

GET IT WRITE: TWO STRATEGIES FOR WRITING TEACHERS

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It can be difficult to encourage/inspire/convince both students and teachers to think of themselves as “writers.” Students may have accumulated negative writing feedback and experiences over their time in school and may think that writing is something that old dead people do—or did, when they were alive . . . a long time ago. In many cases, teachers may not have the time or energy to write, or may feel that they are missing some kind of abstract magical quality that would allow them to be writers. The most important thing for anyone to remember, however, is that the only requirement to be a writer is to write.

Actual, simple writing seems so easy on the surface, but how many people willingly sit down and write every day? Those who do write every day are often forced to in order to complete homework assignments, to send emails to colleagues, or even just to form endless to-do lists. Rarely are people—especially teachers—encouraged to sit quietly and write with wild abandon. “Wild abandon? That’s not on my list/curriculum! I don’t have time for that!”

If you have ten minutes, you do have time. Ten minutes is all it takes to write a justwrite. As a high school Creative Writing teacher, I needed a way to warm up students, to keep them writing daily, and to create a strong community of writers. As a writer myself, I needed a way to keep flexible, to generate material, and to encourage myself to believe that I am indeed a writer. If giving up ten minutes from a busy classroom or personal schedule will accomplish these goals [and it will!], I strongly recommend this as a worthwhile investment.

WHAT IS A JUSTWRITE?

A justwrite is a ten-minute session of constant creative explosions. -Justin

As its name implies, to create a justwrite, the author simply needs to—you guessed it—just write. Since I love coming up with half-way clever or catchy names for activities, this was the best name I could possibly create. A justwrite is a ten-minute sustained freewrite that begins with a shared phrase, if you're writing with others. I hesitate to call this common starting phrase a prompt, as it's not a question like, "What is your favorite elementary school memory?" Questions like this keep the author from writing immediately and require focus on a specific topic. This limits the flow of ideas and forces students to repeatedly discard "distracting" thoughts. My basic guideline is to come up with something that isn't a common phrase—something that authors wouldn't normally use at the beginning of a piece, i.e., never "Once upon a time . . ." or "At Grandma's house. . . ." Starting phrases might be more like, "Total distraction," "Pretend parades," "Rapidfire perspiration," or "By the time. . . ." Two-word phrases often work very well, but there's no rule here. Sometimes starters come from a song, the morning announcements, something recently said aloud, a cliché, or a historical quote, but random is really the way to go. I usually have no idea what the starter will be until I have the chalk in my hand—this keeps me honest, as I have the same preparation that the students have and can't plan my response in advance.

Be bold! Choose a crazy, original starter! Kathleen Stein notes in *The Genius Engine*,

'As an experience, madness is terrific,' Virginia Woolf once claimed, '... and in its lava I still find most of the things I write about. It shoots out of one everything shaped, final, not in mere dribblets as sanity does.' Central to creativity is its transformational ability: to take extant measures of information

and combine them anew in ways that grant greater awareness of reality, which in turn give birth to more new ideas and actions. (178)

A few ideas...

Speak softly—
Just you wait—
It's only human—
Please report to—
With his mighty hand—
Butterscotch hopscotch—
Essential ingredients—
Scarf down—
Drawing a blank—
Without hesitation—
Paper maché shenanigans—
Backpocket stowaways—
Synaptic overdrive—
Gasoline trampoline—
Popcorn infidels—
Splendid lethargy—

Once this starting phrase is established (and written on the board, if in class), writers do their thing for ten minutes straight, wandering off from the phrase as much or as little as they each desire. One starter will automatically trigger some surprisingly related follow-up commentary or fiction, while another might require authors to dispose of it in a single sentence before moving on to an unrelated topic of interest. Either strategy is totally acceptable, as the most important part of this activity is the actual continuous writing. Even if the writing is, "I have nothing to say. Blah blah blah. I am not really writing anything," then yes, something is actually being written. Spelling, punctuation, and reasonable organization are all thrown out the window during a justwrite; second-guessing definitely slows the creative process. By the end, nothing should be crossed out or erased—the

movement should be continuous and forward. It's not wrong to edit, but now is not the time! As Peter Elbow writes, "Editing, *in itself*, is not the problem. . . . The problem is that editing goes on *at the same time* as producing" (5). Beautiful and intriguing ideas come from the producing; the only benefit of editing is clarity. Additionally, justwrites as a class also include self-reflection and the opportunity for sharing, but these will be discussed later.

