Take a cadre of teachers, proclaim their status as writers, cast them loose on the unfamiliar streets of New Orleans, and you have a recipe for what Richard Louth calls a “writing marathon,” a form that writing project teachers at sites all over the country are beginning to try out. Here Louth provides some guidance for those looking for a challenging way to write together about the unfamiliar.

The New Orleans Writing Marathon

—Trish Benit, 2001

The sexy yak of a saxophone drifts into the Café du Monde, mixing with the beat of ceiling fans and the smell of hot, powdered beignets. Across the street, two children tap-dance for quarters while a third spins a bicycle wheel on his head, the spokes a gray halo in the humid air. A horse-drawn carriage clops by St. Louis Cathedral while a mime dressed as Uncle Sam freezes in midstride outside the café window. Inside, teachers gingerly sip café au lait, knock excess sugar off their beignets, and stare at the world outside. Despite their good spirits, I see anxiety in their expressions. “What are we doing here?” they seem to ask.

Usually by 10 A.M., members of our Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project (SLWP) Summer Institute are comfortably enclosed in a room on the other side of the swamps.

And we have already finished journal writing, someone has shared the log, and one nervous summer fellow is launching into a ninety-minute teaching demonstration.

But today we are embracing the unfamiliar in our surroundings, and ourselves, through a field trip we call the New Orleans Writing Marathon.

In the Beginning: Natalie Goldberg’s Marathon

Our first writing marathon took place on much more familiar soil in 1992, when one summer institute participant, Melanie Plesh, introduced us to her practice of journaling with students and to Natalie Goldberg’s Writing Down the Bones. During her teaching demonstration, the other institute participants sat around one table and wrote for hours in response to Melanie’s prompts, which differ significantly from Goldberg’s [see box next page].

Here is Goldberg’s advice about writing during the marathon:

Everyone in the group agrees to commit himself or herself for the full time. Then we make up a schedule. For example, a ten-minute writing session, another ten-minute session, a fifteen-minute session, two twenty-minute sessions, and then we finish with a half-hour round of writing. So for the first session, we all write for ten minutes and then go around the room and read what we’ve written with no comments by anyone. . . . A pause naturally happens after each reader, but we do not say “That was great” or even “I know what you mean.” There is no good or bad, no praise or criticism. We read what we have written and go on to the next person. . . . What usually happens is you stop thinking; you write; you become less and less self-conscious. Everyone is in the same boat, and because no comments are made, you feel freer and freer to write anything you want. (150)
Writing Marathon

This is the theory behind our marathoning, and the first week of every institute, we still "marathon" this way because we value the intensity of the writing experience and the sense of community it produces. But in 1994, we discovered how the marathon could be transformed into a different dish altogether when we added a cup of Louisiana spices to the roux.

The First New Orleans Marathon

The first New Orleans Writing Marathon was not for an institute but for a conference of about a hundred teacher-consultants from across the state. Asked to lead an afternoon of writing activities for the statewide Louisiana Writing Project's Festival of Writers, I wanted to do a marathon based on our site's approach but knew that there were too many people to make it work. I knew also that after a morning of workshops, teachers would rather be on the streets of the French Quarter than writing in a hotel conference room, and that they would crave a chance to chat over an oyster po'boy washed down by a Dixie beer at least as much as the opportunity to write. The solution was to form small writing groups and release them to the streets where Faulkner wrote his first novel, Tennessee Williams set A Streetcar Named Desire, and Andrei Codrescu insists The Muse is Always Half-Dressed.

Immediately, there were practical questions. Who should be in each group? Where should each group go? What would convince them to come back? Also, as both the city and the marathon experience were new to most participants, how could they be prepared for each?

Fearing mass confusion, groups too large, individuals left out, and people getting lost, I had collected the names of all participants beforehand and on file cards created groups with designated itineraries. However, at the last minute, instinct told me to have faith in my audience, to scrap these plans, and to ask everyone to determine their own groups and paths. All they received was a simple handout explaining Goldberg’s advice about responding, a map, and a list of restaurants, coffeehouses, and bars. In addition, I recommended that they limit groups to four or five people so as not to disrupt any establishment they entered, that they try to pick a new spot to write each hour, and that they return by 5 P.M. I concluded with three final pieces of advice that I still give to marathoners:

- If you go into a restaurant or bar, be sure to order something.
- If anyone asks, tell them you are a writer.
- Keep in mind that you are doing this for yourself and for nobody else.

