



YOUNG WRITERS PROGRAM
Volunteer Handbook

2014/2015

The Young Writers Program is dedicated to Santa Cruz County students grades 4-12 and their teachers in building students' writing skills and confidence.

As a volunteer, you will be an integral part to this program in mentoring students to write creatively.

What follows is a little information on how to start your journey as a Writing Project Assistant (WPA), tips/points for what will be going on in the classroom, and how to sign-up.

We want to welcome you to the Young Writers Program!

What's a Young Writers Program Writing Project?

A *writing project* is generally initiated by the teacher. Projects are meaningful and engage students in the writing process to further their involvement with and excitement for writing. We want them hooked! WPAs are typically in the classroom two hours a week and projects generally run 4-8 weeks. In addition, you will be able to pick which project most excites you and run with it!

How Will You Know What To Do with Students? We Have a Training for That...

Free trainings for Young Writers Program WPAs are held throughout the year and are essential for being prepared to be in the classroom. They're informative! They're fun! And there are bagels! We start the year with our Best Practices training for beginning WPAs and then continue with trainings in Teaching Writing Basics, Working with English Language Learners, and "I'm Done!" and Other Excuses and How to Handle Them. Trainings are led by teachers and trainers with lots of experience teaching writing.

Orientation Meetings? You bet!

Every writing project starts out with an orientation meeting. This is where you will meet the teacher and other volunteers on the project. You may feel like it's the first day of school after a long summer break but not to worry. The teacher will go over what he/she has planned for the project and any mini-lessons that will be implemented during the YWP sessions. By all

means, ask questions! Both YWP staff and the teacher will be in attendance but if you've got an aching need to know, speak up. Here are some of the things you can expect to be covered at the orientation:

- **School and classroom rules** (wearing hats, eating in the classroom, cell-phone usage, etc.) The teacher should explain all of these, as they are important to follow. Remember: you're a role model and the kids will be watching you.
- **Basic stuff** like which bathroom to use and the layout of the school. No one wants to wander around looking for the bathroom. That's just terrifying. Writing Project Assistants may be tutoring in a writing center, the library or the cafeteria, and the teacher will be your guide as to where to go. You should feel as comfortable as possible when tutoring the students. Asking plenty of questions at the orientation meeting will help.
- **Communicating with the teacher**, both in and out of the classroom. You'll be provided with the best way to contact the teacher during the sessions and how he/she would like to be addressed.
- **The last day of the project.** This is a great time to discuss the project's closing celebration and throw out ideas about what you might like to do: cupcakes in the classroom, picnic at the park, etc. Starting this discussion now is super pro-active and organized and no one's caught by surprise on the last day of the project!

Publish or Perish! (Not really, but it has a nice ring to it.)

WPAs, students, and the teacher will work to turn in writing that's as publication-ready as possible. The work is be typed with as few grammatical and spelling errors as possible. It's okay to frequently remind students that their work will be published. This isn't a threat. It helps remind students that their hard work has a purpose and hopefully encourages them to take their writing seriously.

Party Time

This is an exciting part of the project! Many of the students have never written a creative piece for publication and will enjoy celebrating. As we've said, writing can be a fun and rewarding experience. Wrapping up the project with a celebratory event provides closure for the students as well as the WPAs who've worked beside them the past few weeks. It also conveys the message that we appreciate the hard work they've done on their writing. Party on!

Tips for Writing Project Assistants (WPAs)

Section 1: Somewhat Obvious Tips That May Not Actually Be That Obvious:

- Know where you are going and arrive at least ten minutes early. Allow for time to figure out

where to park without being towed, check in at the school office, and find the actual classroom. Even better, scope out the school the day before so you don't have those horrible first-day-of-school-stress dreams, where you show up without your pants and can't remember your locker combination.

- Be aware of the campus' visitor policy. Some schools require a name badge every time you visit, while others may allow you to use your YWP name badge. Some will require you to sign in and out every time. Others will require a DNA sample. Just kidding, but you *will* have to get fingerprinted and TB tested (more on that later).
- We know you love coffee and that you usually like to chew gum afterwards, but be mindful of the classroom rules. In most cases, water is okay, but a salad you picked up from Trader Joe's is probably not. Also, I know you really want to "like" the grumpy cat photo your Aunt Sally just posted, but control the urge to whip out your smart phone! The students are watching you as a role model. And it's annoying.
- Try to dress comfortably, but somewhat professionally if for nothing other than avoiding being mistaken as a student.
- Remember: The teacher is in charge and we are in *his or her* classroom. Please be respectful of teaching styles and choices.

Section 2: Working with the actual student:

- If you haven't been in a classroom or around kids in a while, you might have an overwhelming urge to make a speedy exit the first time you walk into the classroom. Don't do it! Be confident even if you don't feel confident. Kids can sense fear and insecurity like sharks can detect blood in water. Okay, that's a little dramatic, but they will feel more comfortable when you appear comfortable. Fake it 'til you make it. Remember, the students are nervous about meeting you, too.
- Take some time to get to know your student. Ask them questions, like, a lot of questions, and don't expect them to be an open-book right away. Some students will be super shy, others will try to impress you in a variety of creative ways, and some will be open and ready to share. Try to gauge your student's needs and, by all means, listen! Open-hearted listening is maybe the top skill we can offer students. Take notes if it helps.
- Ask your student what their assignment is and check their understanding of it. This can be a great start in helping them grasp what they've been assigned to do. Some students will have tons and tons of ideas, others will have no idea where to start. Be patient.
- Remember: you are working with a group of people from a variety of backgrounds. They

have lives outside of the classroom that affect them in so many ways. Try not to make assumptions and don't take things personally.