Sometimes justwrites follow the starter...

Calcium deposit—in the bank sitting stored waiting for use at your local ATM with the other various minerals, rocks, and tiny pebbles. With a withdraw and pockets, wallets and thick white envelopes heavily laden down, many a dwarf hobble of towards the mining store, finding that precious red apple for the cost of 23 pebbles. What a cost! But the moment the delicious fruit touched the lips of the fair maiden, for she awoke from her slumber, and all costs were pushed aside. Through hardships they fought because the honesty in their deposit slip was too much. Minus 21 pebbles and not one more were the dwarfs. But all was for a happily ever after, not their own of course, but for an apple deprived maiden, who's golden heart had found a way to soften theirs, as hard as the rocks they mind. Tick tock, pick, plock, ting-bong, goes the clock tongue and axe. Oh what more could be asked. I'm not sure, and neither are they, because they are confused, and this isn't a play with a happy ending for all, for I am the narrator, and I know all.

-Brittany C.

Sometimes they don't...

I don't remember... so how can I write, this is a confusing topic so I will immediately switch to something more interesting... mmmmmm... mmm... mmmm (different

tone mmm's) ok I'll write about how I want to sleep. I want to sleep, so I can dream and get out of this world right now because it makes me feel crappy. I don't remember why... My chipped red nail polish is a kewl color. My spoon ring is awesome and I'm technically living at the school now. When you spend more than 12 hours at school for 3 days a week, it means something, it has this gutty, chalk tasting mucus feeling that you have no life and you realize this. I would very much like to buy one, but I'm sure there are no extras laying around *sigh*. I will just have to survive through this lifeless life. I'm being melodramatic and I don't remember why. My mind is blurry like a condensing water bottle and wooshy... very wooshy. This is almost like my forget what happened today book. I am your psychiatrist and let me go crazy instead of you. lalalalalala- la *looking for a savior beneath these dirty sheets.* my mind is like a horrible radio. Tori Amos bits and pieces are in my head. Save me! ahhhh Queen... ugh...

- Lindsay

WHY JUSTWRITE?

Before delving too much into the actual practice of utilizing justwrites, it's important to answer the concerns many teachers will have at this point: Why should I do this? I don't have time for this! Isn't this just another warm-up? How is a justwrite different from a freewrite? a quickwrite? a warm-up?

These terms are used differently by different sources, but in my understanding, a freewrite is a free write-what-you-want session, with no set starting point, and with or without a set time limit. Freewrites are often used as brainstorming to prepare to write about a certain topic. A quickwrite or a warm-up asks writers to answer a specific question.

Freewrite

Among others, Peter Elbow, author of *Writing Without Teachers* and other texts, believes strongly in freewriting, calling its regular practice, “the most effective way I know to improve your writing.” On this, we agree. He even agrees that ten minutes, or possibly fifteen, is an excellent length of time for this activity. However, he goes on to say, “It must be a piece of writing which, even if someone reads it, doesn’t send any ripples back to you,” and that “the main thing is that a freewriting must never be evaluated in any way; in fact there must be no discussion or comment at all.” While I recognize that his attempts here are to encourage individual writers to boldly start writing, often in a teacher-free environment, I *am* a teacher and I do see positive outcomes when my students and I start at a common point and share our results. Justwrites offer recognition and development of voice [in self and others], a heightened awareness of being able to “publish” nearly instantly to a receptive audience, and the sense of community that grows from such an opportunity, representing a step up from a freewrite.

Quickwrite/ Warm-up

Quickwrite or warm-up questions, even those with a prescribed time limit, require writers to pause to consider their answers before they begin to write. Even on the rare occasion when authors know exactly how to begin their answers, they must continually narrow their thoughts to stay on track within the confines of the question. While useful in starting a class or encouraging students to consider a particular topic, quickwrites do not have the same benefits offered by the immediacy and freedom of freewrites or justwrites.

A justwrite is not just another warm-up. Justwrites are exactly the opposite. The specific time period (ten minutes) is concentrated, but the response is not focused on a required subject.