Simple enough, but I worried how many would feel offended that their activity hadn’t been more structured and if groups would visit places where they were uncomfortable. How many would be lost to shopping, muggings, or inebriation? Miraculously, everyone returned, and when they did, they were somehow different. An excitement filled the room, a common bond that came from this strange experience. They wanted to read, even though it was

Melanie Plesh’s Writing Prompts

Melanie’s writing prompts are usually simple words that act like Rorschach tests upon writers. They tend to shake up writers and produce the unexpected. Unlike Natalie Goldberg, whose prompts give more direction (“Choose a color” or “Who are the people you loved?”), Melanie just speaks a word or phrase without context and says “Write for ten minutes without stopping.” While she spends significant time thinking of prompts, she asks writers to ignore them if they wish. Most writers find the prompts “weird” at first, but still, they seem to open up writers to thoughts they did not know they had. Here are some of her prompts for our daily writing over the last several years:

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time for dinner, or to tell stories of people they'd seen and places they'd been. Some talked of seeing things they had never seen before, while others talked only about another's writing. A few even went to their rooms to revise so that they could read more polished pieces at breakfast the next day. This, when the pleasures of New Orleans were on the other side of the hotel door.

**Institute Marathons**

After two successful festival marathons, taking a summer institute on a New Orleans Writing Marathon seemed natural. Because our institute lives an hour from the city, some adjustments had to be made, but over the last six years, the New Orleans Writing Marathon has become a tradition at our site. We arrange car pools the day before and ask everyone to meet at the Café du Monde, a familiar landmark, by 10 a.m. After we assemble, we usually hear the previous day's log, and then we split into small, usually unplanned, groups. One of the unexpected thrills of the marathon is ending up in unfamiliar places with unfamiliar partners. At the end of the day, groups convene at a pub to touch base and read before beating the rush hour traffic home. Some years, fellows have stayed overnight, dining at Galatoire's and dancing to zydeco music at Mid City Rock and Bowl. Fellows are encouraged to bring friends and relatives who want to write, and often we are also joined by former fellows, nearby writing projects, or special guests such as Kim Stafford, director of the Oregon Writing Project at Lewis and Clark College who has a special interest in writing about place. In 2001, writers from the Live Oak Writing Project came from Mississippi to join us for their first marathon.

![Richard Louth (front row, far right) takes groups of teacher-writers on the New Orleans Writing Marathon.](image)

**I Am a Writer**

> How many of us, as teachers, can live the writer's life? For me, the writing marathon was my first taste of what it would really feel like to be a writer. It was the very first moment I ever thought, ‘Damn, I am a writer.’
> 
> —Beth Calloway, 1996

Before we begin a marathon, I ask each participant to turn to another and say, “I am a writer.” If asked to identify themselves that day, I tell them to reply, “I’m a writer.” Why? Because most summer fellows identify themselves as teachers, not writers, and for a marathon to succeed, participants must think of themselves in a new way. The marathon introduces its participants to an unfamiliar world, and the first step is to forget the familiar identities that often get us through the rest of the year. I have discovered that thinking of yourself as a writer not only affects you but also others, and that it can open many doors. During my second festival marathon, my group crossed the Mississippi River on a ferry and looked for a place to write along the levee, but cold February winds forced us to seek shelter. We approached a restaurant perched on a bend in the river only to have a waiter tell us they were closed. However, when he asked us what we were doing there, and we replied, “We are writers looking for a place to write,” his demeanor suddenly changed. “In that case, come in by the fire,” he said. We wrote that afternoon in overstuffed chairs by a cozy window overlooking the river, sipping hot coffee that he brought us.

This kind of thing happens again and again, and not just in New Orleans. Sherry Swain, director of the Mississippi Writing/Thinking Institute, tells the following story about a group doing a marathon on a Mississippi college campus:

> The most interesting story for me came from the group that began by asking a construction crew at the stadium (always the stadium is being spiffed up!) whether they might enter to sit on the fifty-yard line.

> “No, I don’t have the authority to let you in,” the foreman said.

> But then they said, “WE’RE WRITERS!”

> And he said, “Well then, come on in. There’s an open gate around the corner.”

