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A Thousand Teens Writing across America: A Virtual Marathon

A group of teachers and authors collaborated to develop a six-week creative writing marathon that invited young writers on a virtual journey to six states.

Readng for pleasure and supporting students as they develop individual tastes as readers has long been accepted as a pedagogical approach (Bushman; Gallo; Buehler), but what about supporting students' love of writing and developing identities as *writers*? Young people throughout the United States are writing for their own purposes. Teens Write Across America, an innovative online writing marathon, gave these writers an opportunity to connect.

We—two writing project site directors and an alum of the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards National Student Poets Program—recognized that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many teenage creative writers had less access to support from fellow writers and teachers. So, we repurposed the idea of a writing marathon—which traditionally includes opportunities for a group of writers to visit a selected set of locations and spend time writing in each place. We developed a virtual writing marathon to help young writers connect online and sent out an invitation through our partner organizations using educator networks and social media (see Figure 1). In total, 1,096 teenage writers from across the country registered, suggesting that they craved connections with other writers and were willing to join a virtual community to get those connections. By sharing our design for this unique set of virtual writing activities, as well as the lessons we learned along the way, we hope to expand the range of possibilities teachers can imagine for their classrooms.

DESIGNING TEENS WRITE ACROSS AMERICA

In designing this activity for writers, we turned to the Alliance for Young Artists and Writers, the nonprofit organization that presents the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, and to the National Writing Project (NWP), the longest-running professional development network in the country, and the only one that focuses specifically on writing. One of NWP's successful programs for inspiring and supporting writers is the writing marathon. In the summers of 2020 and 2021, Kelly and Susan worked with Richard Louth, director of the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project and founder of the New Orleans Writing Marathon, to develop a virtual writing marathon program to support teacher-writers during the pandemic. Dubbed Write Across America, and hosted on *Zoom* by different NWP sites for nine Tuesday afternoons in 2020 and twelve in 2021, this program drew teachers, students, and writers together in seventy-five-minute writing events that evolved from a basic model: a host site would virtually welcome writers to their place (North Dakota, New York's Hudson Valley, Missouri, Kentucky, etc.), invite them to write while exploring digital maps and links, and then ask them to share their writing aloud in breakout rooms with three to five other writers.

The success of NWP's Write Across America Virtual Writing Marathon program over the summers of 2020 and 2021 made us wonder if we could

Just because school is out for the summer, that doesn't mean your creative journey needs to be put on pause. This August, embark on a writing tour of America with #TeensWriteAcrossAmerica Marathon (TWAAM)! Hosted by teen writers for teen writers, this writing marathon will take you around the country as you meet with peers in a judgment-free virtual space to explore your creativity. Join us to cultivate a writer's eye, ear, and mind, while writing and sharing writing in a supportive community of writers.

The Writing Marathon will meet every Wednesday from August 4, 2021 to September 8, 2021 for 90-minute sessions (8:00–9:30 pm ET). This marathon is open to all teen writers. Whether you're experienced or just starting out, we want to hear from you!

Each week, young writers will be inspired by a new virtual host location. A peer will lead the group in writing and sharing exercises. Writers celebrate each other at the end of each session by sharing their favorite lines. No criticism is offered, just a simple "Thank you for sharing." For our last session, we will invite young writers to bring one piece of writing from any of their marathon stops for feedback and revision! Our talented host writers will help you polish it up to enter in the [2022 Scholastic Art & Writing Awards](#).

[Sign Up](#)

You will receive a Zoom link to join each event 48 hours before we meet.

FIGURE 1

National Writing Project sites across the country and the Alliance for Young Artists and Writers partnered to publicize an invitation to teens to participate in the marathon.

adapt the virtual writing marathon model to support creative teens across the country. In July of 2021, with the second iteration of Write Across America in full swing, Kelly reached out to five NWP site leaders (including Susan) in five regions of the United States to work with five Scholastic Writing Award-winning youth writers (including Julie) who committed to collaborate to design a series of virtual writing marathons for teens. Kelly gathered everyone together for an orientation and work session with Katie Bonner, the Alliance's national partners manager, and Lee Fisher, director of the Minnesota Writing Project, inviting those who had not yet experienced a virtual writing marathon to participate in an upcoming

Write Across America stop. The Alliance and NWP collaborated with us to put out a call for participants, drawing teens from forty-nine states, four Canadian provinces, and other international sites (see Figure 2) to participate in the series of six 90-minute sessions (Bonner).