Of course, freewriting in general is not a new idea. Again, Virginia Woolf embraced it, saying in *Moments of Being*:

I confess that the rough & random style of it, often so ungrammatical, & crying for a word altered, afflicted me somewhat. . . . And now I may add my little compliment to the effect that it has a slapdash & vigour, & sometimes hits an unexpected bulls eye. [Freewriting] loosens the ligaments. Never mind the misses & the stumbles. Going at such a pace as I do I must make the most direct & instant shots at my object & thus have to lay hands on words, choose them, & shoot them with no more pause than is needed to put my pen in the ink. The main requisite, I think on re-reading my old volumes, is not to play the part of censor, but to write as the mood comes or of anything whatever; since I was curious to find how I went for things put in haphazard, & found the significance to lie where I never saw it at the time. (22)

Research-supported

The idea that a justwrite should be ten minutes long is backed up by research and practice. In *How the Brain Learns to Read*, David Sousa identifies five to ten minutes as being the working memory time limit for pre-adolescents, and says, “An adolescent (or adult) normally can process an item in working memory intently for ten to twenty minutes before fatigue or boredom with that item occurs and the individual’s focus drifts” (48). Laurie Materna traces this theory to the working memory model proposed by Alan Baddeley and Graham Hitch in 1974. Slightly less scientifically, it seems that ten minutes of continuous writing unlocks something in a writer’s mind that allows him or her more free access to creative thought and verbal ability. Peter Elbow, Natalie Goldberg, and others have based many of their suggestions on this idea. Elbow writes, “Freewriting helps you pour *more* attention, focus, and energy into what you write. That is why freewriting exercises must be short” (7).

The benefits of opening up one's mind are enormous, even if the whole brain isn't involved. According to Matthew MacDonald, "Studies of improvising jazz musicians suggest that when you get creative, part of your prefrontal cortex shuts down. In other words, the executive centers of planning, judging, and control need to get out of the way when it's time for a creative jam session" (172). This is exactly the same thing that happens during a justwrite: flow is turned on, and editing and criticism are turned off.

A justwrite is not just an opportunity to "tune out"; it is consistent with many of the suggestions developed by brain-based educational research. Authors like David Sousa and Sheryl Feinstein challenge teachers to consider that the adolescent brain is still developing, and the components of a justwrite provide just the right exercise to encourage this development.

Incorporating justwrites at the beginning of class allows students to inhabit their collective creative space as soon as they enter and to be prepared for future, more focused activities. Even though the activity itself is a predictable part of each class, the adolescent brain craves the novelty and unpredictability of the content. Studies show students are "most vibrant when creating or thinking about something new" and find it "invigorating" to be able to "express their originality" (Intrator 23).

Because language regions of the brain are still maturing in adolescents, they are more able to say/write the first thing that comes to mind, and aren't held back by "grown up" self-editing. Utilizing this strength (not that it's always seen as a strength when students say the first thing that comes to mind!) may help students to develop "more efficient frontal lobes . . . a better control of the language; as teens grow up, they are able to communicate and understand elaborate, detailed, high-level information" (Feinstein 15).

Feedback, as well, is key in promoting learning, and is especially important to teens because of the changes in their brain. When students hear responses to their justwrites, they can hear what works and what doesn't. Neurons fire, dendrites form or

prune connections, and all those fireworks lead to improved writing and more efficient learning (Feinstein).

Also, brain research tells us that emotional security in a safe environment for learning hard-wires students for positive educational experiences and encourages them to take appropriate risks while learning (Sousa). If a student reads something aloud and no one laughs (unless it's funny!), there's a pretty good chance he or she might develop the confidence to read again. Groups with which I've used justwrites definitely show that confidence as they grow to trust each other and recognize the value of respect—not to mention genuine entertainment, at times!

Some students are eager for the opportunity to be creative, while some may believe that they are intrinsically unoriginal. In an article in *Scientific American*, Ulrich Kraft declares,

Scientific understanding of creativity is far from complete, but one lesson already seems plain: originality is not a gift doled out sparingly by the gods. We can call it up from within us through training and encouragement. Not every man, woman or child is a potential genius, but we can get the most out of our abilities by performing certain kinds of exercises and by optimizing our attitudes and environments—the same factors that help us maximize other cognitive powers. (n.p.)

A justwrite is just such an opportunity. Kraft adds, “The ease with which we routinely string together appropriate words during a conversation should leave no doubt that our brains are fundamentally creative” (n.p.) Indeed, few students are at a loss for words, given ten minutes to talk!

Another research-based component is the importance of teacher sharing and modeling. The National Writing Project, with which I am involved, is only one of many sources that support the belief that good writing teachers must be writers, as well. Writing and reading my own justwrites in class every day seems wildly indulgent, but it definitely goes a long way toward

establishing openness and lending value to the activity itself. Ten minutes of continuous writing is not necessarily an easy task, to start with, but if the teacher's doing it, too, it's not just busywork. This isn't some ridiculous assignment to occupy attendance-taking time; students definitely know that I enjoy it and value it as a daily part of my life and work as a writer.

