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## A Guide for Writing Marathon Leaders

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**Summary:** This in-depth guide—drawn from the book *"I'm a Writer": Essays on the Writing Marathon and Why We Write*—covers just about everything needed to organize and run a successful writing marathon.

There are many kinds of writing marathons, and depending on audience, time frame, and location, writing marathon leaders may have to adjust their preparations and expectations. However, having led or participated in close to 100 writing marathons since the first New Orleans Writing Marathon in 1994, I offer the following advice for those who plan to lead writing marathons.

### 1. Leading a writing marathon is different from being on a writing marathon.

The leader should try to participate, of course, but sometimes that is difficult due to the planning and little details involved. The leader's primary job is to understand the underlying purpose of the writing marathon well enough to communicate it to an audience that may be unfamiliar with it; to introduce the writing marathon concept to the group and to get it started; and to prepare ahead so that the writing marathon runs smoothly and writers don't need to think about much except their writing.

In the case of leading a marathon at a school, this may mean getting permission from parents and school authorities; assigning chaperones when necessary; creating and reviewing a handout with students; picking a location; assigning groups; reviewing the marathon "basics" on a handout; determining how the marathon will feed back into the classroom and your teaching goals, and so forth.

In the case of leading a marathon for adults, the leader may be involved with other kinds of preparation, including getting a list of names and cell phones of participants; creating a back-up plan for latecomers; having a central location where the leader(s) might expect to begin and end the marathon; providing a map of the area and suggested locations for writing; reviewing the marathon "basics" on a handout; planning a read-around or debriefing at the end, and other items.

In both cases, the leader needs to set the tone by helping the participants feel comfortable by reviewing the basic purpose of a marathon (enjoyment in writing), by preparing ahead for any eventualities, and by treating the audience as *writers* (as opposed to "students" and "teachers") from the beginning and throughout.

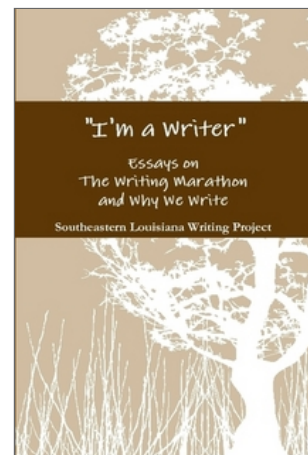
### 2. A writing marathon is all about the writing and writer.

A writing marathon is really quite simple. It's about setting people loose to write. **Emphasize the writing.** Yes, it involves small groups, a particular protocol for reading and responding, a common setting, some socializing, and a sense of community. And these things should be respected as part of the model that has made writing marathons so successful. However, I've seen leaders forget why writers gather together on a marathon, or at least confuse their priorities so that the writing takes second place to sightseeing, following an agenda, or bonding. I have witnessed writing marathons where writing took a backseat to something else—to listening to a tour guide, to seeing a particular monument, to visiting a museum or an exhibit, to eating in a particular place.

Leaders need to do their best to keep it simple, stick to the model, and keep peripheral things from taking over the focus or the energy of writers in the marathon. Leaders must be the ones to remember and emphasize that the writing marathon is not about sightseeing (though that can occur). It is not about having to go to a designated place or to write in a prescribed way or for a mandated amount of time. It is not about being with friends. It's simply about writing and enjoying the writing experience (even though what one writes on a marathon can often be challenging or distressing).

### 3. The more writing, the better.

I have been on marathons as short as 60 minutes and as long as three days. The point is not so much the amount of time (though more time is usually better) but how the time is used. My students can get three rounds of writing done in a class period. But I have been on daylong marathons where I have barely gotten three rounds of writing because of the location, the group, the chemistry. While everything that happens during the marathon counts toward the writing—the walking, the talking, the looking in



*"I'm a Writer": Essays on the Writing Marathon and Why We Write* Lulu, 2010, 160 pages.

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shop windows, the standing in caf elines—one needs to remember that if any of these get in the way of actually doing the writing, then they are counterproductive. So groups should be encouraged to do as many rounds of writing as they can.

#### 4. Remember the writing marathon model.

The model for the writing marathon comes first from Natalie Goldberg, whose book *Writing Down the Bones* deserves credit for inspiring the kind of writing marathons we do. She taught us the basic protocol: write, read your writing to others, and say only "thank you" after each reading. And do this again and again for as long as you can. That is the model in a nutshell. In our "New Orleans style" writing marathon, we have added food, talk, place, and movement to the model, but these should never interfere with the basic routine of write, read, say "thank you."

