

# Wild Words

## A guide to integrating creative writing into field-based education

by Becca Deysach

*"I've always wanted to write but never gave myself permission to."*

This sentiment is the one I have heard most frequently since I began teaching creative writing several years ago. I've heard it from my college students, patients at a mental health clinic, and empty-nesters who are finally letting themselves do whatever the heck they want.

The more I inquire about my students' inhibitions about writing, the more I discover that people are afraid they have nothing to say, or, worse, that they will fail terribly at saying what they want. I hear horror stories of returned papers that

might as well have been dipped in red ink, and the resulting belief that they were, indeed, better off not trying.

But it's not true: they are storytellers. We all are. Some creative impulse lives in each of us—it's part of being human, after all—and for some, the urge to paint or dance or write becomes so great that eventually it overpowers the limitations imposed by well intentioned teachers when they were young. But then it shouldn't get to that point.

I believe that it is the responsibility of educators to prevent our students' alienation from their own creativity before it's too late by nurturing their inborn sense of wonder, curiosity, and creativity, whether our discipline is wilderness leadership,

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(continued)

stream ecology, or math.

Good teachers do this in a variety of ways, including inquiry-based learning initiatives, field studies, journaling, art projects, and more. We do these things because they are fun, and we do them because we know that experiential education leads to better learning outcomes.

Creative writing workshops are another fabulous means by which students can engage more intimately with any topic at hand, integrate their learning, and deepen their relationship to their ecological and learning community. The only problem is, the same messages that make so many adults fearful of creative writing also prevent many educators from facilitating creative writing exercises, and students thus lose the chance to get to know forest with the sensitivity of a poet and the precision of an ecologist.

At the risk of making my job obsolete, though, I've got a secret for you: anybody can facilitate a writing workshop. All you need is a group of students armed with paper and writing implements, your own creative spark, and some basic facilitation tools.

The writing workshop I outline below is designed with field educators in mind, but the basic principles and format can be applied to any classroom, school yard, garden, or living room context just as easily.

But first, you must know the Rules for Freewriting:

- Write the first thoughts that comes into your head. Don't think, just write!
- Keep your pen flowing. Don't stop writing until the timer is up or the facilitator says, "stop"! If you get stuck, just repeat the word you're on over and over until something else comes out.
- Don't worry about grammar, spelling, or punctuation. You can fix that stuff later.
- Don't try to control your writing! Let it take you where it wants to.

## Ice-Breaker and Warm-Up

Writing and sharing can make us all feel vulnerable, so it's important to begin any writing workshop by creating a safe and supportive space. If everyone is new to one another, a name game of your choice is a great place to start. If you are working with a group of students familiar to one another, begin with some variation of the following exercise, tailoring it to your

group and your field of inquiry:

Read the following phrases aloud one at a time, and give everyone about thirty seconds to write their response before moving on to the next phrase. Urge your students to follow the Rules of Freewriting as they write.

- My favorite smell is...
- I wonder...
- In my free time...
- I love...
- If I could travel anywhere...
- My favorite book/plant/ecosystem/river/mountain/geologic era/invertebrate/chemical/constellation is...
- If I could travel to any point in history...
- When I grow up...
- I come from...
- I crave...
- I don't remember...
- I remember...
- My name...



## Sharing

Before any sharing takes place, let your students know that there is no right or wrong response to the prompts, and that you encourage them to share even if it feels a little scary, but that everybody has the option of passing at any point. The freedom not to share helps prevent self-censorship while writing, and that is ultimately what we're going for.

Go around in a circle, sharing responses to one prompt at a time. So, for example, ask everybody read aloud their response to "My favorite smell is..." before going on to "I wonder..." This creates a rhythmic group poem while exposing students to

new aspects of one another. I always write and share with my students in these freewriting exercises, as it models vulnerability and helps contribute to a safe and intimate group atmosphere.

## Exploration, Observation, and Writing

Once you've warmed your group up and they've begun to get comfortable with writing freely and sharing, you can move on to a longer exploration and writing exercise. Ask your students to split up and give them a couple minutes to find something in their environment that catches their eye—a rock, a plant, or a natural feature, perhaps. Depending on the type of class you are teaching, you could be specific about how they should focus their attention (“Pick a rock layer that you find intriguing”), or you could leave it open and let curiosity be their only guide.

Alternatively, you could collect some natural objects—a handful of river stones, branches covered in lichen, or decaying bark—and ask your students to each pick one. This may be a better option with younger students.

Once your students are settled in near the focus of their attention, ask them to observe it with most of their senses (taste is usually not appropriate). When 3-5 minutes have passed, ask them to begin a 5-10 minute freewrite that begins with a multi-sensory description of their focus and follows the Rules of Freewriting. Remind them to let their writing take them wherever it wants to go. You will time them.

Give your students a two-minute warning before their writing time is up, then ask them to finish up their last thoughts and rejoin the group quietly when the stopwatch strikes five (or ten).

