

COMMUNITY BASED WRITING THROUGH THE LENS OF A MARATHON: SCAFFOLDING NOVICE WRITERS TO ENGAGE IN THE ARTS

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As former National Writing Project (NWP) site directors at different universities in the state of Alabama, we found ourselves at the same institution as assistant professors during the fall semester of 2008. Nostalgic for NWP professional development strategies, we often discussed the merits of the various writing marathons in which we personally participated and facilitated. Paige Vitulli pondered the use of visual artifact journals (sketchbooks) integrating art as a variation to traditional journal writing. Sketchbooks, journals, and reflective writing in art education are nothing new. Yet, art educators have revisited and revised practices to include experiences that are not solely about formal content and the development of art skills but those which cross disciplinary boundaries, encourage conceptual development, and foster creative and critical inquiry, all within the context of an ever-changing contemporary world (Sanders-Bustle). Preservice teachers who have used visual artifact journals cite benefits such as: documenting and giving importance to the small things in life; finding unexpected visual qualities in everyday objects; thinking critically; helping us to realize that anything can be art, not just paintings or drawings; implementing the art language and terms we have learned in class.

Susan Ferguson Martin complimented my interest in visual arts journals when she expressed her desire for students to experience the creative freedom of “writing marathon style,” at inspirational

locations which are best kept secrets in our city. After years of reminiscing about writing marathons, and exploring the rich architecture, art, and history of our city, we decided to join forces, integrate disciplines, and pilot a modified writing marathon aimed at meeting multiple objectives in our varied curriculums of art education, language arts, social studies, and English for Speakers of Other Languages. We advocate that writing and visual literacy should occur across the curriculum for authentic purposes; our writing marathon or “writing 5K” was born to put into practice what we preach.

Our goals were therefore:

1. To encourage structured writing events, with the use of writing journals and prompts that facilitate and encourage written response and personal reflection.
2. To model a low-cost/free writing event that could be replicated by educators with their students utilizing local resources and regionally significant texts and landmarks.
3. To encourage self-reflection in that context, such that educators could have a template for attending to their own creative writing and artistic development.

What is a Writing Marathon?

Richard Louth (“The New Orleans”) of the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project describes a writing marathon as a visit to an engaging and new setting in which a small group of writers walk and explore, stop to write about what they are experiencing, and then share their writing with each other. This cycle is repeated several times. The National Middle School Association defines the marathon model as focusing on four key elements: setting, timing, small groups, and writers’ level of commitment. At the National Writing Project website, Louth provides a useful resource for novice writing marathon leaders complete with PDF handouts. Extracted from the book *“I’m a Writer”: Essays on the Writing Marathon and Why We Write*, this guide addresses planning needed to organize and lead an effective traditional writing marathon.

Basic components of the traditional NWP Writing Marathon include:

- Motivational location
- Agreed commitment
- A schedule
- Shared reading
- No evaluative comments, simply “thank you”
- Socializing, with an emphasis on writing
- Giving yourself time and space to write
- Doing it for YOURSELF

As we revisited our writing marathon experiences, we determined that the abbreviated versions we were developing for teachers to implement with their elementary and middle school students were more appropriately described as Writing 5Ks.

Integration/Cross-Training

As we planned for these events, we recognized the parallel with the concept of cross-training. Cross-training refers to an athlete training in sports other than the one that athlete competes in with a goal of improving overall performance. It takes advantage of the particular effectiveness of each training method, while at the same time attempting to negate the shortcomings of that method by combining it with other methods that address its weaknesses (Wikipedia contributors).

As we developed our first Writing 5K, it did feel like cross-training. We considered various disciplines, students and faculty of all levels, and the overall value of the experience to our students’ development as a whole. While we planned to host the 5K infinite times, we knew that our first group would be participants of Paige’s Arts in Education grant focused on the integration of dance, music, theatre, and visual arts across the curriculum. Specifically, the summer session was focused on the integration of the arts for language arts and social studies middle school teachers. In reality we accepted any inservice teachers with a desire to integrate the arts. Therefore the

summer participants were teachers of varied disciplines and levels. Consistent with the NWP philosophy, we were faced with promoting writing across all disciplines and ages, and exploring ways to extend the Writing 5K experience to educators, preservice teachers, P-12 students, and college students (as well as any other interested parties) with any curricular interest or background. With teachers new to the classroom and others newly retired, it was the first time many had set aside time to not only learn the art of teaching writing to young children and adolescents, but to openly and honestly question their own teaching beliefs and practices with regards to writing.