Some find it easy very quickly...

It's not really that hard to write for 10 minutes. Even if you just write "this is boring, how many minutes do I have left?" you're still writing. It gets easier as you go. Soon you're going to get bored writing "10 minutes left." – Brittany C.

Some need practice...

It is very difficult to write for ten minutes straight. Usually I find myself pausing to think, or to give up . . . some of us non-creative types have a hard time keeping a flow. – Justin

Some really get it...

It's fun, and ideas and images that I didn't know I knew come out from somewhere. Sometimes ideas from justwrites end up in other things I decide to write. It's fun to see what the end result is. – Katie

Experts agree...

Our brains bestow moments of illumination almost as a matter of course, as long as there has been adequate preparation and incubation. The catch is that because the neural processes that take place during creativity remain hidden from consciousness, we cannot actively influence or

accelerate them. It therefore behooves even the most creative among us to practice one discipline above all—patience. (Kraft, n.p)

DEVELOPING COMMUNITY, VOICE, AND AUDIENCE

Having a research-based rationale is great, but visible results are even more encouraging. Building a community is definitely one of the greatest benefits of using justwrites. Creative writing, especially, can bring together students from all different backgrounds, but this is a place where diversity is definitely valued. We learn to hear the real, organic voice of each author instead of wondering so much why she's dressed like that or if he really even goes to this school. These voices tell stories that engage the audience and prompt community support. Invariably, stories involve common concerns. Work, for example, is a source of constant material. Tricia's managers at the movie theater are totally ridiculous, and she has to try to sell extra fruit snacks this week, for some reason. Jamy's managers are equally unreasonable, but her concern is that no one seems to know how to create a schedule that includes the right number of employees at the right time to run their fast food restaurant. Customers, too, are totally irrational, and John receives comfort from the fact that his problems at the electronics store ("Don't people even try to find what they're looking for before they ask me?") are parallel to Danielle's experiences at the pharmacy ("And I told her I'm not a doctor and I have no idea what that rash is. It was nasty!").

Though writing a justwrite is a very personal experience, the practice of sharing aloud can really help students to consider both audience and voice. Some students definitely emerge as regular sharers, and their justwrites are often conceived to provoke some sort of response from their audience—often laughter, identification, or sympathy. As an audience, we might follow Brittany W.'s adventures as a "not-really-stalker" of "my honey-bunny who doesn't know he's mine," or Amanda's tales of car

mishaps, sometimes involving wayward cupcake trucks. Lindsay's love of Frisbee golf, nature, and all things wild and unpredictable show up in her justwrites, and Brittany C.'s notebook is filled with swimming references, little brother annoyances, and random magic. Alden's "another one bites the dust"-themed justwrites, John's philosophical physics connections, and Jenny's beautiful imagery all become part of the community, and the audience begins to recognize voice more easily. Who are these writers? They're real people! Their inspirations come from their relationships, the movies they watch, the books they read, and their theories of how the world works—or should work. In studying voice in English classes, we tend to analyze the voices of well-published authors, as it's easiest to see voice across a variety of samples. This reinforces the idea that voice might be something only "real" writers have—some elusive quality that comes with publication and/ or fame. Recognizing the voices of authors who are alive and well and living in the classroom makes it easier for each student to begin to recognize and develop his or her own voice.

STRENGTHENING FLUENCY

Writing fluency is a skill that's valuable in a variety of subject areas, "real life," and even standardized testing. Though AP Composition exams and SAT Writing tests are unlikely to suggest that a writer spend ten minutes following up a starter like "Elephant pajamas," the carryover benefits from justwriting include being able to write right away without wasting valuable time staring blankly. The development of voice is another valuable component of justwrites that can transfer to responding to timed prompts, but it's the confidence of being able to get started—even with freewriting to plan a response—that aids justwriters the most on these tests. Fluency is also valuable in untimed situations, as writing assignments in any class do require writers to get started at some point *and* to keep going. Those who justwrite are less likely to be overwhelmed by "the power of the white." They will often just start, recognizing that revision and clarification can

be a second step. Those who complete quick planning freewrites will have more material to choose from, as well as time to organize and clean up their ideas to form strong responses.