Each of the first five stops (stops are marked with a star in Figure 2) took place in a different geographic region of the United States (North Dakota, California, Tennessee, Oklahoma, and New York). Each stop was cohosted by a National Writing Project site and a former National Student Poet or Scholastic Writing Awards alum. Teens encountered place-based inspirational prompts, time to write, and



FIGURE 2
The black stars on the map represent the National Writing Project sites that hosted marathon stops, and the red circles indicate the number of participants from each state.

an opportunity to share in small groups, as well as to share a “golden line” from their drafts with the whole group in the chat feature of *Zoom*. The concept of Teens Write Across America was expressed in this simple equation by Darshna Katwala, director of the Long Island Writing Project and cohost of the fourth stop, in New York: “Spontaneous adventures + guided invitation + community = Writing Marathon.”

The sixth and final Teens Write Across America event was a revision session with thirty volunteers, each leading a small breakout room of four to seven teen writers. In the final moments of the session, the chat exploded with expressions of gratitude, such as: “These last six weeks were the best weeks of my life, and I certainly went on a journey with my writing.”

CONTEXTUALIZING THE WRITING MARATHON

Writing marathons have been a cherished practice within NWP sites for over twenty-five years, and they are organized now in hundreds of classrooms,

conferences, community groups, and literary events across the country. They traditionally involve small groups of writers who move from place to place, writing and sharing aloud along the way in locations such as parks, schools, downtowns, museums, and historic sites. Richard Loth originally adapted the technique from Natalie Goldberg’s book *Writing Down the Bones*, in which she describes a writing practice built around successive rounds of writing shared aloud with no comment from the group except for a “thank you.”

Writing marathons have proven to be an invaluable tool for motivating writers of all ages, including reluctant and developing writers who benefit from the physical movement, the novel stimuli of nonclassroom spaces, and the immediacy of a small audience of group members who listen without judgment. Scholarship on place-based writing supports its

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effectiveness. For example, Tom Meyer investigated middle school students doing place-based writing in an out-of-school summer setting. He theorizes this writing as happening in *third spaces*—where “places become sets for action and interaction that transcend the limitations of invisible, normative boundaries and expected behaviors” (308). Meyer’s study found that such writing contributed to students’ sense of freedom, fluency, and fellowship. Other scholars have documented their use of writing marathons in high school and college classrooms (Steigman; Grinvalds; Martens). Teachers interested in learning more about writing marathons can explore the many resources gathered by NWP by visiting the organization’s blog and reading the article “#WriteAcross America—A Virtual Writing Marathon.”

For the young writers we hoped to attract to the Teens Write Across America writing marathon, we knew we could build a program that drew both on the successes of traditional writing marathons in secondary classrooms and on the successes of NWP’s Write Across America Virtual Writing Marathon program conducted in the summers of

2020 and 2021. We couldn’t have known, when we started, how well teens would respond to a virtual writing environment. Asking them to participate as writers on *Zoom* pushed them outside of their comfort zones, from being placed in breakout groups with randomly assigned strangers to sharing in the unique, no-feedback, “thank you” style of the writing marathon. Yet it was clear that the love of writing and the craving for a like-minded community—for others who wanted to talk about writing, too, and who would listen to their pieces—meant the students were willing to push past any temporary awkwardness to create energetic, supportive communities at each event.

The leadership team shared a basic structure for each marathon stop and then left it to the hosts to personalize the stop. The template for the agenda (see Figure 3) included a short welcome segment, an introduction from the hosts, an invitation to explore and write, time to share in small breakout groups, a second invitation to explore and write, and a celebration of the work plus a preview of the next session (to be held the following week).

