

# *Writing Spaces* Assignments & Activities Archive

## Putting Ourselves in the Company of Writers: Overcoming Obstacles to Creating Successful Collaborations

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## Overview

“Don't wait for the muse. As I've said, he's a hardheaded guy who's not susceptible to a lot of creative fluttering. This isn't the Ouija board or the spirit-world we're talking about here, but just another job like laying pipe or driving long-haul trucks. Your job is to make sure the muse knows where you're going to be every day from nine 'til noon. Or seven 'til three. If he does know, I assure you that sooner or later he'll start showing up.”

~Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*

Truth be told most writers we know, including ourselves, have dabbled in magical thinking from time to time. Whether it's waiting for creative inspiration to strike or simply indulging our belief in genius, karma, or luck, we soon discover that writing doesn't happen by chance. Instead, and just as Stephen King suggests in the epigraph above, writing happens deliberately—when we start showing up for the work, swap out our faith in the muse for a dose of self-reliance, and make time to write. While tempting, the myth of the muse is ultimately a trap, not just because it offers us easy refuge from the everyday hard work of writing but also because it enables another stubborn and equally unproductive fiction: that writing itself is a solitary act. Perpetually waiting for the muse keeps us from seeing ourselves as part of a wider community of writers with whom we might collaborate.

Despite our field's well-established emphasis on collaboration in writing (see Alexander; Ede & Lunsford; Martorana; van Steendam; Winzenried et al.), many writers—experienced and novice alike—are reluctant to seek out both readers for our

unfinished work and collaborators with whom we might compose. When we do choose people to collaborate with on writing projects, whether as readers or as co-authors, we often choose those closest to us, either in physical space or in ideological stance. In other words, we still rely too much on chance to find our writing partners—being at the right place, with the right colleagues, at the right time—rather than deliberately cultivating productive writing relationships. We then bring that attitude to the classroom, relying primarily on chance or a vague sense of similarity in style or writing topic to pair students for peer review activities.

While there is much to be said for sharing space and stance, actively pursuing collaborative relationships with people whose strengths, styles, and stances are different from one's own can be much more productive in actually improving writing. To do that, however, it is essential for writers to know their own strengths and weaknesses and to feel comfortable sharing and valuing those writing proclivities during interactions with other writers.

In this sequenced assignment, we invite students to begin where they more typically end: with a written reflection on their beliefs about themselves as writers and about the nature of the writing process generally, drawing from their past writing experiences to create a portrait of themselves. We then ask students to share their self-portrait with others to identify classmates with whom they might usefully collaborate. By using a 2-minute round-robin interaction, similar to a speed-dating scenario, this process encourages students to gain insight into each other's writing strengths and weaknesses while avoiding the uncomfortable silences that often characterize getting-to-know-you activities. Keeping this pace also allows for the activity to happen in a single 50-minute class period.

Next, students are asked to reflect again in an out-of-class composition, but the focus this time is on the round-robin

interactions in an effort to identify classmates with whom they do and do not have common qualities. Using student reflections to guide us, we can craft peer review groups built on the premise of dissimilarity, looking for those students whose skills compliment and fill gaps rather than those who are bonded by shared interests, topics, or stances. Following peer review and the completion of the project at hand, we again foreground reflection so that students can discover what feedback was most helpful for their writing process and identify the kinds of reviewers they should seek out in the future.

## Time Commitment

2-3 weeks

## Assignment Process

- In class, review the “Writing Beliefs” assignment prompt with students (see Appendix).
- Students complete the assignment at home and bring to class the following session.
- During the class session, have students form two rough lines, facing one another. For two minutes, the students will discuss their writing beliefs and identity with the student directly across from them.
- After two minutes, ring a bell, clap, etc. Students in one line will move to the right (with the end person rotating to the other line) and students in the other will move left (with the end person rotating to the other line).
- Repeat the activity until all possible pairs of students have talked for a two-minute segment or until class time is over.
- Prompt students to write about the in-class activity, identifying students who shared similarities with them as well as students who expressed very different writing beliefs, stances, and styles.
- After reading students’ reflections, create peer review groups that privilege dissimilarity, aiming to pair

students who have different beliefs about the writing process and different strengths and weaknesses relative to their writing stances and styles.