“[Earlier] I tried to force myself to stick with the starting phrase, but now I just go with it.” – Katie

CREATING SOURCE MATERIAL

Beyond building community and developing fluency, justwrites are also fabulous tools to use in the creation of future, more polished writing. Some justwrites, with a little editing, can stand alone as short stories. Personally, many of my poems start as justwrites, and the prose form of a justwrite encourages a smooth flow through my line breaks. It’s also possible that lines lifted from justwrites can either start a new piece or supply that much-needed boost to an entirely separate piece. Writers might see their notebooks full of justwrites as grocery shelves stocked with ingredients.

Add line breaks, tweak a little, make a poem—

sixthirty horses

on the left side of the road it was
maybe sixthirty there was a poem
waiting
it looked like two horses two fences and a tree but
when I tried to put it down
the balance the joining across empty space how one horse
was dark and one
was white stood out awkwardly
like thick waxy lines on a construction paper field
and the re-telling obscured the picture the feeling lost in
obtuse language
and elementary terminology it turned into

two horses
sideby fenced-in fields
one tree between the fences
standing
late in the sun two horses
dark and light
under the same tree

and this is how it falls apart tumbles through my fingers tied
as senseless thumbs to fence and horse and tree and missing
adjectives and metaphor in the end just
two horses

- MK

Still, and this is integral: justwrites themselves are pieces of writing! Some teachers will worry that these pieces will just end up fattening a writing notebook and then ending up in a pile somewhere. Fine! One of my biggest realizations about writing over the past several years is that writing is an end unto itself. Though it is nice to be published, the experience of writing is what makes you a writer. This is extremely empowering to me, personally, and I've had many students echo this sentiment. Our notebooks may be in piles somewhere, but they are books full of writing that *we* did, and that's noteworthy. Keeping a writing notebook should be a required component of any creative writing class, with justwrites, classwork, doodles, and drafts forming a wildly original book—a genuine artifact. All English classes, in fact, should involve writing notebooks of some kind, and a portfolio is a great tool in any subject area.

Sometimes a justwrite can stand alone as a complete piece—

when

when I am twenty-six I will eat oatmeal for dinner on the front stoop the sidewalk really in pajama pants in eighty degrees seven o'clock I will fill up on Ovaltine brown glass nutrition of a.m. radio commercials of my grandfather in Ohio I will listen to my neighbor on her phone and she will speak with no words but much emphasis through the brick wall aching for summer I will imagine crickets I will think profoundly will consider writing poems with lines like there's more room at the table when you eat outside will not write those lines I will write myself a mirror will question the new living insects twisting dead leaves from the grass I will look up and the sky will be blank and I will tell you what I see

- MK

BUT HOW?

Because justwrites can branch off into any direction, I think that the practice of using them in class should be consistent. The starting phrase is on the board once the bell has rung, we begin at the same time, the room is silent, and I always announce when there's a minute left. Though the writing should still continue through this last minute, I think that this allows enough awareness so that writers who want to can wrap up their ideas or stories and/ or come to some sort of conclusion. Coming to a definite end point is not at all necessary, nor is announcing that there is one minute remaining. I personally prefer to be aware of the time left, but that's just me. Occasionally, when reading over justwrites, I will discover that students have written down my line—"You have about a minute left"—and sometimes this is even worked in with whatever was being written beforehand. I know that in reality, I'm the one saying this, but sometimes justwrites include an alarm clock or a monster saying, "You have about a minute left!" I try not to be insulted. Strange noises in the hallway or other minor disruptions appear in justwrites, too. Notes University of Toronto psychologist Jordan Peterson, "Unusually

creative individuals may have lower levels of latent inhibition; they may remain in contact with the extra information constantly streaming in from the environment. . . . Creative people are not as good at learning to ignore things” (“Creative”).

Once the ten minutes have expired, I suggest, “Take a minute to read over what you just wrote. Underline any good words, phrases, or lines that you’re especially pleased with.” At this point, if students desperately need to fix a few spelling errors or insert accidentally deleted words—the mind is faster than the pencil!—that’s fine. Reading what has just been written is sometimes a little surprising, as continuous writing does not allow for an author to look back at the same time. While simultaneous writing and looking back can be a very helpful tool in “regular” writing for improving organization and maintaining voice, agreement, and flow, justwrites are not concerned about these structural constraints. The goal in looking back after writing, though, has at least three components:

- To figure out what has actually been written.
- To allow the author to mine for gems that could be polished for appearance in future writing.
- To prepare writers for possibly sharing their work with others.