Basic Agenda for Virtual Writing Marathon Stops

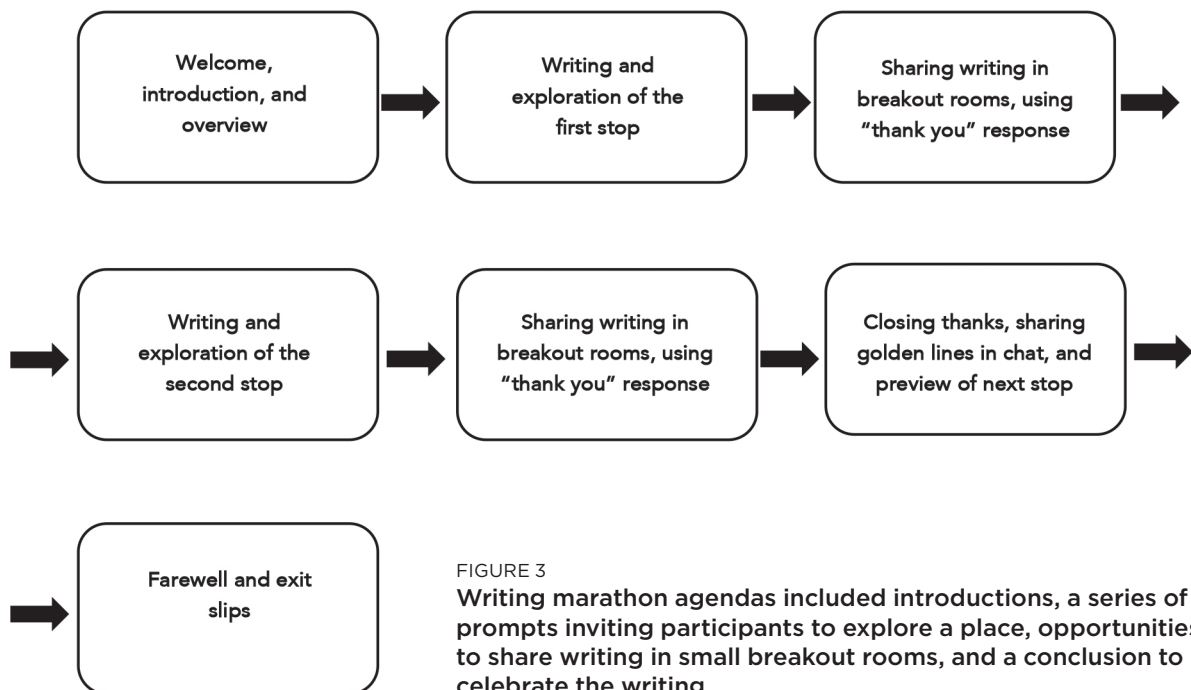


FIGURE 3 Writing marathon agendas included introductions, a series of prompts inviting participants to explore a place, opportunities to share writing in small breakout rooms, and a conclusion to celebrate the writing.

VISITING A STOP ON THE MARATHON

To illustrate what happens on one “stop” in a virtual writing marathon, we share details about our third stop during Teens Write Across America 2021, in Oklahoma, hosted by the Prairie Lands Writing Project director (Susan) and Scholastic’s 2019 National Student Poet for the Southwest Region (Julie). With Susan serving primarily as a thinking partner (as a recent host of her own site’s stop during the 2021 Write Across America Virtual Writing Marathon), Julie developed materials for the Teens Write Across America Oklahoma stop using *Google Earth’s* “projects” feature. She created a collection of locations in Tulsa and Oklahoma City alongside screens with writing prompts. Susan and Julie then met to work out the agenda, revise the materials, and finally host their stop on Wednesday, August 18, 2021.

As students were arriving at the *Zoom* meeting, Julie and Susan welcomed them and invited them to respond to a writing prompt in the chat: “Assuming all basic needs are met, what are three things you would need as a writer on a deserted island?” (see Figure 4). This invitation “primed the pump” for the writing sessions to come. Between the postings, the

writers also chatted about their favorite music to listen to when they write, building community as the event started.

After introductions and a brief overview, Julie began the first round of writing by sharing Joy Harjo’s poem “My House Is the Red Earth.” An embedded link to a performance of the poem by Harjo and her band Poetic Justice allowed the students to listen to the first minute of the song, providing an evocative soundscape alongside the poem. After reading and listening to the poem, everyone had ten minutes of writing time in response to this invitation: “Pick a line from Joy Harjo’s ‘My House Is the Red Earth’ on the previous slide and make it the first line (or just a line) in your writing; *or* write about your concept of home or a fictional character’s home; *or* write about something ‘words cannot construct’; *or* write whatever you want.”

After ten minutes, everyone split into breakout rooms of four or five participants to introduce themselves and share their writing aloud. Students introduced themselves with “My name is _____, and I’m a writer.” Claiming the identity of *writer* is one of the traditions of the NWP writing marathon. Another tradition is that writers do not apologize for the state



FIGURE 4
The welcome slide for the virtual marathon’s Oklahoma stop shared the opening prompt for writing in the chat and the schedule for the session.

of their writing—they just share, and everyone simply says, “Thank you.” For many of the teens, this was the first time they had shared writing that did not get evaluated. We knew it felt strange at first to some writers, but by this third stop in the virtual writing marathon, many of the regular attendees had become familiar with this protocol, which not only allowed them to be heard and valued as writers, but also freed them to go in any direction without criticism. This NWP tradition paired well with the Alliance’s emphasis on the value of freedom of expression. During the pandemic, when so many lost so much, writers benefited from being in a place where they could express themselves and receive unconditional acceptance.