#### 5. Say, "I am a writer."

It sounds corny, but to ask your participants at the beginning of a writing marathon to turn to each other and say, "I am a writer," is not only a kind of ritual that binds all writing marathons together, but an act which really sets the tone and gets the audience thinking about who they are during the marathon and why they are there. If participants do not see themselves as writers, but instead see themselves as tourists of a city, or teachers on a holiday, or parents with other responsibilities, or kids getting out of class, then the writing marathon really isn't a writing marathon. The marathon is ultimately about the writing and more important, it is about the writer—and giving the writer an opportunity to write.

#### 6. Give thought to how you handle groups.

When I have only 60 minutes for a marathon, and a class of 24 students, what I will do is quickly assign groups of 4 so that no one is left out and no time is wasted in trying to decide who goes with whom. But that is an anomaly dictated by circumstance. My usual approach is to say, "Walk out the door, see who you end up walking near, and go write with them." Preplanning groups—particularly with adults—can really spoil the freedom, choice, and even risk that add energy to a writing marathon.

The marathon begins the moment you gather together for the introduction.

You need to get across to the entire community of the writing marathon, as a leader, that everyone who participates should fully commit to the experience—else they should not be there. And what that commitment means is staying the full time (whatever that may be); following the model for writing/reading/responding; and keeping the emphasis on the writing. Though being with friends, as writers, can be enjoyable, I find that I write better with people I do not know so well because I assume less, fraternize less, have less in common, and therefore write more and better.

It isn't necessary for groups to decide ahead of time where they plan to go, as the point of the marathon is not to visit a specific place but to discover what it is like to write in places where you least expected to be. (If your crowd wants to visit particular places, encourage them to do so as tourists, later. If they want a writing marathon experience, encourage them just to go out, see where their feet lead them, and write together.)

Encourage groups to remain small (three or four writers in each if possible) so that they can get seating in places, so that the readings don't take too long, and so that bonding will occur. Also, I think groups that agree, at the beginning, to share their writing every round no matter how bad it is, tend to write better and to enjoy the experience more than groups that don't make such a commitment. And having someone in the group act as timekeeper keeps everyone—as a writer—on track, and has always worked well for me. As much as any other writer, I like to break away occasionally, get my own table, and write by myself for an hour; however, I will honestly admit, whenever I have done that I have not written as well or enjoyed the experience as much as when I sat, elbow to elbow around one table with three other writers, with one of them designated to tell us when ten minutes are up.

#### 7. Writing occurs even when you are not writing.

NWP's Atlanta Marathon was very instructive to me on this point. I had gone to Atlanta before the marathon to scope out the city, and what I discovered was that the city really wasn't all that suitable to a writing marathon. There were surprisingly few coffee shops and other such places for small groups to gather, and the city itself seemed too large and cavernous. Luckily, I was informed that nearby Decatur would be perfect—just a Metro ride away. After giving everyone a brief introduction to the marathon in a downtown hotel, I held my breath as I asked them all to find their way to the Metro, purchase tickets and find their way to Decatur.

I thought it was going to be a big mess. It wasn't. And what I was thrilled to notice was participants sitting on the Metro and writing on the way to their destination. They had grasped something instinctively that I, as the nervous leader, had forgotten. That is, the marathon begins the moment you gather together for the introduction, and if you think of yourself as a writer from that moment on, then no time is lost in transportation, in finding writing spots, etc. The journey itself is part of the marathon, and you do not need to wait until you arrive at some designated place to begin your writing. Participants, who might feel antsy about traveling to a spot, need to know that.

## 8. Consider whether your marathon needs closure.

I like to tell participants at the beginning of a writing marathon that if they are on a roll, don't bother coming back. It is all about the writing, so if you are writing well, why give that up to come back for a reading? More than once, I have followed my own advice, even though I was the leader of the marathon, and stayed writing in a pub or coffeehouse when everyone else returned to a scheduled read-around at the end of the day. So, a read-around is not mandatory, nor is any closing event. Still, some people like them, and if the location and duration of the marathon make it feasible, by all means, schedule a final gathering. It does not have to be in the same place where the marathon begins, though that might seem the logical choice. We have begun a marathon in a hotel room and gathered, at the end of the day, at a designated pub. I will say this, however: I have attended both weak and strong final gatherings. The weak ones were either in a place with poor acoustics and insufficient seating or they started too soon and ended too late.

Here is the ideal closure so far as I am concerned: it is at a location that everyone can find easily, at a time that doesn't cut into people's writing. It has some food and drink (BYOB), and is partly a social. People are asked to come, let's say at 5 p.m. When they arrive, they have time to mix and talk. We post a sign-up sheet, and ask anyone who intends to read to sign up for a spot. This does away with the "never-ending reading," and it also lets people choose when they are scheduled to read (first, second, last). Before we begin the reading, the leader lays down some ground rules: participants are invited to read from their writing (not talk about it); they are encouraged to choose something that fits the audience and purpose (that is, they are encouraged to keep it short and to not read anything that would be offensive to the larger audience); they are told that it is tradition to applaud at the end of each reading, so we will applaud; and they are told that if anyone goes on too long, the leader will politely interrupt and say time is up.