“Others?! Oh no! Those people are really writers! I’m not telling them what I wrote!” You mean those people who started with the same phrase you did and had the exact same amount of time to write? “Those people,” in this case, are on a much more level playing field than might be common in the typical sharing of finished pieces. Fear of not stacking up against other “real writers” seems to be a major reason why people don’t consider themselves writers, but if every person present is involved in the same activity, this fear will gradually subside. No one is required to read a justwrite aloud and, though I do periodically collect writing notebooks, students can even choose to paperclip or staple shut a

few extra-sensitive entries. (As a side note, reading through justwrites is such a great chance to know what's going on in students' heads!) In sharing aloud, of course, some people will be more confident to begin with, but I've found that most students will, at some point during a semester, choose to or agree to read at least one underlined chunk of a justwrite, if not the entire thing. Plus, underlining phrases allows students to be able to share pieces that they believe to be successful without being forced to confront any perceived risk in sharing an entire entry.

It's exciting to see the way a single starter leads authors in many different directions. As mentioned earlier, some will follow the starter faithfully and some will address it briefly, then hastily move to something else. Some will write about their own personal experiences or emotions. Some will create rich stories or anecdotes from seemingly nowhere. All of these are perfectly wonderful, as writing is writing. Who knows what words or stories are just waiting for a starter key in the ignition and ten minutes on the open page? "The pen is the tongue of the mind," says Cervantes. "How can I tell what I think until I see what I say?" agrees E.M. Forster.

Additionally, sharing justwrites and exploring voice as a class really create an environment that welcomes stories. As a firm believer in the theory that the more stories you tell, the more happens to you, justwrites can actually create more exciting lives for their own authors! Plus, the discussions that follow justwrites are totally unpredictable and often prompt follow-up writing or contemplation. Though the intellectual benefits vary based on the discussion topic (Are pancakes better than waffles?), some really useful discussions occur spontaneously (Why do we always end up writing "you" toward the end of a justwrite, even if it starts out in third person?).

In order to keep their gardens growing, I believe that writers should justwrite every day. To encourage myself and strengthen my own "accountability," I have been involved in daily justwrite email exchanges with friends, and am now posting justwrites on my own blog each day. Ten minutes is not a long time at all, and

it's worth any perceived sacrifice to set aside that time to write. Daily writing not only accumulates material (potential drafts and ingredients), but it also keeps writers flexible. Early justwrites—especially those at the beginning of a semester—tend to include much more self-conscious writing. While this is fine, these entries often pale in comparison to the same author's later justwrites, which are often much more “writerly” and free. Some of my early justwrites included notes to myself on my lesson plans for that specific day! Annoyances of the day would occasionally creep in, as well. While this planning/ journal-style writing was probably helpful for me at the time, I gradually moved past this, and my justwrites now rarely include explicit information about my real life.

Sometimes we start at the same place and head in totally different directions...

Honestly, that was the first time...

Student—

“Honestly, that was the first time I began a revolution,” I said in a tone that was dripping sarcasm.

“Oh yea, well that was the first time I had ever been behind a girl in a ventilation system,” and Eien raised his brows at me, his green eyes flashing humor.

I smiled and chuckled. The past couple of weeks we had become closer and closer. We worked on the plan anytime we could and so I was with Eien most of the day. He was really fun to be around. But then as my chuckle died down, I remembered where we were. We were in a cell. The prison system and how it looks hasn't changed much in the last couple of centuries except for the security.

I looked around at our drab room, feeling lost. Most likely we were gonna die, but we tried to keep our minds off of that subject, for I didn't like the thought. We mainly talked and made ourselves laugh.

We had been planning, talking about it and they still managed to somehow have found us out. I tried thinking of ways they could of known and some of them I just didn't want to believe.

"My parents must be so ashamed of me..." I said, my depression coming back to me as I thought more and more.

"There not your parents," Eien commented.

"Yea... I know but they still raised me." I didn't want to cry, so I laid down the bed that I had been sitting on. Eien watched me as I turned my back on him and I shut my eyes, trying to hold back the tears.

Eien came over and sat on the bed. He started rubbing my back, "It's ok... were not... gonna die..." he said. I sat up my eyes starting to pour forth the tears that came from them. He wrapped me in his arms and I hugged him back, my silent tears falling onto his shirt.