Planning & Preparation/Strength and Conditioning

After years of discussion, we each had a vision of key aspects important to our disciplines and philosophies related to pedagogy. Formally merging our ideas was an exciting and personally educational part of the planning. The planning included revisiting our favorite Visual Artifact Journal Resources (Figure 1) to remind ourselves of various strategies and to inspire creativity and motivation among our writers. Expanding our own toolbox of ideas prepared us for suggesting various pedagogical applications across the curriculum as we interacted with the diverse teachers. We capitalized on our varied strengths as leaders and on the background knowledge of the participants in our groups. We delegated our leadership roles so we could toggle between the participant/leader roles ourselves. We strengthened our organizational skills so our transition to participant researcher and writer was smooth. Figure 2 includes helpful gear and materials to include for use along the trek, and Figure 3 depicts our first agenda.

Gregory, Danny. *The Creative License: Giving Yourself Permission to be the Artist You Truly Are*. Hyperion, 2006.

Hermanson, Kim. *Getting Messy: A Guide to Taking Risks and Opening the Imagination for Teachers, Trainers, Coaches, and Mentors*. Rawberry, 2009.

Perrella, Lynne. *Artists' Journals and Sketchbooks: Exploring and Creating Personal Pages*. Quarry, 2004.

Sanders-Bustle, Lynn. "Visual Artifact Journals as Creative and Critical Springboards for Meaning Making." *Art Education*, vol. 63, 2008, pp. 8-14.

Schaefer, John. *Sight Unseen: The Art of Active Seeing*. GoodYear Books, 1995.

Smith, Keri. *How to Be an Explorer of the World: Portable Life Museum*. Penguin Group, 2008.

Woods, Linda, and Karen Dinino. *Visual Chronicles: The No-Fear Guide to Creating Art Journals, Creative Manifestos, and Altered Books*. North Light, 2006.

Figure 1: Visual Artifact Journal Resources

Gear	Use
Map or Guide	To lead participants along the way and highlight major points of interest
Journal	For participants who do not already have their own
Local Paraphernalia	To provide items that represent the local culture—for our first Writing 5K we included Mardi Gras beads and Moon Pies
Bottled Water	To refresh the spirit and body—especially on hot days
Tote Bags	For transporting gear during the journey
Books	To put the materials directly in the hands of the educator for immediate use when they return to their curriculum planning

Figure 2: Gears/Materials

Location, Location, Location/The Course

As with a running event, a well-planned, thought-out course not only enhances, but is crucial to the experience. An area unfamiliar to the participants can lend itself to a sense of exploration and discovery; it may also invite concerns about getting lost along the way. A map—either on a smartphone or in print—of the layout of streets and major landmarks makes for a more relaxed experience and one in which participants can focus more on their writing and less on becoming displaced. While our particular courses were local, in the heart of downtown Mobile, several participants had not been to the area where we held our 5K, enabling them to associate what they knew of the area with key landmarks.

ARTS IN EDUCATION
JUNE 26, 2013

Dr. Susan Martin & Dr. Paige Vitulli invite you to
WRITING OUR PASTS AND FRAMING OUR FUTURES



*“What do you think is important to teach our children?
What do you wish you learned when you were in school?”*
—Candy Chang

AGENDA

- 9:00 Meet at *A Spot of Tea* in Cathedral Square Dauphin Street
- Plan to have coffee or tea (they make the most DEE-LICIOUS strawberry tea!) and breakfast if you like. Here's a menu: <https://www.spotoftea.com/menu.html>.
- What is a writing marathon, and how can I use it to enliven writing for my students?*
- A brief history of Downtown Mobile
- Using Our Self-Reflection for Our Students' Writing*
- 10:00 Leave *A Spot of Tea* for the first leg of the marathon
- 11:00 Reconvene at Church Street Graveyard
<http://www.cityofmobile.org/parks/churchstreetgraveyard.php>
- Using the Past to Write about the Present*
- Second leg of the marathon
- Time to Share!
- 12:00 Lunch with a Bunch or on Your Own
- 1:00 Meet back as a group at Center for the Livings Arts, Space 301
<http://www.centreforthelivingarts.com/>

Figure 3: Writing Marathon Agenda

For our inaugural 5K we chose to begin our journey at a local restaurant. As inspiration for our first writing prompt, we used the frame poem, “Where I’m From” (Lyon) since it seems to invite not only self-reflection but also situation of oneself among a more global backdrop. George Ella Lyon writes:

*I am from clothespins
From Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride
I am from the dirt under the back porch
(Black, glistening
it tasted like beets).
I am from the forsythia bush
The Dutch elm
Whose long-gone limbs I remember
As if they were my own.*