After everyone shared, the writers returned to the main *Zoom* room for a second round of writing, grounded by Julie’s *Google Earth* presentation and her tour of potential writing spots in Tulsa and Oklahoma City. Through *Zoom*’s screen sharing and the *Google Earth* “street view” perspective, Julie first brought the group to important locations in the historic Greenwood District of Tulsa—including a favorite burger joint and a mural that reads, “Black Wall Street”—narrating as she clicked through the map, sharing the history of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre alongside her personal experiences as a native Oklahoman. Next, we moved to Oklahoma City, where Julie took us down to a street view of the moving Oklahoma City National Memorial as well as Bricktown, a lively, industrial-chic entertainment district. Finally, we moved across the *Google Earth* map to two of the most beautiful writing spots in the state: Great Salt Plains State Park and Beavers Bend State Park and Nature Center. At each location, Julie shared a slide with writing prompts. For instance, “Write about a time when a minute felt like an hour” was paired with the Oklahoma bombing site, and “Write a scene from the perspective of furniture” followed a visit to the Philbrook Museum, where art is housed in the mansion of a Tulsa oil baron.

Following Julie’s nine-minute tour of possible Oklahoma writing locations, students had twenty minutes to further explore the map and to write. We encouraged them to make use of *Google Earth*’s

features to fly over the state to get a bird’s eye view of Julie’s chosen writing spots, zoom in on locations of interest, and “walk around” using the street-view function. We also provided a link to access the slide presentation so that writers could get the *YouTube* video from the first prompt, click through every location in the tour, and reread the prompts. After twenty minutes, we sent writers back into their previous breakout rooms to share their writing aloud in their groups using the simple “thank you” response protocol.

After ten minutes of sharing in their breakout rooms, the writers returned to the main *Zoom* room for the closing session, where we invited everyone to share “golden lines” in the chat. (This is a tradition that we adapted from NWP’s virtual writing marathons, where writers copy and paste a striking sentence or phrase from what they have written during the session.) The session concluded with a preview of the next week’s stop in New York.

LEARNING FROM TEENS WRITE ACROSS AMERICA

As the designers of Teens Write Across America, we wanted to know what participants thought, so after the last stop of the marathon (the sixth week), we sent a survey to all students who registered for any of our events. We received eighty-six responses to these questions:

- Which stops did you attend?
- How would you rate your overall experience (from 1 to 5, with 5 being *excellent*)?
- What did you appreciate the most about these events?
- What changes would you recommend?

All stops along the marathon route had strong attendance, but there was a core group—approximately twenty-two respondents—who attended every single stop.

For the second question, 84 percent of the respondents rated the overall experience as *good* or *excellent*. For the question about what they appreciated most, we coded the data by sorting and grouping the responses with like responses and then labeling the

largest groups. Six strong themes emerged: (1) connecting with other writers, (2) writing to a variety of prompts, (3) sharing writing, (4) getting feedback, (5) spaces/places visited, and (6) the volunteers/hosts. Having used Corbin and Strauss's model of grounded theory to do a more detailed analysis of the 2020 NWP virtual writing marathon, we were not surprised to see most of these themes; however, the teens were more concerned about getting feedback on their writing than the 2020 participants were.

We analyzed the fourth question about what they would change in a similar way. The most common responses were “nothing” and “more”—more time to write, more prompts, and more stops. Respondents expressed some criticism about the organization of the events, especially the technological aspects, and some noted that in breakout rooms some writers were reluctant to share. They recommended more getting-to-know-you activities to help writers feel comfortable sharing in the breakout rooms. Their feedback was important, as we could not be in every breakout room simultaneously. We trust teens to tell us what works and what doesn't.

In considering the themes that emerged from reviewing the surveys, we turn again to Tom Meyer's concept of how writing in the third space contributed to students' sense of freedom, fluency, and

fellowship—three qualities that also emerged in the virtual third space of Teens Write Across America. The students got to write about what

they wanted to write about, and they appreciated this freedom: “I loved having so many different prompts and different types of writing styles,” one respondent offered. Another participant wrote, “The prompts were very interesting and open-ended, which I liked.”

Although Teens Write Across America encouraged freedom of choice in the teens' writing, some respondents commented on their appreciation of structure: “My favorite stops were the ones with the most detailed schedules and clear instructions. I found it really helpful knowing when to write/breakout/share, and while I LOVED the freedom

and looseness of the prompts, I would recommend continuing with the sent-out schedules.”