All those ground rules, being known up front, help everyone know what lies ahead and prevent some surprises we have had before and would rather not have again. The marathon leaders usually look at the list of readers and sign up to be last, to make sure the reading closes down when it needs to, and if it has gone on too long, the leaders might just say a few words at the end rather than read.

We have recorded some of these readings and turned them into radio shows (with the understanding by the readers that they were being recorded for possible publication). Often, halfway through, we will take a seven-minute stretch for restrooms and refreshments. However, it is up to the leaders to keep the reading going and to make sure it honors the writers and writing as well as the day. An alternative to a traditional read-around that we have tried is to inform everyone at the beginning of the day that we will gather at the end in order to share our experiences rather than to have a formal reading. This is often preferable, as it gives folks a chance just to debrief and compare notes in a somewhat informal discussion. Occasionally someone will say, "Oh, I must read this," and that is okay, but the emphasis in this kind of closing activity is really not on "publishing" the writing that was done extemporaneously, but just on talking about the experience.

## 9. Remember: choice, community, diversity, spontaneity, serendipity, discovery.

If writers are given the freedom of choice—where to go, whom to write with, what to write about—they will want to write. And if they feel that they are part of a community—the small audience of their response group and the larger community of marathoners spread out across a landscape—they will feel comfort. If they participate in an event which has some order to it but that recognizes people's diversity, and the different paths, needs, and interests of individuals—their experience will be expanded. If they allow for spontaneity, they open themselves to the serendipity as well as discovery that make writers want to write. Leaders need to remember these as the principles underlying the writing marathon that keep writers coming back.

## 10. Enjoyment is natural to this kind of writing and it is the key.

If writers do not enjoy themselves on a writing marathon, it is usually because they have not participated in a real writing marathon experience. It is usually because they spent too much energy trying to get into an exhibit, or trying to find a particular restaurant, or trying to catch up with friends, or standing in line or talking over food, or waiting for table service, or writing to impress. All of those things can happen on writing marathons, and when they do, they usually detract from the experience. A writing marathon is all about the writing and writer. Say it again. It is all about the writing and writer. And writing is enjoyable, especially when you do not have to do it for anyone else but yourself, when no one will criticize it, when you give it plenty of time, and when you allow yourself to write about things you did not expect. Writers do not need the words of a famous poet to inspire them on a writing marathon or a map to a fantastic location. All they need, really, are some writing tools, time, a few companions, and the desire to write.

## 11. Final Thoughts

It is about the writing act, not the writing product. Most of our writing in school and in the publishing life is about product. We teach our students the so-called writing process—draft, revise, polish, edit—and when that is done, they have supposedly learned to write. What they have learned is one way to write. There is an entire world of writers—and enjoyment in writing—that this process does not tap into. And the writing marathon does. That is, writing for the sake of writing. Writing for the moment. Writing for the immediate audience. Writing as the foundation of other writing by peers who respond directly to your thoughts in their own writing. Writing as the experience of a moment or place. Writing for the self.

None of that necessarily puts a paper in a portfolio to be graded, or a book on the bookshelf to be reshelved years later in a used book store and then eventually left in a box outside the store for passersby, or shipped to Goodwill, or recycled to become cardboard boxes to contain books shipped to Goodwill. My point: the writing marathon is all about the writing act, and enjoyment of the writing act, whatever it produces. In that sense, it is subversive and antiestablishment. Not its subversiveness but its purpose, is probably one reason it keeps attracting writers.

Writing groups can change writers. The essence of the writing marathon—reading aloud to others who simply say "thank you," and then writing again and reading aloud again, is the key to the marathon's success. What many people who have done writing marathons realize is that by the second, third, and fourth rounds of writing, they are subconsciously responding to the writers who have read to them. Like the place they are writing in and the world they are passing through on the way to that place, the writing circle that forms as part of the writing marathon is an integral part of the experience, and has an enormous effect on each writer there. It is one of the reasons to try to have as many rounds of writing as possible, for each person's writing reflects the others' as the process continues. This is one of the reasons such a bond can occur between strangers in such a short time, and it is also why people who otherwise would not get along or see eye-to-eye tend to change their opinions of one another after writing together.

Time matters. The more time you devote to the writing, the better. For leaders, that means keeping the introductions short and taut, de-emphasizing the closure activity, and doing everything in their power to let the writers get out the door and writing. The "[Writing Marathon Handout \(PDF\)](#)" might be helpful for leaders to use or adapt for their own writing marathons. To keep myself honest, and because I'm afraid of forgetting something, I read it aloud at every marathon I lead as well as provide one for each member of the audience. (Yes, always have extra copies on hand.) It has become a thread to link not only those that I have led, but to link mine with others across the country.

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