

# Start Your Own Teen Writing Club

## What you will need:

- Purchase a composition pad and pen for every kid in the club. This won't cost much, but it helps to have a special notepad specifically for writing club. The teens can look back at everything they've written, and it gives them more ownership of their writing club.
- A room where you can be somewhat loud. We use our library's auditorium.
- Some kind of refreshment for each month. We do microwave popcorn and water.

## How to get teens to sign up:

- If you already have a teen book club, pass around a paper and ask any kids who are interested to write down their name and email address. If you have an elementary school-aged book club, ask kids who are about to age out of the book club if they are interested.
- Talk to teachers at your local junior high and high school to find out if they have any kids who love writing in their classes. Give a sign-up sheet to each teacher, then check back in a few weeks.

## General Stuff That Has Worked for Us:

- One hour once a month on the third Monday at 4:00 PM has been great for our club. We email the kids a reminder the Wednesday prior.
- The kids respond best when we give compliments, but stay real. Every kid is listening to what we are saying, and so if we give a compliment that doesn't ring true to one kid, the other kids won't be as apt to believe us when we compliment their work. Specific compliments are best.
- We try hard to create an environment of creativity, not instruction. Our writing club isn't about learning how to write. Teens go to school for that. Our writing club is about exploring the joy of creative expression, without worrying about a grade.
- We encourage the teens to share their writing, but don't require it. We ask them to read their work out loud when they share, which gives them more control over how it is received, and eliminates insecurities about handwriting and grammar. Some of them didn't share at first, but over time, as our group bonded, even the shyest kids have come out of their creative shell. We almost teared up the first time our quietest writer shared his work.
- We do every writing exercise with the teens, and share our writing with them. Writing groups are all about trust. Sharing our writing engenders trust, and encourages the teens to do the same. Some of our teens clamor for us to go next during the sharing period, as they don't often get to see the writing of the adults in their lives.
- We research writing workshops and contests for teens in our area, then tell our club about them.

## Nine Months of Ideas to Get You Started

### *September: A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words*

Cut out 8 different people from old magazines at your library. I like to use photos from National Geographic and Wired. Use a variety of different types of photos. Some of people in funny situations, some poignant or sad photos, some photos that are futurist or fantastical, and some of people who may seem ordinary. I even used a photo of an anthropomorphic robot once. Write a large number in the corner of each photo with a sharpie, then tape the photos up on a white board or on the wall of the room you are using for writing club. During the first five minutes of writing club make sure you have everyone's name and e-mail. Then hand out the compositions pads and pens. Ask your teens to pick a photo and write a story about that person. Let them write for 20 minutes. At that point ask if anyone wants to share. If no one does, then have them pick another photo and do the exercise again.

### *October: Horror*

For ambiance, bring any candles you have that are inside class jars. Dim the lighting as much as you can. You will need a whiteboard or chalk board. On the left half of the white board, write down the six U's of horror: Unknown, Unexpected, Unbelievable, Unseen, Unconscious, Unstoppable. I also printed out quotes about writing horror that the kids could read while they were coming in, and posted them on the wall. Here are some that I used:

*"The 3 types of terror: The Gross-out: the sight of a severed head tumbling down a flight of stairs, it's when the lights go out and something green and slimy splatters against your arm. The Horror: the unnatural, spiders the size of bears, the dead waking up and walking around, it's when the lights go out and something with claws grabs you by the arm. And the last and worse one: Terror, when you come home and notice everything you own had been taken away and replaced by an exact substitute. It's when the lights go out and you feel something behind you, you hear it, you feel its breath against your ear, but when you turn around, there's nothing there..." — Stephen King*

*"Horror is the removal of masks." — Robert Bloch*

*"Horror needs to work on you, the author. You need to be troubled, a little unsettled, by your own material. Write about what scares you... Dig deep into your own dark places. Tear off the manhole cover and stare down into the unanswered abyss. Speak to your own experiences, your own fears and frights. Shake up your anxieties and let them tumble onto the page. Because horror works best when horror is honest. The audience will feel that. The truth you bring to the genre will resonate, an eerie and unsettling echo that turns the mind upon itself." — Chuck Wendig*

*"[Horror fiction] shows us that the control we believe we have is purely illusory, and that every moment we teeter on chaos and oblivion." — Clive Barker*

During the first five or ten minutes ask the kids what they find scary. Write down everything they say on the right column of the white board. Afterward, ask them to name examples, or explain each of the six U's of horror. Ask them what movies they've seen or books they've read that have scared them. Then invite them to start a horror story based on something that scares them. Let them work for 20 minutes. At that point ask if anyone wants to share. Give them more time on their stories if no one does. Otherwise, offer a prize to anyone who finishes their story by the next writing club.