- Complete a peer review activity designed to complement your specific essay assignment.
- After the peer review activity and essay revision are complete, prompt students to write a reflection on what specific peer feedback was helpful and from whom they received that feedback. Ask students to identify what characteristics they would look for in future peer reviewers.

## Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this assignment will:

- Gain an understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses as writers
- Identify gaps in their writing knowledge
- Learn to identify beneficial peer feedback
- Gain an understanding of their needs from the peer review process

## Learning Accommodations

- Round-robin interactions can take place virtually or in-person to align with required or preferred instructional modalities.
- Extended time to complete in-person round-robin interactions should be offered to students with mobility limitations, anxiety disorders, or other identified learning challenges.
- For online delivery formats, ensure presentation of writing prompts and activity instructions incorporate auditory and visual supports.

## Works Cited

Alexander, Kara Poe. "Collaborative Composing: Practices and

Strategies for Implementing Team Projects into Writing Classrooms." *Collaborative Learning and Writing: Essays on Using Small Groups in Teaching English and Composition*, edited by Kathleen Hunzer, McFarland Publishers, 2012, pp. 181-200.

Ede, Lisa, and Andrea Lunsford. *Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1990.

King, Stephen. *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. Simon & Schuster, 2000.

Martorana, Christine. "Through the Lens of Figured World: A Heuristic for Productive Collaboration." *Composition Studies*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2017, pp. 59-73.

Van Steendam, Elke. "Editorial: Forms of Collaboration in Writing." *Journal of Writing Research*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2016, pp. 183-204. doi: 10.17239/jowr-2016.08.02.01.

Winzenried, Misty A., Lillian Campbell, Roger Chao, and Alison Cardinal. "Co-Constructing Writing Knowledge: Students' Collaborative Talk across Contexts." *Composition Forum*, vol. 37, [compositionforum.com/issue/37/co-constructing.php](http://compositionforum.com/issue/37/co-constructing.php).

## Further Reading

Dewey, John. *My Pedagogic Creed*. New York: E. L. Kellogg & Co., 1897.

## Appendix: Writing Beliefs Prompt

### What I Believe about Writing: A Self-Portrait

You might begin this assignment by asking yourself why it is that you are here in this class. What are your short-term and long-term goals, and how do those goals inform your beliefs about what it means to write? What do you consider to be your strengths when you're writing? What do you perceive to be your weaknesses?

This assignment is modeled on John Dewey's declaration of principles, *My Pedagogic Creed*. You can find it at the link below. You do not need to read all of Dewey's *Creed*, but do spend some time examining the format he uses to declare his beliefs.

[https://books.google.com/books?id=Kpcr2\\_bXla0C&printsec=frontcover&dq=my+pedagogic+creed&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjktuXJgajJAhWCwiYKHXkiDpAQ6AEIMDAA#v=onepage&q=my%20pedagogic%20creed&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=Kpcr2_bXla0C&printsec=frontcover&dq=my+pedagogic+creed&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjktuXJgajJAhWCwiYKHXkiDpAQ6AEIMDAA#v=onepage&q=my%20pedagogic%20creed&f=false)

As you'll see, Dewey outlines a series of beliefs and then explains how he came to hold that belief, its underlying assumptions and observations. In other words, by identifying the beliefs he holds about the project and promise of education, he creates a self-portrait of who he is in relation to the classroom. **For this project, I ask that you compose at least five "I believe" statements that identify your own beliefs about yourself as a writer and about the writing process generally, followed by the kind of brief explanation Dewey models in his *Creed*.**

I anticipate this project will result in a document of roughly two pages, double spaced. No need for research—this is a statement that reflects where you are now, and it is about your values and your beliefs. We will share these self-portraits in class, but we will not judge one another.