



Richard Louth

“New Orleans Writing Marathon” Handout

Overview:

The N.O. Writing Marathon gives everyone a chance to write on anything they want and to share their writing in small groups, with no criticism, while experiencing the city as writers.

1. Natalie Goldberg conceptualized the “Writing Marathon” in *Writing Down the Bones*

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. People are allowed to pass and not read twice during the marathon. Naturally there should be some flexibility. If someone feels the need to pass more often or less often, that is fine. 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).

2. Hemingway contributed a sense of place to our “Marathon” concept in *A Moveable Feast*

“The story was writing itself and I was having a hard time keeping up with it. I ordered another rum St. James and I watched the girl whenever I looked up, or when I sharpened the pencil with a pencil sharpener with the shavings curling into the saucer under my drink.

I’ve seen you, beauty, and you belong to me now, whoever you are waiting for and if I never see you again, I thought. You belong to me and all Paris belongs to me and I belong to this notebook and pen” (6).

3. The “New Orleans-style Writing Marathon”

A “New Orleans” style writing marathon combines Natalie Goldberg and Ernest Hemingway with a format developed at the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project. Every year since 1996, Writing Project teacher-writers have met in New Orleans to hold writing marathons lasting up to three days long. The basic format is always the same.

1. Writers begin a marathon by turning to each other and saying, “I’m a writer.”

2. We split into small groups to go to restaurants, coffeehouses, pubs, parks, etc., where we eat, write, and share our way across the landscape. We spend about an hour in each place, and then move on. If the place is particularly good, we may stay longer.
3. We follow Goldberg's basic rules: allow about 10 min. of uninterrupted writing time, share, and limit responses to a simple "Thank you" after each reading.
4. While there is always time for socializing, the emphasis remains on the writing, and doing it for yourself.
5. Groups find their own path, can cross paths, join, and turn into new groups.
6. Emphasis is on giving yourself time and space to write in good company.

4. Writing Marathon Reminders

We'll work in small groups of your own choice, mixing in refreshments and local color. Try to keep the groups small (3-5 persons) to get quick service at restaurants, etc., and go to places with good acoustics. Don't fret if your first piece of writing seems forced. That's not unusual. Just relax and keep at it. If stuck, just look around and record what you hear and see. As Kim Stafford advises in *The Muses Among Us*, become "a professional eavesdropper," who listens "to the muses among us." And whatever you write, enjoy yourself! You may want to write for longer than 10 minutes once you get started. Remember these four steps: 1) Write. 2) Share writing without response. 3) Socialize (eat/talk). 4) Move on. Repeat.

5. Suggested Schedule

- Keep it loose, let your small group form naturally, and let your feet lead you to your first writing spot.
- Each Hour: Write about 10 minutes and read your writing to each other with no response but "Thank you." Then socialize, enjoy surroundings, and move on to a new spot.
- Read-around: Voluntary, at end, TBA.

6. Resources

- *The Writing Marathon: "In Good Company Revealed"* (LULU.com, 2011).
- KSLU Writing Marathon Radio Programs: www.selu.edu/acad_research/programs/slwp/index.html
- *Writing Marathon Central* Website: <http://english.selu.edu/writingmarathon>
- NWP article on Writing Marathons: <http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/315>