## Sharing and Feedback

Once again, ask students to share their writing. You can also ask students to give supportive feedback to one another's writing at this point. This encourages students to pay close attention to qualities that make good writing, builds group trust and support, and helps build writing confidence in individuals. A few of the many things to give feedback on are:

- Images that stand out
- Interesting questions the writing raises
- Creative descriptions
- Striking language
- Any other strengths

Keep in mind that some groups are awkward about giving feedback and will need a little bit of modeling from the facilitator at first.

In addition, I ask people to refrain from giving “constructive feedback” on all off-the-cuff freewriting. It hardly seems fair to ask people to write whatever spills out and then critique it. Only once a piece has been revised is it ready for suggestions for improvement, and even then positive feedback is just as important.

## Closure

It's often most satisfying to end a writing session with a final, short piece of writing. Three-to-five minutes will do, and



it's up to you if you share for this final round. In lieu of sharing the whole piece of writing, you could ask students to share their final line.

A few suggestions for your final writing activity:

- Have students pick a favorite line from their own piece of writing and use it as the starting point for another one.
- Ask students to write down the last/first/favorite line from their previous piece of writing on a slip of paper, put the slips of paper into a small pile, and ask each student to pick a random slip to use as their first line.
- Use one of the phrases from the warm-up activity as a starting point.
- Have them close their eyes and listen, then begin by writing what they hear.
- Start with “Today I learned.....”

At the end of a workshop, I always like to thank people for their bravery and thoughtful participation. It makes everyone feel good and eager to come back for more.

Congratulations! You've just facilitated a successful writing workshop!

## Launch Pad

Just as writing prompts are meant to be springboards for stories to emerge, the basic writing workshop model I outlined above is intended to be simply a starting point for integrating creative writing into your educational repertoire. Let your own imagination, course objectives, and field of study be your guide as you give your students permission to become the creative writers that live inside of them.

And, in the process, you might just meet the creative writer inside of you.

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# RESOURCES FOR NATURE WRITING

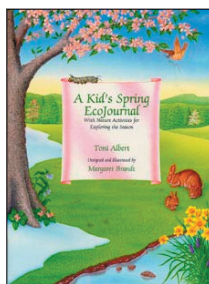
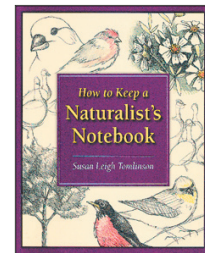


## KEEPING A NATURE JOURNAL, Discovering a Whole New Way of Seeing the World Around You.

Leslie, Roth. REVISED EDITION (includes 21 page color portfolio from Clare Walker Leslie's own journal). Compels one to slow down, take time to observe, reflect, and once again connect to the living mosaic that is our basic environment. For teachers, there is no better way to instill in students a love of writing and a subsequent natural desire to improve their skills. In any season, any weather and any place, nature journaling encourages children to harness their creative energies into organized thoughts that integrate science with language arts, math, social studies, and art. Keeping nature journals develops observational skills that can last a lifetime.

## HOW TO KEEP A NATURALIST'S NOTEBOOK.

Tomlinson. For naturalists, birders, and students of wildlife and biology, keeping a field notebook is essential for accurately recording outdoor observations. This unique guide offers instructions on how to do it—what to look for, what information should be recorded and how to organize it. It outlines basic drawing skills using line and color, and highlights techniques for incorporating maps and charts. Offers advice on field equipment and ways to optimize use of field guides. Inspiration for students of all ages.

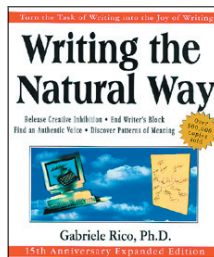
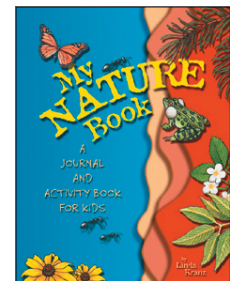


## A KID'S SUMMER ECOJOURNAL, With Nature Activities for Exploring the Season.

Albert. Four 56-page activity books feature entries from the author's own nature journal along with ample space for children to make their own journal entries. Seasonally appropriate activities are found on every page, along with information about plants and animals of the season. Profusely illustrated, this activity book provides hands-on learning for ages 8-13.

## MY NATURE BOOK, A Journal and Activity Book for Kids.

Kranz. This journal offers a perfect way to keep track of all your memories. Plenty of room to draw and write about your experiences with nature. Also includes projects and ideas to help you get started along with lined pages for writing, blank pages for drawing, activity pages, ideas, and even recipes for tasty trail treats. Ideal companion for exploring science and nature. This journal is designed to encourage children ages 7-13 to venture forth and explore the world around them.



## WRITING THE NATURAL WAY, Using Right-Brain Techniques to Release Your Expressive Powers.

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These resources can be purchased from Acorn Naturalists, 155 El Camino Real, Tustin CA 92780.  
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