- Lindsay

Self—

Honestly, that was the first time I've been that late for school. I was in my classroom at 7:25 but I still feel horribly guilty. It's not the end of the world, but being ten minutes late instead of forty-five minutes early was a big change for me. What a letdown.

There seems to be oodles of grading to be done. Maybe that's because I have oodles of students. That noise is absolutely unnecessary. I'm ringless today because my rings are still safely in the bag I brought home from the YMCA. Shucks.

Last night the group from the summer writing project had a reading get-together. We were all to try to bring a piece to read and copies for everyone. Only Susan and I did... Why is it that I feel the need to be a good student even though I'm now a teacher? In my experience, teachers do not always make good students. Upon having our degrees conferred upon us, do we also feel we've been given the

right to interrupt, ignore others, and roll our eyes at any possible provocation?

It seems that there are a lot of September birthdays. Maybe this is because September is the 9th month and January is one of the coldest months. The implications are relatively disturbing if you're considering this calculation in terms of your own parents—but nature is beautiful, I guess. Oh, my!

I didn't realize I was so hyper-sensitive to even minute amounts of caffeine... this bears remembering...

- MK

BEYOND...

The majority of my discussion and suggestions focus on my personal writing or the use of justwrites in a high school Creative Writing class, but justwrites can be very useful outside of these situations. Obviously, justwrites could be used as tools in any English class. Descriptive and narrative assignments connect beautifully. Any chance for students to write freely on topics of their own choice will allow them to become more confident writers. Imagine the pleasure of helping students discover the pleasure of writing! I've had students in the past who've said, "Can we have a longer justwrite today?" and "I think we should justwrite the whole class today." The mirror positive experience for me would be to see my English students really interested in their choicebooks and "secretly" reading under their desks. Just like reading, writing can be a surprisingly fun opportunity for students, whether they believe it at first or not!

Even younger students can benefit from justwriting, though time modifications might be appropriate. Maybe five minutes of sustained writing is more reasonable for elementary students. Helping younger students to have fun with writing—especially while they're young enough to be creative and not worry about what others will think—will definitely help them out in the future.

In my general English classes, justwrites don't appear every day. When my AP Composition classes do justwrites, they come up with different results—word counts, language usage skills, etc.—than those written by my 10-merit students, but the benefits are still the same. My merit-level classes are much more comfortable starting with five minutes of writing, and then working up to seven, and then ten minutes at a later point. Sometimes the creativity and storytelling abilities locked away in “average” or “lower level” students are surprising; just because they don't get A's in English doesn't mean they can't or won't love writing! Likewise, it's sometimes AP students who start haltingly, caught up in looking for the “right” response. Luckily, justwrites are never wrong.

Beyond the English classroom, too, all teachers are working to improve students' communication skills. With some modifications, justwrites could be used to share a student's assessment of his or her own competence in completing a type of math problem, or to think about what it would be like to live during a particular period of history. Art students might use a work's title as the starter for a justwrite before viewing the piece, and then analyze whether the artist's feelings matched the author's; “Starry Night” is a perfect starting phrase. The only point to remember is that justwrites should not be graded as polished pieces of writing, because they're not.

English 10-merit seven minute sample—

What's up dog?! nothing much just here in english with bobby and jake... well and robby too. but he's kinda just chillin' not doing much. He looks kinda sad, but then again i'm not sure he's wearing yellow and i totally love nichole's purple shirt. She just sniffed along with two others. i'm thinking swineflu in the air. dude jake shut up i hear you mumbling what you're writing, i guess you can't think in your mind? I wonder if astronauts like roller coasters since they like going into space-- ehdaa sit down! bobby stop

playing with your fingers and write... man my stories like about everyone in class, i sound like a creaper. but ian's totally being one staring at carley write bahaha! my hand is starting to hurt, but it's cool we only have uno momento. What?! What?! Kid [in the hallway] shut up, obviously if you didn't get it the first time, you're not the second.

-Courtney

A FEW SUGGESTIONS FOR USING JUSTWRITES IN CLASS

Establish a positive and respectful learning environment. Even though justwrites can really grow a community, they can't spontaneously generate wildflowers in the desert. Students have to feel safe enough to risk writing whatever they want and to share their work aloud. Show that you are a listener and that you genuinely want to know who your students are, and they will generally do the same for each other.

Consider yourself to be more of a workshop facilitator than a teacher, at least during this time. Students need to know that there is not a "right" justwrite. Faithfully writing a justwrite with your students is a very strong tool, and regular sharing is even more powerful.

