

## **Write Night: An Evening Writing Program for Students and Parents**

by  
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Write Night is an evening event that brings students and family members to school to participate in some type of writing activity. I learned how to conduct a Write Night activity from the Florida Writing Project, and I have used it with students in grades 6-12, in Florida, North Carolina, and Virginia. It has always been successful, and it's a great way to get parents involved in writing with their kids (plus, principals love it!). However, the best aspect of Write Night is its flexibility: there are so many ways to make it work for you!

### Steps to Holding a Successful Write Night Evening Activity:

First, it's important to determine if holding a Write Night evening program is appropriate for you and your students. Ask yourself, "Why am I doing this? What results do I want?" Your answers to these questions will guide your decision-making throughout the planning process.

After you've set your objectives, the next step is to set the date and time for the event. As you are planning, consider setting a snow date, if appropriate, and determine when you will send out invitations and when you will accept your last RSVP. Mark all this on a calendar so you can keep track of all tasks you need to accomplish.

The next task is to set parameters for the activity. The parameters you set will determine the scope of this activity. Which students will you invite? Will you open up this event to other teachers and their classes? What family member(s) will students be allowed to bring with them? May students bring friends if family members cannot attend? It's also helpful to ask some other questions that will help you define your parameters. For instance, what will be the results of attendance? Will you offer bonus points, eliminate a low quiz/homework grade, or do something else to encourage students to attend? Knowing the answers to these questions is critical as you move on to the next stages of planning.

One of the more enjoyable parts of planning is developing the program. I recommend that you plan to do introductions (not all of the attendees will know you, and you'll want people at tables to get to know each other) and hold an ice-breaker activity to ease participants' anxieties. This is a fun night, not an examination period! You will probably have time for two short writing activities (you're only going to get to the drafting stage on them, but that's enough for the purposes of this evening). I recommend that you choose activities that are related to previous lessons so your students can show off. It's also a good idea to consider activities that do not require much previous knowledge, especially if you have a large number of limited-English speaking parents. Also, try to select activities that provide variety, are active and authentic, use the process writing. Finally, don't forget to build in time for sharing.

Here's a description of the writing activities I did at one program. It is NOT the only way to organize an evening writing program. However, seeing my example may help you think of other ways to make this work.

- 1) Introductions
- 2) Icebreaker – Participants form a line by birthdays.

- 3) Activity 1 – “Sound.” Talk a bit about sound in poetry. Share some poems that really rely on sound. Point out sound words. Call on students to point out examples of alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia, euphony, and cacophony. Have participants eat food at tables (carrots, celery, crackers, chips) and try to capture the sounds they make chewing the food. They don’t have to write down real words. After chewing loudly and writing for about 5 minutes, have small groups share their words. Then, discuss briefly the idea of metaphor. Show some examples. Call on students to point out metaphors in the examples. Have participants brainstorm things (other than chewing) that make the same noises. Provides some examples (mash = someone stepping on your heart; crunchunch = jack hammer tearing up the street). While they are brainstorming, you should be doing your own writing on the overhead. After allowing participants to brainstorm for about 5 minutes, ask them to try to turn the idea into a poem. There are no rules for the poem (it can be long or short, rhyming or not, rhythmic or not, etc.). Allow about 10 minutes for drafting. While they are drafting, you should be writing your own poem on the overhead. Ask small groups to share, but tell participants that no one is required to share. Then ask for one or two poems to be shared with the entire room.
- 4) Activity 2 – “Silence.” Talk about the flip side of sound, silence. Share some poems that rely on the idea of silence. Bring the sound down in the room so that everyone is almost whispering. Focus on hearing the silence. Show this haiku:

No one spoke  
The host, the guest  
The white chrysanthemums (Ryota)

Ask participants to brainstorm in writing what the setting of this poem could be. Obviously, there is a host and at least one guest, and there are white flowers. What events might have such a setting? Write your own ideas on the overhead. Allow for sharing in the large group. Then have participants brainstorm, again in writing, what might have occurred to cause the sudden silence? Again, write on the overhead as they brainstorm, and then share as a large group. Finally, have participants write a very short story that shows the scene that includes the event that caused the sudden silence. The last line of the story should be the haiku itself. Write your own story as participants draft theirs. After about 15 minutes, allow sharing in the small groups and then invite some writers to share with the large group.

- 5) Conclusion and thanks

After you’ve planned your activities, it’s time to ask for approval from the right people. Talk to the principal and make sure this is appropriate. Determine what space to use, whether it’s the library or cafeteria or a classroom. I advise selecting a space that has tables, if it’s available. They are so much more comfortable than desks. Plus, you want people sitting in small groups. When you get the go-ahead and find the space, share this information with your custodial staff, because an after-hours activity will affect their schedules and you may need their help in set-up and clean-up.

Write Night can be held without spending a dime. However, some activities can cost a little bit of money (such as the poem writing activity I described above). Moreover, depending on the number of people who attend, you may need to purchase additional writing supplies, or you

might like to send printed invitations. Local grants usually provide enough funds for a project such as Write Night, so keep that in mind when the calls for proposals are issued.

Preparing for the program is quite like preparing for class. Purchase or obtain any extra supplies you anticipate needing. Create overheads/PowerPoint presentation. If you have a large audience, you'll be glad for the assistance of visuals. Make task cards for the tables so you don't have to repeat the directions fifty times. And don't forget to seek publicity. This is great for American Education Week! We educators, as a whole, don't do enough to promote the positive things we're doing in the schools. Get this in your local newspaper.

After you've held your evening writing activity, don't forget a couple important chores. Write thank you notes to your principal, custodian, and anyone else who helped. People really do appreciate the sentiment. And seek feedback from students. You'll learn quite a bit about what worked and what didn't so that you can make improvements for the next time.

I've held Write Nights for groups as large as 150 and as small as 30. It's never been unsuccessful. Parents love it, principals love it, and the students love it. If you are thinking of doing this at your school, my advice is to go for it! And email me if you have any questions!