### ***November: A Tongue-in-Cheek Apology***

Read the poem *This is Just to Say* by William Carlos Williams to your teens. Print out a copy of it for each member of your writing club. Then ask your teens to write their own tongue-in-cheek apology poem, using the same format as Williams. Let them write for 20 minutes. At that point ask them if anyone wants to share. If no one does, then have them write another tongue-in-cheek apology poem.

*This is Just to Say*

*I have eaten  
the plums  
that were in  
the icebox*

*and which  
you were probably  
saving  
for breakfast*

*Forgive me  
they were delicious  
so sweet  
and so cold*

### ***December: Person, Place, Situation***

Think up a list of different characters, places, and interesting situations. Then print them out, cut them out, fold them, and put them into a hat. There should be a character hat, a place hat, and a situation hat (with enough of each for every teen in your group). Have each teen pick a character, place, and situation out of the hats. Then give them 20 minutes to write a story. Ask if anyone wants to share. If they don't, put all of the characters, places, and situations back into their respective hats and do the exercise again. Here are some characters, places, and situations we used:

- *Characters: 12-year-old boy, emigrant, librarian(this ended up being very funny), refugee, dog, robot, new mother, 80-year-old woman*
- *Place: Mars, Tokyo, desert, Congo, the bottom of the ocean, New York City, Swamp*
- *Situation: Lost in a supermarket, diagnosed with a terminal illness, being followed by a stalker, being arrested, falling in love*

At the end of club ask each teen to bring in some writing they've been working on, or to write something new during winter break to bring in next month. Tell them you will be bringing something in too. It can be the first page of a novel, a poem, first page of a story, or anything else fun they are willing to share.

### ***January: Really Bad Analogies Written By High School Students***

At the beginning of writing club ask everyone if they've brought any work to share. Let everyone share their first page or poem. Then if you have time left over, you can do this exercise.

Here is a list compiled by English teachers:

#### *Really Bad Analogies Written by High School Students*

1. *Her eyes were like two brown circles with big black dots in the center.*
2. *He was as tall as a 6'3" tree.*
3. *Her face was a perfect oval, like a circle that had its two sides gently compressed by a thigh master.*
4. *From the attic came an unearthly howl. The whole scene had an eerie, surreal quality, like when you're on vacation in another city and Jeopardy comes on at 7:00 instead of 7:30.*
5. *John and Mary had never met. They were like two hummingbirds who had also never met.*
6. *She had a deep, throaty, genuine laugh like that sound a dog makes just before it throws up.*
7. *The ballerina rose gracefully en pointe and extended one slender leg behind her, like a dog at a fire hydrant.*
8. *He was as lame as a duck. Not the metaphorical duck, either, but a real duck that was actually lame. Maybe from stepping on a land mine or something.*
9. *Her vocabulary was as bad as, like, whatever.*
10. *She grew on him like she was a colony of E. coli and he was room-temperature Canadian beef.*
11. *The revelation that his marriage of 30 years had disintegrated because of his wife's infidelity came as a rude shock, like a surcharge at a formerly surcharge-free ATM.*
12. *The lamp just sat there, like an inanimate object.*

Print out each of these bad analogies, big enough to fill an 8.5/11 sheet of paper, then post them on a white board or the wall where you hold writing club. Have your kids read through all of the analogies. When they are done, ask them to write three of their own really bad analogies. Ask if anyone wants to share.

### ***February: Three Different Nuclear Explosions***

Ask your teens to write about a nuclear explosion from three different points of view. Give them about ten minutes for each point of view. Ask if anyone wants to share. If no one wants to, then have them write about a sunset from two different points of view.

### ***March: Author Visit***

Many local authors are enthusiastic to speak with a group of teen writers. Our teens loved it when Lisa Mangum of *The Hourglass Door* trilogy came to speak to us. She had a powerpoint about writing that was amazing. Also, she didn't charge us. As a tie-in, we read her book for book club that month, so the teens were familiar with her work. While you probably can't get Jessica Day George or Shannon Hale to come to your writing club, you could try emailing a few local writers without quite as much of a following to see if any of them are willing. Try Lisa Mangum if you're in the Salt Lake area.

