

## **A Teacher/Librarian's Guide to Starting a Writers' Group**

This guide is based on my experience running a Teen Writers' Workshop at my library. Everyone's comfort zone, experience, and resource level is different so your mileage may vary. Feel free to adjust and adapt as needed!

I think the biggest key for any group like this is to keep it fun. Yes, you're learning and building skills, but more importantly, you're exploring and creating. I always set out a plan for each session, but I keep things totally flexible.

Sometimes, the group isn't into what I have planned so we switch it up and work on whatever they're more interested in. As long as everyone is writing and having a good time, you're doing things right.

Don't worry about numbers. A smaller group is ideal because it will give everyone more time to share their work. I've found that I have my core group of regulars and attendance goes up and down. Some days you'll have a full house. Some days, you'll have only one kid show up. Or zero. I think the biggest mistake people make is shutting things down before they've had the chance to grow.

At the beginning, everyone is usually pretty shy. Initially, whenever we did prompts, I wrote along with the group and shared my work first to help break the ice. It took a lot of the pressure off for the kids (especially because my stuff ~~was~~ *is* always silly.) Now they write so much, there's no time for my stuff! I have a number of fun suggestions in the Writing Activities section of my website, but here are a couple of other prompts that work better when the group leader is in charge:

## 1. The Last Line

I used to give everyone in my group an opening line as prompt, but we found that all of the stories were ending up very similar in tone and content. Then I tried mixing it up and giving them a *last* line. The story or scene could be any genre they wanted, with any kind of plot, as long as it ended with that particular line. With that simple change, we ended up with a huge variety of stories. There was something about being able to choose your own starting place and yet knowing what your end point would be that helped them dive into their work. Don't be afraid to come up with lines that are really outside the box. One of our funniest series of stories resulted from the last line being "This is why we don't keep goats!"

## 2. Pictures

Visual images can also stir up excellent results. Sometimes I'll print out random landscape scenes or portraits and hand them out to the group. They will then write out a scene or short story to go along with it. Sometimes they might need an extra prompt, such as a question from you about the scene.

The kids in my group will pull books off the shelf at random to use. One of their favourites that they discovered is a book for doll collectors. It is full of the most terrifying dolls you can ever imagine. They love it. I do not which of course means they ask to get it out all the time. We'll open it to a random page and they'll pick a doll to centre their story around. It's the stuff of my nightmares, but they have fun and they write up a storm so whatever works, right?

### 3. The Mystery Box

This is a great activity that one of my teacher/writer friends, Kendra, shared with me. Place a random item inside a box. Ask the kids to come up one at a time to touch what's inside the box. They're not allowed to peek, only touch. Then they go back and write a short story about what they think is inside the box. When everyone's done, they can share their stories and you can reveal what's in the box!

#### **Goals of the group:**

When you're first starting out, the biggest accomplishment is going to be getting the group to share their work with each other. Stress the importance of supporting and encouraging each other. I also emphasize the value of reading when you're a writer. You can't have one without the other. I check out books that I think will interest them and give a book talk at the start of each meeting. I also encourage them to bring in books that they've been reading and enjoying.

As your group progresses, you can gauge the interest level and possibly bring in the basics of critiquing. With my group, I introduced it in two ways:

1. Critiquing published books – we talk about what we liked, what we didn't like, what we might have done differently
2. Allowing them to critique my own work – I didn't want them practicing their skills on each other. I've got a thick skin so I had no problem sharing my work with them so we could go over the various elements of critiquing.

I focus on positive and constructive critiques. We start out by discussing what we enjoyed about the work. When it comes to constructive criticism, we focus on parts that were confusing or could be explored more. Their instinct is going to be saying things like ‘I didn’t like this part’ or ‘I thought it was boring’. That’s when I would coach them to identify what it was about the story itself that made them feel that way. Thinking a story is boring is a way to bring up a discussion about pacing and what that means. If they have a negative reaction to a character, it opens up a discussion about depth and motivation.

It’s equally important to discuss how to receive feedback. We talk about identifying when something is a subjective opinion versus when you’re receiving consistent feedback about a particular issue. It’s good to talk about sleeping on feedback and giving your brain time to digest it. I tread the critiquing waters carefully. Learning how to give and receive feedback is vitally important for any writer, but for young writers especially, you want to the focus to be on enjoying and creating their worlds. It’s definitely something to ease into.

If you’re willing to put in the time, a writers’ group can be a ton of fun. The kids are inventive and enthusiastic. I’m continually blown away by their boundless creativity. Their story ideas are always awesome. It’s a great outlet for them and will always be an interesting experience for you!