Participants were given a copy of Lyon’s poem along with a blank “*I am from*” frame to create their own versions. Participants shared aloud before we embarked on our journey. They were encouraged to stop along the way as they saw sites that sparked their writing interests. Stopping at the Mardi Gras Museum, Spanish Fountain, and downtown library—all locations that carry a certain local fame among area natives—participants were invited to freewrite, sketch, photograph, and express themselves however they chose. At the Church Street Graveyard we gave them a prompt based on the book, *Port City Crusader: John LeFlore and the Non-Partisan Voters League in Mobile, Alabama*, by local author and educator Kenneth Robinson. Not only did using a local author allow participants to gain familiarity with a text that may be used as part of a local history unit, but it also opened the invitation to write about influential people within the geographical location of the Church Street Graveyard. The set up for the prompt, “John LeFlore, this man of unquenchable energy who moved relentlessly toward justice for many he would never meet, finally rested in beautiful and historic Magnolia Cemetery in south Mobile” (Robinson 144), highlighted an aspect of the book while also getting participants to consider the impact of

the local hero. As a prompt, we asked participants to, *Write one sentence that sums up the impact or influence of a particular individual*. Participants wandered the graveyard looking at epitaphs for inspiration and finding quiet nooks in which they could reflect and write. Those who wanted to do so shared their epitaphs with the group before we moved on to the finish line—the Centre for the Living Arts, a non-profit contemporary art center focused on engaging all sectors of Mobile and committed to education in the arts. Our purpose for finishing our 5K there was twofold: the featured exhibit focused on the future and on how education will play a role in the future, and we wanted participants to be more aware of the resources available to them so that they might utilize them with their students. The final reflection of the day took place after a hands-on art activity and tour of the center. Feedback was very positive, specifically in terms of the location and facilitation of awareness of resources. In fact, several participants have since taken groups of students to the Centre for the Living Arts for writing experiences.

The second Writing 5K took place in the fall and included preservice teachers enrolled in a language teaching methods course. The 5K began and ended at the Church Street Graveyard, and we used the same epitaph prompt to start the writing event. Upon leaving the cemetery, participants chose to break off in groups to explore the downtown area; this is typical of such a writing event. Participants in this 5K seemed most interested in the *how* and *where* of doing such a writing event or school trip. They wanted to know how to find out about age-appropriate events and excursions. Perhaps it was due to their language major, but they were open to sharing the things about which they wrote, sketched, and photographed along the way. In the follow-up reflection, participants shared that they were already making plans for conducting writing events and cultural field trips with the groups of P-12 students with whom they were doing their internships.

Future plans include expansion of the Writing 5K to include those interested in how writing plays a role in math and science at the Dauphin Island Sea Lab and Estuarium, both of which provide an abundance of local scientific exploration as well as inspiration for

writing in the sciences. As an area frequented by P-12 and postsecondary school field trips, introduction of the element of writing to the excursion will enhance what is already a favored educational experience. With an abundance of both modern and historical architecture and horticulture, the downtown also lends itself to writing invitations based on spatial reasoning, mapping, and estimation. While these themes are specific to the Mobile Bay area of Alabama, the idea behind use of local resources to marry writing with the core disciplines is universal. Not only does it allow for an engaging approach to learning that demonstrates how writing spans all areas of education, but it also gets people of all ages into areas of the region they might not otherwise have visited.

Local Writers/Trainers

While writing prompts may take many forms, our first two events highlighted local writers and local themes. As illustrated in the appendix, Responses to Literature and Local History depicts the connections between the literary pieces and local history that we chose to highlight during our first Writing 5K. Also included are the prompts we used for literary response, as well as extensions for educators to use in their classrooms. You may choose to begin with a prompt and later allow open-ended response, or you may offer a prompt for those who wish to follow it, while others may choose to freewrite. You may also choose to introduce a variety of writing prompts along the way. Much of that decision depends upon purpose and the writing level of participants (e.g., reluctant, high skilled).

The texts selected for this particular context are authored by local educators, faculty, and historians, many of whom students and faculty relative to this context may encounter. It is encouraging to students to see other local writers who have been published so that they might see that they, too, are writers.

Avoiding Injuries

Although some participants seem more predisposed to personal writing than others, even the most seasoned writer can use a warm

up before embarking on a writing exercise. Besides getting the mental juices flowing and inviting creativity, warm up may also be used to allow participants to get to know each other; after all, they will see each other and hopefully share writing throughout the journey. Inviting participants to make this first exercise in writing be about something on which they are experts can increase their confidence in themselves as writers—sort of a pep talk prior to the official start. Since everyone is an expert on themselves, we recommend using a prompt or writing activity that will invite creativity and spark introspection.

When participating in a writing event such as this, you will find that you have a different role than when you are a leader. We could not help but write along with the participants, but the feeling as leader was quite different from that sense of being guided. Participants will look to you for guidance—both on the geographic course and in the invitation to write. Don't be discouraged if some participants don't seem ecstatic about the event. It may not be the ideal activity for everyone, but many will reflect afterward and later offer praise as well as a desire to participate again. It is also important not to force or coerce participants to share their writing aloud. While encouraging writers is part of the process, many participants write themselves into an intimate space that they need to keep to themselves. You may also find that those who are reluctant at first will share as the 5K goes on or in a future meeting. As with all writing activities, the best encouragement is often example, so as a leader you may want to share first or share to show your willingness to be a participant and not a judge.

