp that attracts hundreds of kids each year. Over time, the group has come up with a way to spotlight the work of the young writers in the community. Because the camp has as many as 1,000 students each summer, the publication of anthologies has proved inordinately expensive. Instead, the project has worked with the local Barnes and Noble to “publish” student writing.

At the end of each three-week session, young writers from pre-kindergarten through grade twelve select one piece for “publication.” These are framed on poster board, often with accompanying artwork or photographs, and displayed prominently at the Irvine Barnes and Noble store. Parents are invited to attend an evening Young Writers’ Celebration at the store, and, after light refreshments, they go on a Gallery Walk to peruse the students’ writing and offer positive comments to the authors of specific pieces.

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With student writing, to celebrate is to motivate.

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A few years ago, the Inland Area Writing Project (IAWP) at the University of California, Riverside, worked with the Palm Springs Desert Museum to develop an exhibit that celebrated the writing and creativity of students in the surrounding Coachella Valley. Palm Springs, says IAWP Co-director Martha Plender, “has a reputation as a playground for the rich.” But teachers in the area work with few of the children of this privileged class. Rather, they work with poor children, many of whom are Latinos whose first language is Spanish. That’s why the writing project and the museum chose to focus on the museum’s Meso-American collection. For one year, the writing project teamed with local teachers to provide workshops concentrating on the history, culture, and art of Meso-American culture. Teachers brought this experience back to their classrooms where their students – who in many cases visited the collection at the museum – were inspired to create poetry, books, and art.

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In the spring, student work was collected from all over the county and displayed in the museum. Plender recalls, “I arrived to find a teacher and a parent studying one student exhibit very carefully. The parent looked at it, reached out gently to touch the glass, then gave a power salute.”

For more information about the National Writing Project, to read our publications, or to find out about local writing project activities in your area, visit www.writingproject.org, or contact us at:

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