Similar stories abound—marathoners admitted to a private garden in Arkansas, a writing group given a free ride in a Florida trolley, etc. It happens, I think, because writers who believe in themselves tap into an unimaginable power; people sense this, and treat them with the kind of reverence often given to priests.
**Writing Marathon**

**Things Do Go Wrong**

There have been times when the marathon has not worked. For instance, at a festival of writers in Lafayette, the marathon turned into a sightseeing tour; not enough writing happened. Our group ended up on a tour boat in the stark, beautiful Atchafalaya Basin with a captain whose Cajun patter never gave us a chance to write. Noise also plagued us in New Orleans when, at the end of the 1996 marathon, we gathered in a park by the Mississippi River in order to read and say goodbye only to be interrupted every five minutes by a ship's shrill whistle and the captain announcing departure. Bad acoustics, bad seating, or other interferences during the marathon are rare, for small groups can usually get up and move. But they can put a damper on the final gathering when groups convene, so it is important to plan ahead. In 1997, the quaint coffeehouse we chose for our final rendezvous let us move chairs and tables, but the acoustics in the building were horrible. Even if the proprietors had turned down the classical background music (which they wouldn't do), we could not have heard each other read. And waiting thirty minutes for everyone to get caffe lattes made it worse. Because we choose not to “over-plan,” we sometimes run into unpleasant surprises; however, that is a small price to pay for the good surprises—the sudden insights into oneself, one's colleagues, and one's surroundings.

Further, the above difficulties are often prevented with a little luck and planning. We now meet for a drink at an Irish pub, and if the place becomes too loud, we save our readings until we return to the institute.

**Marathon Tips**

1. **Organization**
   - Confirm meeting/closing places and times. Choose them well.
   - Arrange car pools and exchange cell phone numbers.
   - Issue map and a list of potential writing spots (cafes, etc.).

2. **Writing**
   - Review Goldberg's advice for writing, sharing, and not responding.
   - Give a pep talk on the spirit of the day and writing for oneself.
   - Ask for at least one piece of writing and sharing per hour.

3. **Groups**
   - Don't pre-plan groups or paths they take. Let both happen naturally.
   - Allow writers to bring guests who want to write.
   - Keep groups small enough (3–5) to work in any environment.

4. **Flexibility**
   - Follow any path that develops. Look for unusual spots to write.
   - Write for whatever length(s) of time the group feels comfortable.
   - Move each hour unless the group is comfortable where it is.

**Bottom line:** It's not about following directions but about writing for yourself all day.

The biggest problem occurs when a participant doesn't understand the purpose of the marathon and simply views it as a chance to shop, as a day off from the institute, or as a chance to visit with friends. The best way to prevent this happening is to build writing into the culture of the institute beforehand and review the guidelines about sharing and writing when you begin. The essential thing for everyone to remember is that the marathon is not about sightseeing, sharing, or holding a final reading: it is all about seeing the world as a writer and giving oneself the chance to do this.

**The Paths of Writing**

Like a marathon's many paths, its writings are full of surprises. While one group may journey between bar, restaurant, and park, another marathons on a streetcar, as a third spreads its time between patisserie, quiet courtyard, and raucous Bourbon Street. Like the external journeys each group takes,
At the conclusion of the 2000 New Orleans Writing Marathon, Tracy Amond wrote this account of her experience.

The Never Ending Marathon

TRACY AMOND

We begin volunteering to share our writing a little hesitantly but know that each one of us has come away with some snippets of good writing and some ideas for future pieces. We have combed the city and scribbled down poetry, journal entries, essays, interesting scenes, and conversations overheard. One group has taken the Algiers ferry. Others have strolled along the River Walk, sat in cafes, observed life from park benches. We have drawn inspiration from storeowners, waitresses, tourists, the homeless, statues, the Mississippi River. We hear descriptions of scenes knowing that we were standing ten feet away from the writer or even sitting at the same table. It is fascinating to hear the different perspectives and to see what other writers notice. We will never be simple tourists. Wherever we travel, we will see our destinations through writers’ eyes, marvel at the extraordinary in the ordinary, drink the city in with all our senses, take time to see more than the usual sites, knowing that there is writing out there to be harvested like so much golden wheat.

I am hesitant to leave. The group breaks up slowly, members leaving in pairs and small groups. Some are staying overnight to play, and I visit with them in the quiet of the courtyard as warm drops of rain begin sifting through the massive magnolia tree. I finally begin my long trek back to the parking garage, sweaty, tired, hungry, and happy. I put Sheryl Crow back in the tape deck to sing me home. Later, afternoon traffic brings me to a crawl at the same spot where I crept along this morning. As I cross the Bonne Carre Spillway, the thunderheads open, and a violent rain pounds the car. It follows me all the way to Manchac.

Realizing I haven’t eaten in six hours, I pull off at Middendorf’s for dinner. I bring my notepad and a new pen with me, figuring I’ll continue the writing marathon a little longer over some catfish. I get a table with a view of the whole room, talk about the storm with Susie, my waitress, and begin refining the piece I wrote in the cathedral. Life is good. I break the crusty French bread, slather it with soft butter, and write. Susie brings me a bottle of diet Coke and the traditional four-ounce tumbler of ice. I’ve been coming here since I was a child, and it is always exactly the same. I love the notion of duplicating a memory: the dishes, the people, the food, the waitresses, all overwrite themselves into my memory bank. The place becomes a time warp of truth. I have never known it to fail me.