Cooldown/Finish Line

Integrating local history and art into a writing event seems an ideal way to utilize resources and encourage interactions and awareness among participants. For classroom teachers, a writing event is typically a free or low cost way to extend writing for students with the hope that they will continue their own writing journeys, using their surroundings as inspiration. A quick written response to a poem or a picture related to the writing event helps

students warm up. A writing prompt can be as simple as asking students to write about the senses that are awakened along the trek. As an extension they may write about what they observed that they had not seen before—about what things surprised them and what things met their expectations. The writing they do may be shared immediately with classmates, or it may be kept as inspiration for later writing. Whether the journey is downtown, down the street, or just outside the classroom door, the invitation to write outside schoolhouse walls is a way to extend writing into life and out of the context of the typical essay assignment.

Writing, as with running, involves a continuous process with a multitude of factors, which should be considered and engaged in prior to crossing the finish line or publishing. The time and effort devoted to personal writing and training correlate with desirable finishes and products. Remember that episodes of artistic expression are organic in nature. If you will open your mind to limitless possibilities, beautiful self-expression will result. Though there is a typical framework for writing events—the start, the journey, and the finish—participants will evolve along the way, seeing things you had not considered and sharing things you may not have planned as part of the event.

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Walker, S. B. *Reuben’s Mobile*. Negative Capability Press, 2007.

Write at the HeART of Mobile Bay, 2017. <<https://www.facebook.com/wriateattheheart>>.

APPENDIX
RESPONSES TO LITERATURE AND LOCAL HISTORY

Authors and Works	Local History Connection	Prompts for Response to Literature
Robinson, Kenneth. (2013). <i>Port City Crusader: John LeFlore and the Non-Partisan Voters League in Mobile, Alabama</i> . Mod Mobilian Press.	John LeFlore, this man of unquenchable energy who moved relentlessly toward justice for many he would never meet, finally rested in beautiful and historic Magnolia Cemetery in south Mobile. (p. 144)	Part of a local history unit or for writing epitaphs or even for a discussion on brevity in writing. For example: <i>Write one sentence that sums up the impact or influence of a particular individual or of yourself.</i>
Tunks, Karyn W. (2012). <i>Jubilee!</i> . Pelican Publishing Company, Inc.	Jubilees happen in the early morning... (p. 8)	Student publication and example of memoir writing, scrapbooking, writing historical fiction.
Walker, S. B. (2007). <i>Reuben’s Mobile</i> . Negative Capability Press.	Reuben shakes his head as if to clear it. He affirms Life and living well, believes there’s a place on this planet for everyone, even if they prefer cats to dogs and believes sitting on a porch rocking is aerobic exercise. (p. 17)	First Person, er, Canine Point of View—this collection of regional poetry told from the perspective of Reuben the Great Dane, is an example for students reluctant to cast poetry in their own voices.
Eckert, Heidi. (2013). <i>Weaving the Unraveling</i> . Sand Island Publishing.	Memories of years long passed; of summers spent on a magical, sunlit-beach, still shimmer in her mind, where	Regional Fiction Semi-Autobiographical—a less explored area of writing, blending memories or events or setting with

	love grew and promises were made.	sensationalized or fictitious. Some students feel more empowered to tell their stories if they believe their audience to perceive their writing as a work of fiction.
Gaillard, Frye. (2012). <i>The Books that Mattered</i> . NewSouth Books.	... I had always wanted to write a book about books, those that had brought me the greatest delight through the years. I wanted to offer a reader's tribute but more than that, a kind of reader's memoir, a recounting exactly why and when these volumes had mattered. (xii)	Memoir Writing— invitation to consider what pieces of art have shaped readers' thoughts and their lives into who they are today. Students may enjoy the example set forth by the author as a template for crafting their own introspective accounts of their relationships with literature and with art in general.
Thompson, D. (2003). <i>A, B...Seek!</i> , Gwin's.	<i>A, B...Seek!</i> is an ABC-find book featuring local photographs. Each photograph contains the hidden letter displayed on each page.	Exploring an area with a specific purpose such as finding images related to letters.
Local History	Mardi Gras	You have been charged with the task of designing a float for the Joe Cain Day procession. Your float needs to be representative of the history of Mardi Gras in Mobile. Describe the float and any relevant information that would help someone build the float based on your description.
Local History	Church Street Cemetery	You grew up with civil rights leader John LeFlore. A reporter has asked you to tell about your adventures with LeFlore for a documentary film. Describe some of the major points of your courageous adventures from your first person perspective.