Start by providing your own starters, but then fill a jar with student-suggested phrases. This allows for a wider variety of inspired thoughts, and instills a little swelling of pride in the author—"Oh! That one's mine!"

Never force writers to share with the class. Pair-shares can be especially effective at the beginning of a semester, but do everything you can to keep justwriting a positive and un-pressured activity.

Permit some feedback and discussion from others. This helps to validate the author's own writing as well as actively involving his or her audience. I personally write down key words or phrases that seem particularly exciting to me in my own writing notebook, and I encourage students to do the same. At the end of

our sharing time, if I have a particularly interesting list, I'll read it out loud. I do the same thing throughout our Creative Writing Club's poetry cafes, and at the end, I read what one student called my Franken-poem. It takes such little effort, but it's a tiny form of publication and validation that students really like—again, “Oh! That one's mine!” I've never really had to say, “Be sure that your feedback is positive!” Students see the modeling and recognize that this is not really a time to be critical, but a time to value the words and ideas of others as springboards.

Perhaps most importantly: keep writing! Ten minutes doesn't seem like a long time, but the first few attempts at justwriting will often include students staring at the clock, the ceiling, me, or other classmates. Sacrifice a few of your own seconds to catch an eye and make an exaggerated writing motion with your own pencil. Gentle reminders may occasionally be necessary, but personal demonstration is definitely the best way to convey your expectations. Sometimes I feel students staring at me while I'm writing, which is a little weird, but it usually just encourages me to keep writing and to show them, “Yes! I *am* writing. This is what writers do.”

NIGHTWRITES

For students or teachers who truly believe that they have absolutely no time to justwrite during the day, nightwrites are an alternative method of ensuring regular writing. As opposed to a day-end journal, filled with the frustrations or accomplishments of a particular day, a nightwrite is a collection of the images, phrases, sounds, or smells of that day. There's no need to follow chronological order—complete accuracy is not required!—and it might take the form of a list or a justwrite freeflow mishmash. The goals of a nightwrite are probably three-fold. One, you're writing. Two, you're collecting all kinds of juicy bits that can be used later on in any form that you wish. Many of these bits will disappear forever if you don't snatch them up! Three, regularly creating nightwrites allows you to look at the world differently. As a writer, you don't have to be simply a reporter. A nightwrite

that states, “I went to the store. I got milk. I drove home. I ate cereal,” might be factually accurate, but it’s an entirely different kind of thinking that instead creates, “The days-waiting dry cereal in the blue bowl finally cried milky tears of joy by way of the car by way of the shelf and the crunch shook the orange dining room triumphant in its deliciousness.” When you take in the world as images and sensations, it’s a totally different place. At the end of a given day, there’s no benefit to adding up the positive and negative happenings to determine if said day was “good” or “bad.” Pulling out the juicy bits is much more rewarding.

Writing a nightwrite is similar to writing a justwrite, but there are a few key differences. As the name implies, nightwrites are done in the evening. I usually try to write mine as close to bedtime as possible, in order to collect as many day-bits as I can. Also, for a nightwrite, it’s perfectly acceptable to “draft” during the day, jotting down particularly thrilling phrases or sentences that you hear and are unwilling to lose (“Can you ride a horse without training wheels?”), or images that are likely to vanish as quickly as they appear (“the morning dayfast fox out-the-way of one-lane traffic”). The other option is to sit down at the end of the day and write down everything that comes to mind as it comes to mind. I prefer this method, as it’s more natural, but it’s true that I sometimes forget interesting bits and have to jot them down later (when driving past the spot where the fox was—“Oh yeah, the fox!”), or allow them to vanish into the past. Finally, nightwrites are not timed. What would be the point? Squeeze as much juice as you can from your day, and then go to sleep!

I do use nightwrites occasionally as part of my Creative Writing class, but they are not daily requirements. For some students, evening writing more naturally takes the form of a journal entry, and that’s great. For me, personally, nightwrites are definitely the way to go.

I use it to write when I’m in a comfortable atmosphere. It’s like a justwrite, but in a less stressed environment (outside of

school). It helps develop writing style and voice so it's a good exercise. – Brittany C.

SO WRITE ALREADY!

Whatever the method, writing is obviously the key requirement for being a writer. When students, teachers, and wanna-be writers understand this, they'll be empowered to consider themselves "real" writers and stop clinging to archaic beliefs that all writers are published, famous, and in possession of some rare, magical quality that the rest of us can only dream of.

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