I abstained from the gourmet delights and alcoholic treats of the French Quarter. I wanted to be a little hungry and to have my wits sharp so that I could savor the city with all of my senses. But now, in this room at the edge of Lake Maurepas, paneled in cypress, lined with prints of antebellum homes and swamp scenes, dotted with yellow Formica tables, I indulge myself in crispy seafood and cool sweet coleslaw. Susie is attentive but not disruptive. Toward the end of my meal, she surveys my plate and says, “Two more tartars coming right up.” She is good at this, and I wonder how long she’s been at it and if she lives in one of the frame houses nearby. Or maybe she lives in Ponchatoula and drives in everyday. I realize that she, too, is a story, along with the family at the next table and the three real estate agents with their cell phones clipped to their belts and their legal-sized folders over their plates.

I leave Susie a large tip, not only for her service, but for being the perfect ending to this day. I visit the ladies room and realize that even it is a story: the whole thing is covered in stainless steel. It’s like walking into a submarine. Stalls, doors, and walls of brushed steel with dark wallpaper at the top and on the ceiling. I want to linger and write in here, too, but realize how strange that will look and wonder if I’m perhaps on some sort of writer adrenaline rush that needs to come down. I brave the storm again and follow it all the way home. I am full, damp from the rain and sweat, smell funky, and have a sunburn on both cheeks. I have ten pages of writing in my notebook. Sheryl Crow rocking me along with the storm, and a feeling of having arrived at some mystical destination. Today was a good day.
the internal journeys each writer takes are a blend of the familiar and unfamiliar. These examples illustrate the paths a marathon can take. Writing in a coffeehouse, Barry L. Dunlap observes the strange world surrounding him in the French Quarter.

**The Prayer**

As I slurp my coffee, she enters the shop—white shirt off one shoulder, black skirt, shadowed eyes; she drudges to the rear of the shop, then approaches the man sitting at the window—interrupts his reading—murky dreadlocks uncover his eyes.

She speaks: “Find me someone who does witchcraft.” They leave, different directions.

—Barry L. Dunlap, 1997

Meanwhile in St. Louis Cathedral, Jeri Stewart uses her more familiar surroundings to journey deep into herself.

**Inside the Cathedral**

What a beautiful place! Somewhere, I do feel lonely here. New Orleans is where my Catholic heritage began. The tour guide is in the back of the church. She is speaking French—just like my mom and Memere used to do. I miss those days, and they seem so far away, almost as if they were for someone else, not for me. Pepere would take us kids to church every Sunday. My mom and Memere would go at 5:00 a.m., and I still have never figured out why they went so early. I used to get so angry with my brother because he used to kick the pew in front of us, and the people would always turn around to see who was doing that. It never seemed to bother Robert. In fact, I think he liked it and almost dared anyone to say anything to him. Perhaps he was kicking because we had to go—rain, hail, snow—us and the mailman on a mission: his to deliver the mail; ours to deliver our souls! —Jeri Stewart, 1997

George Dorrill (2001) is engaged in a writing reverie while listening to the jukebox at Molly’s on the Market:

Johnny Cash is singing “I Walk the Line.” I remember the alternative lyrics Roland Smawt taught me: “I keep my pants up with a piece of twine; because you’re mine, please pull the twine… Now the Supremes’ “Stop in the Name of Love”—another all-time favorite—brings back college days vividly: I remember Hap’s, drinking beer, smoking Pall Malls, listening to the Supremes. Maybe the high point of my life…

Henrietta Kirby (1999) reflects less on the scene in front of her and more on the messages of her own body:

Muggy and hot. The sweat is dripping around the nape of my neck as I quickly run into Jax Brewery—not menopause sweat but the sweat that little kids get in the summer. The kind of sweat that runs lips and eyelids. The New Orleans sweat that zaps you—no wonder everyone is so laid back in the Deep South—the sweat. It puddles between my breasts and the base of my spine. It begins to slide down into my buttocks. Not perspiration—just sweat—southern sweat. I can smell the salt in the sweat—not body odor—just the smell of sweat, cleansing sweat—the kind of sweat that makes your clothes itch. I attempt to unobtrusively pull my bra from my skin to get temporary relief from the sweat. Sweat—New Orleans sweat.