Meyer defines fluency as “ease, flow, speed, and volume of writing generated” (324). In Teens Write Across America, fluency was demonstrated by the speed with which writers responded to the initial invitation to write in the chat, the sharing of their writing in breakout rooms, and the calls for “more” in the student responses. The variety of prompts led one participant to comment, “I appreciated how I got to explore many different topics, which has made me become a better writer.” We have wondered why fluency in writing is such an important characteristic of writing marathons—perhaps it is the lack of criticism, participants' acknowledgment of each other as writers, the freedom of the writing prompts, or the energy of being in the company of other writers as they write.

The teen writers also appreciated the sense of what Meyer calls “fellowship,” which we coded as *connecting with other writers*—a robust theme in the results of the final survey. A representative quote that expresses this theme came from a student who wrote, “I loved finding a community of writers. It's amazing to get that support, and it just felt good to be around other writers.” Within that theme, we noticed several repeated words: *connecting, meeting, community, other writers, and kindness/friendliness*. For example, respondents commented: “I appreciated the opportunity to connect with amazing writers and grow in my skills alongside others!”; “I really appreciate how much passion and love for writing everyone has. How this was bringing everyone together in the writing community”; “I enjoyed meeting a ton of like-minded writers and learning a ton about different places”; and “I loved how open and friendly everyone was. It was nice to just talk to other writers.” This last comment, especially, seems to articulate the vibe the teens created—a blend of inclusion and affirmation that echoed the spirit of the very best of in-person writing marathons. The following quotation was representative of the emotions expressed throughout the marathon:

This just made me so happy. It was so inspiring hearing everyone else's work. . . . Motivation and confidence boosting for sure!! Being able to do it from home, without restriction of location while still feeling like I was traveling the country, was one of the

The students got to write about what they wanted to write about, and they appreciated this freedom.

best parts. I would LOVE to participate again next year. This was brilliant.

Writing marathons do not have to take place outside of school as ours did, however. Many teachers saw the potential for virtual writing marathons in their classrooms during the school year, when much teaching took place online. To support teachers, NWP provided online resources for using virtual writing marathons in the classroom. When face-to-face teaching resumed in fall 2021, many teachers who remained in contact with our Write Across America leadership team told us that they continued to use writing marathons to establish classroom communities or kept the virtual writing marathon in their “back pocket” in case of a return to online learning.

The most important lesson of Teens Write Across America, for us and for teachers of writing at all levels, was that creating and sustaining writing communities can be meaningful for teens, even if those communities must form in the sometimes-awkward virtual realm of *Zoom*. The writers who chose to be part of our program were able to connect with other teen writers, transcending distance to be inspired by each other and to explore the world as writers. In addition to visiting the Oklahoma stop profiled here, many teens made their first virtual visit to a Native American reservation and toured the urban neighborhoods of Los Angeles and Long Island. For teens who may feel like they are the only creative writers in their class, school, or social group, Teens Write Across America provided a friendly and accessible platform for connecting with others. One teen writer who seemed to share our core sentiment about virtual writing communities described the experience this way:

This was everything. Being virtual did nothing against building this writing community; I felt so connected, and it was amazing being surrounded

by other writers my age. I appreciated the low-stress environments, the stops with the most detailed agendas, the culture we learned (the *Google Earth* was so cool!), the inspiring + fun prompts, and the last-session revision time!! **EJ**

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JULIE DAWKINS was the 2019 National Student Poet of the Southwest Region and hosted her first writing marathon stop in August of 2021. She is currently a student at the University of Oklahoma studying economics and the humanities, and she remains an avid writer. She can be contacted at julie.l.dawkins@gmail.com.

READWRITETHINKCONNECTION Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

With this strategy guide, educators can use independent, imaginative artwork and varied writing prompts to assess understanding of a given topic for a student body with differentiated needs. <https://bit.ly/3c6zILz>

EARLY CAREER EDUCATOR OF COLOR LEADERSHIP AWARD 2022

This award supports early career teachers of color as they build accomplished teaching careers in literacy education. Participants are practicing preK through university-level literacy educators of color who are in the first five years of a paid teaching career and who aspire to build a career in literacy education. They receive two years of mentor support, the opportunity to present or co-present at the NCTE Annual Convention in year two of the program, opportunities to collaborate with NCTE leaders, a plaque to recognize their participation, and funding to attend the summer institute in year one and the Annual Convention in year two.

The six members of the cohort are listed below:

- Adedoyin Ogunfeyimi, University of Pittsburgh, Bradford, PA
- N’Kengé Robertson, Detroit International Academy, Detroit, MI
- Hiawatha Smith, University of Wisconsin-River Falls
- Kim Tate, International Prep Academy, Champaign, IL
- Karen Tellez-Trujillo, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, CA
- Curtis Wu, Prospect Hill Academy, Cambridge, MA

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