- Leave things like grammar, spelling, and other writing conventions for later. There will be plenty of time for it down the road! At the start, focus on getting the story out, making sure the student's voice is consistent and strong, adding details, etc.
- Every piece of writing has potential, but hard work is what makes *good* writing. Our job is to instill confidence in our students and listen to the stories they have to tell. Try to keep the writing process fun, because it truly is! We won't make perfect writers out of these students. It's just a step toward being better at it, which is a life-long process! Beyond the amazing benefits of undivided attention and supported, focused writing, the kids will hopefully learn that writing is fun even though it's hard. At the very least, let's not bore them to death.

Section 3: Working with the Teacher

- As mentioned, you are in *their* classroom. You are a guest. Sing "Be our Guest," from Beauty and the Beast in your head if that helps you remember. You may not agree with everything the teacher does, but please, please be respectful. Refrain from questioning them in front of their students. Without teachers, we couldn't do this project. Or anything.

- Find out the best way to contact the teacher (this is usually determined at the Orientation Meeting). As you continue working in different classrooms (because you won't want to stop once you start!) you will learn that each teacher has different preferences about being in contact and how much responsibility they're comfortable giving volunteers.
- Get familiar with the prompt and what the teacher expects from students. You may be a grammarian, but the teacher may want to focus on something else. You won't be able to guide your student unless you know what is being asked of them.
- It's really awesome if you are able to debrief with the teacher after your session has ended. This is a much more effective method than interrupting the class to share something you are thinking. Not all teachers have time in their schedules to sit with you, but most are willing to discuss in some shape or form. Talk with your teacher to figure out what works best for them.

Section 4: The Not So Fun Stuff That We Need to Talk About Anyway

- Whatever you do, don't engage in a power struggle with your student. Over time you will learn to pick your battles and in the mean time, be patient and consistent.

- Sometimes dark material may come up in students' writing. The projects are personal and you will find that some of these kids have been through a lot. If something comes up, speak with the teacher. Do not speak with the student until you've spoken with the teacher.
- Be mindful of the school environment. Find out the school's dress code. Sometimes you shouldn't wear red or blue. Sometimes brands or symbols that carry no significance to you have associations you'd never dream of. Ask if you are unsure.
- Lastly, some kids actually hate writing, or at least they think they do. Not all of them will thank you in the end, but what you are providing them is priceless. You never know what impact sitting beside them will have later in their lives.

Tips from volunteers who keep coming back for more

Here are a few points that past volunteers felt were important to remember:

- I'd say that it was important for me to go into the classroom assuming that the students I worked with had no experience with creative writing in the classroom before. I made sure I didn't take any prior knowledge on their part for granted and this gave me more patience. Also, it helped to develop trust with the students by asking them questions and showing an interest in them academically and personally.
—Celine Cuneo
- The magic of this program is one-on-one. *Most* students will respond to pressure, guidance, whatever, from the YWP. Don't be afraid to push. "I want you to do good work/be successful. That's what I'm here for."
—Jane Walton
- At a time when many [students] feel silenced or as though their voice isn't being heard, working with students to express themselves through writing is an awe-inspiring experience - both for the kids and for [the Writing Project Assistant].
—Jackie Pasko

How to Sign up:

1. Fill out an online registration form at our website:
SantaCruzWrites/YoungWritersProgram
Filling out the form will generate a Santa Cruz County Office of Education referral with your name and contact phone number. It will be signed and sent to HR.
2. Once your referral is with HR, we'll let you know you're clear to be fingerprinted and send you the SCCOE Volunteer Application.
3. **To reduce your number of trips to Human Resources, please bring the following two documents with you when you go in to be fingerprinted:**
 - a. Completed and signed **Volunteer Application**
 - b. **Negative TB test results.** The least expensive TB test is at County Health Services on Emeline for \$15. Doctors on Duty on Ocean St. in Santa Cruz is also a low-cost option. Alternatively, you may get a test from your physician for the cost of your co-pay. Please call clinics in advance to insure availability of the test. Allow plenty of time at the Health Services clinic as wait time can be up to two hours.
4. Get fingerprinted. Fingerprint hours in the Human Resources Department are Monday-Friday, 1:30 to 4:00 p.m. Bring your volunteer application, photo ID, and TB test results to:

Human Resources
Santa Cruz County Office of Education
400 Encinal Street
Santa Cruz, CA 95060
831-466-5750

Cost:

Fingerprinting cost is \$20. The County Office of Ed is offsetting the remainder of the \$67.50 cost for volunteers. Volunteers are responsible for TB test costs. If these costs are a true hardship, please let us know

Santa Cruz Writes

Enhancing Literary Opportunities for Santa Cruz County Writers

Core Principles

Santa Cruz Writes (SCW) is a non-profit organization that seeks to develop and sustain a vibrant literary community dedicated to the craft of writing and its ability to inform, reveal, and enchant.

SCW provides a voice for both known and emerging writers and opportunities for those writers to meet and share their writing and ideas in the spirit of collaboration.

SCW provides Santa Cruz County writers with an audience through its online literary magazine, *phren-Z*, featuring fiction, poetry, essays, book reviews, and interviews. Find *phren-Z* at phren-Z.org

SCW believes in the importance of writing at an early age and instilling the love of language and the written word in young people. Its Young Writers Program enlists volunteers to work with student authors, giving their writing individualized, focused attention. The Young Writers Program is dedicated to Santa Cruz County students in grades 4-12 and their teachers in building students' writing skills and confidence.



The Young Writers Program is Co-sponsored by Santa Cruz Writes and the Santa Cruz County Office of Education.

Santa Cruz Writes