### ***April: From a Rock's Perspective***

Collect enough rocks for every teen in your writing group. Set the rocks out, and have each kid choose a rock. Then have them write down the story of that rock. Getting rocks from a faraway location, and telling the kids where they are from helps jog their imagination. Ask them to focus on sensory words like temperature, color, and smells when they are describing the rock's experiences.

### ***May: Choose Your Own Adventure***

This is somewhat of an ambitious project, and you may want to change writing club from a one-hour timeframe to 90 minutes in order to finish it in time. If the teens in your group are fast, confident writers, an hour may be enough time.

Write the first page to a "choose your own adventure" story, or use the text included below. At the end of the first page, write different paths the reader can take (one path for every 3 teens in your group). Read the first page to your writing group, then assign groups of three to write the next section for each path. For instance, in the example provided, assign three teens to write about what would happen if the protagonist follows the priest to an undisclosed location to build weapons, assign three teens to write about what would happen if the protagonist joins the band of fugitives and learns how to steal from the rich, etcetera. Each group of three works together, writing one segment as a group. Give them 20 minutes to complete this section, telling them to write three options for the protagonist at the end of their segment.

Once they have completed this segment, ask them to each choose one of the three options they wrote for their protagonist, then write an ending to the story. Give them 20 minutes to complete their ending. Have them label each of their stories so you can easily sort through them, then turn the stories into you. Now you can type up the entire story, creating a mini choose-your-own adventure novel that you can email to each of your writing club participants. For formatting help, consult one of the choose-your-own

adventure books from your juvenile collection. Our teens loved this project, and they especially liked having a finished story at the end. Our choose-your-own adventure novel was actually really good.

Here is the first page we used for our choose-your-own-adventure story:

## *Choose Your Own Adventure*

*It has been one year since your brother, Thomas, was killed. You begged him not to go that night, even though you were so hungry and he was so gaunt. You didn't think it was worth the risk to sneak a loaf of bread from underneath the baker's nose, even though both of you were close to starvation. Now that he is gone there is anger inside you that never quite leaves. Before you were hungry, but complacent. Now you seek others who can fan the flame of rage that seems to be the only thing you can feel anymore.*

*There is a rebellion. Risky and in its infancy, it is not the kind of pastime a wiser girl would choose. But living seems less of a priority these days. Revenge is more important. Not revenge against the baker. He was only trying to feed his family, like everyone else. But revenge against those who had so much, and still left so many to beg. Revenge against a government who continued to fill the coffers of the rich and ignore the thousands of stomachs that ached and burned with need.*

*The meeting is in a barn. You have walked all day to get there, using a filched map that is smudged on one side. The smell of the hay is stale, almost rotten in your nostrils. The air inside the dark barn is colder than outside in the sunlight. But you find a corner and lean your tired body against the rough, wooden wall of the barn.*

*There are about twenty people who wait with you. They shiver and fidget. One of them has a child who can't be more than five years old grasping her fingers. Her wide eyes make it clear she knows the danger of this place. You all wait another hour or so. The light in the barn begins to dim as the sun sets outside. More people crowd in. Almost seventy are standing in clumps now, whispering to each other.*

*Then he arrives. When he enters the barn you know immediately that this is the leader. He wears the simple woolen robe of a priest, but there is a fire in his eyes. When he speaks his voice booms against the walls of the barn. He riles the crowd with true stories of the starving and the dying. That familiar anger awakens within you.*

*At the end of his speech he begs the crowd to join him. Some must travel far away to build weapons, others to train with the small band of fugitives that steal from the rich to feed the poor. Some must stay here in the city to be spies. And still others must continue on with their lives and their jobs, but donate money to the cause.*

- *To follow the Priest to an undisclosed location to build weapons, turn to page 2.*
- *To join the band of fugitives and learn how to steal from the rich, turn to page 7.*
- *To stay within the city and begin training to learn how to spy on the noblemen, turn to page 11.*

- *To attend another meeting to feel things out before doing anything drastic, but give the little money you have to the priest, and tell him the location of the small cobbler's shop where you started to work after Thomas's death, turn to page 15.*