



Young Writers Program

Volunteer Handbook

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. 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/pointers for what will be going on in the classroom, and how to sign-up. We want to welcome you to the Young Writers Program!

You can find information on
the Young Writers Program at our website,
youngwriterssc.org.
Email vc@youngwriterssc.org or phone 831-466-5829.

The Young Writers Program has projects!

The Young Writers Program has five projects:

- **The In-Classroom Project:** volunteers work in the classroom for 2-4 hours a week for 6-8 weeks on teacher-initiated writing projects.
- **The Dedicated Writing Room Project:** at Branciforte Middle School and similar to the In-Classroom Project but takes place in a converted metal shop where one section is devoted entirely to a writing 'room.'
- **The Word Lab:** embedded at the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History and adjacent to the Young Writers Program's Chamber of Heart & Mystery. The Word Lab is open from 3:00-5:00 on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday and volunteers are needed to work with small groups of students.
- **Hablamos Juntos:** an In-Classroom writing project in collaboration with Museo Eduardo Carrillo. Volunteers work with students to write personal narratives inspired by Latinx-Californian artwork, which are published in English and Spanish alongside the artwork.
- **College Application Essay Workshop:** a chance to help Santa Cruz County Students write a college essay that works! Held at the beginning of each school year, volunteers provide one-on-one writing mentorship to college-hopefuls.

Kids Scare Me and I Don't Like Poetry. Are There Other Ways For Me To Get Involved?

You betcha. If you'd rather not work the front lines as a classroom WPA, (read: Hello, Introverts), consider joining the YWP as a remote editor.

- **Remote Editors:** You heard it right the first time. You can work from home, alone! With guidance from our Publications Coordinator you will lightly edit submitted student writing pieces until they're publication ready. Contact

Stuart@youngwriterssc.org for your first assignment.

We might add, however, that reverence toward any genre of writing, poetry included, is a plus, but not a prerequisite to being a great mentor. Our most successful WPAs aren't all writers! They're lawyers and asphalt salesmen, retired and aspiring teachers, college students and parents. Approach students' writing with genuine curiosity and you'll be fine, seriously.

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

Free workshops 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 Workshop for beginning WPAs and then continue with trainings in Traits of Good Writing, and Working with English Language Learners. Workshops 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 they have 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 they would like to be addressed.
- **The first and last days of the project.** The teacher and YWP staff will walk you through your first day activity with the students. This is also 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, ersatz poet's cafe, 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. It will 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 since they're writing for a wider audience.

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. The teacher, along with participating WPAs, decide together what the celebration will look like and what to bring. 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, to check in at the school office, and to 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, we 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 *her or his* classroom. Please be respectful of teaching styles and choices, and reach out to the Volunteer Coordinator first if there's a stink developing that needs to be aired. They are your friend and liaison!

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 students' 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 students 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. When making comments, move from warm to cool.
- 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 lifelong 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

communication preferences 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 students 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.

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 meantime, 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.

- For more No-Fun Info, check out our Volunteer Grievance, Corrective Action & Dismissal Policy buried at the back this handbook.

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. 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:

<http://youngwriterssc.org/volunteer-sign-up/>. This will generate a Santa Cruz County Office of Education referral with your name and contact phone number.

2. Once your referral is with HR, we'll let you know you're clear to be fingerprinted.
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. **A photo ID.**
 - 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 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
5. Fill out a SCCOE Volunteer Application upon arrival and, pending the clearance of your fingerprints, you're ready to start in the classroom!

Cost:

Fingerprinting cost is \$25 and payable by cash or check. 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.

Volunteer Grievance, Corrective Action & Dismissal Policy

Things hardly ever go wrong, but this policy is in place just in case they do. Know your rights!

Volunteer Grievances

A grievance is defined as any event, condition, rule, or practice which the volunteer believes violates their civil rights, treats them unfairly, or causes them any degree of unpleasantness or unhappiness on the job. A grievance may also deal with an attitude, or an opinion or statement held by a staff member or fellow volunteer.

Volunteer grievances are of great concern to the YWP. It is our promise to provide prompt and efficient evaluation of, and response to grievances. It is the YWP's policy to give full consideration to every volunteer's opinion. There will be no discrimination against or toward anyone for his or her part in presenting a grievance. All grievances are handled confidentially.

1. If a volunteer has a grievance toward a student, the volunteer should:
 - a. not engage in a power struggle with a student.
 - b. bring grievances of this kind directly to the classroom teacher if the concern is immediate or threatening.
 - c. wait until after the session, if the situation is not immediate, to speak with the teacher, and be sure that other students are not

Volunteers are expected to conduct themselves with professionalism and act, always, within the rules and regulations set forth in the Volunteer Handbook. When a volunteer is violating, knowingly or not, the YWP's mission statement, school rules, or state/federal law, corrective action may be taken. Corrective action is within the discretion of the Volunteer Coordinator and/or the Executive Director and may include:

1. verbal warning with additional supervision;
2. written warning reasserting our expectation for volunteers and explaining how volunteer is falling short of said expectation;
3. pulling Volunteer from project with offer to retrain;
4. reassigning volunteer to position that better utilizes skills and avoids further transgression;
5. dismissal from the Young Writers Program.

Volunteer Dismissal

Volunteers who do not adhere to the policies and procedures set forth by the program, or who fail to satisfactorily perform their assignment, are subject to dismissal, immediately or with verbal and written warning, depending on the severity of the transgression. Dismissal is at the discretion of the Executive Director.

Grounds for immediate dismissal may include, but are not limited to:

- physical, mental, or emotional abuse of a child;
- chronic absence or tardiness;
- being under the influence of alcohol or drugs while performing volunteer duties;

- gross misconduct or insubordination, negligence, harassment, assault, mistreatment or inappropriate conduct toward a student, teacher, or another volunteer;
- destruction or theft of school property;
- violation of program policies and procedures, school rules, or law.



Young Writers Program

youngwriterssc.org

The Young Writers Program is sponsored by the
Santa Cruz County Office of Education.