While Tracey Marranto (1999) is drawn into the odors of place and led to a poignant memory:

While waiting for my food in Johnny’s Po-Boys, I naturally begin salivating and thinking of food. Why do certain foods spark memories in us? The muffuletta sandwich that I am eagerly awaiting fondly reminds me of Mom and the sandwich shop. She had this restaurant called New Orleans Po-Boys when I was in fifth or sixth grade. It was in the old town section of my childhood location, beautiful Fairhope, Alabama. She would make me this creation every afternoon after I walked to her shop from school. I distinctly recall the smell of the shop as I walked inside. The aroma of fried food, fresh bread, and Italian meat and cheeses filled the tiny eatery. What I remember most is seeing my mother putting her heart and soul into that place. It was so heartbreaking to see her closing down after nearly a year of up-and-down business. The shop was getting too expensive to keep up and not enough patrons. She doesn’t talk about it much, and to this day, she will not make or eat a muffuletta. So my memories of this wonderfully flavor-filled sandwich remain bittersweet. I
sure do miss that little place because there my mom was in her element as I have never seen before or since.

Following the Model

In the National Writing Project, the model of “teachers teaching teachers” underpins institute, inservices, and continuity. As long as sites recognize the model, there is room for individual differences. The same could be said of the writing marathon. There are many different forms that a marathon can take as long as it is about “writers writing with writers” and recognizes these essentials: setting, group, and writer.

Setting: While the inspiration behind our writing marathon was a city, almost any landscape will do as long as it is conducive to writing without being distracting. The important thing is for the setting to shake one up a bit—to be unfamiliar—and sometimes that happens not because it is a new place but simply because it is being seen through new eyes, a writer’s eyes. While New York City, Charleston, and Baltimore have all proven ideal locations, writing marathons have also blossomed in the Rocky Mountains, on the Mississippi State University campus, and even in an elementary school in Rhode Island. Setting also considers time, for a marathon is as much about duration as distance covered. Usually it takes at least two or three “rounds” of writing and responding before participants feel the effects, and that takes hours, especially if groups move from spot to spot. The longer the marathon, the better.

Group: The second marathon essential is the writing group. As the primary purpose of the marathon is simply for the writer to write, it seems odd that a group is so important, especially if it is not allowed to respond. However, marathoners report that having a group writing with them frees them up and makes them feel less guilty indulging in their own writing. The group also gives writers a deadline, an audience, and in many cases inspiration. It is common for one’s second piece of writing in a marathon to comment on someone else’s first reading, and that in turn often leads writers in new directions and interesting dialogues. The size of the group and members’ familiarity with each other are relatively unimportant. Most important is the group’s discipline in giving time to writing, avoiding response, and remaining sociable yet focused.

Writer: The greatest essential is the writer. One might say that the task of any writer is to make the familiar new and the new familiar. The marathon helps writers do this through the use of setting and groups, but everything finally depends on the commitment of the individual. If marathoners identify themselves as writers before they begin their journey, then they’re off to the right start. The best way for that to occur, of course, is to establish writing as an integral part of the summer institute. However, a pep talk at the start of the marathon helps. Also, an inspirational piece, such as the short opening chapter of Hemingway’s A Moveable Feast, or an excerpt from a previous marathon can set the right tone.

Conclusion

The New Orleans Writing Marathon may have begun in Louisiana, but it has been spreading quickly and is now occurring in over a dozen sites around the country. My last marathon took place in Baltimore during the National Writing Project Annual Meeting in November 2001, and it was even fresher than the first. Let me leave you with a moment in time from my journal that morning, which I hope captures the feeling of what it is like and why I continue to do it:

The Baltimore Writing Marathon has begun. Let it begin. I felt like the Pied Piper leading a group of writers toward the harbor. The same old fear. Will they split up into groups? What if all thirty go to Barnes and Noble and spend their time standing in line? Always that fear. How many will then feel let down? “What a dumb idea… I hardly wrote a thing… I thought we were really going to do something.” Well, that’s the risk you take, and by the time you get about a page, you no longer worry about it. Like when the plane takes off, as soon as you feel the last bump of the tires on the pavement and it lurches up and the noise changes and you say that prayer with your eyes closed, “God bless my mother, my father, Kevin, Carolyn, Henry,” and by the time you say “and Doris” you are above a city looking down, probably like you will be when you are dead. Well, that’s what it’s like leading a writing marathon, and that’s what it’s like when you write. You finally are up in the air, into it, into the airiness and freedom and danger, but you’re no longer praying, worrying—you’re into it, there’s nothing else you can do, what’s gonna happen is gonna happen, and you’re free. That’s the best feeling when you’re finally launched.

References


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