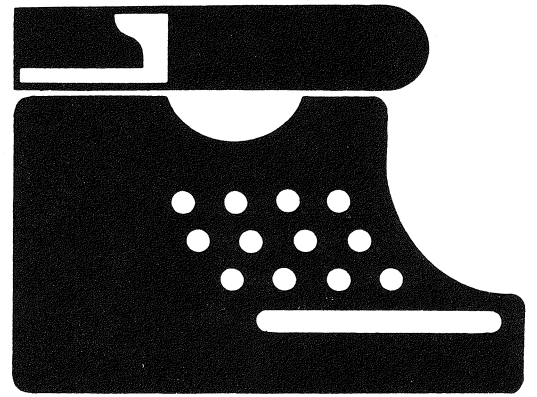


Teachers & Writers



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This special issue of *Teachers & Writers* magazine is devoted to the work of two veterans of the T&W program: Alan Ziegler and Meredith Sue Willis. We have included a profile of each writer, a selection of their poetry and fiction, and excerpts from their two brand-new T&W books, *The Writing Workshop: Volume 2* by Alan Ziegler and *Personal Fiction Writing: A Guide for Writing from Real Life for Teachers, Students, & Writers* by Meredith Sue Willis. We hope you like these selections.—Editor

Profile Alan Ziegler Poet and Teacher

ALAN ZIEGLER WRITES, TEACHES WRITING, teaches the teaching of writing, and edits writing. Words, words, words.

He has been conducting creative writing workshops for Teachers & Writers Collaborative since 1974 (at P.S. 75 since 1980) and also teaches at Columbia University. He has taught for Poets in the Schools, Poets & Writers, and at Bronx Community College. He was in residency at Hampshire College and was writer-in-residence at the Interlochen Arts Academy in Michigan. Before teaching, he worked as a newspaper reporter, machine operator, and magazine editor. He has a masters degree in creative writing from The City College of New York, where he studied with Kurt Vonnegut, Joel Oppenheimer, and William Burroughs.

Alan's books of poetry are *So Much to Do*, *Planning Escape*, and *Sleeping Obsessions* (co-authored with Harry Greenberg and Larry Zirlin). His poetry has appeared in numerous publications—including *Paris Review*, *The Ardis Anthology of New American Poetry*, *American Poetry Review*, *The New York Times*, *Sun*, and *Carolina Quarterly*—and he received a N.Y. State CAPS grant in poetry. His short stories have been selected for the PEN/NEA Syndicated Fiction Project and published in magazines such as *Sundog*, *Paris Review*, and *New American Review*.

His article about the relationship between the poets Allen and Louis Ginsberg appeared in the *Village Voice*. He collaborated with Nick Bozanic on the narration for a dance version of *Alice in Wonderland* (choreographed by Helen Earl) and he wrote the script for the Ragabash Puppet Theater production of *Hary Janos Suite*. He is currently working on *The Incomplete* (a

novel set in 1968) and a screen play (with Phyllis Raphael).

Alan is also the author of *The Writing Workshop* (Volumes 1 and 2), about the teaching of creative writing. He has conducted seminars, consulted, and lectured on the teaching of writing for the National Council of Teachers of English, Conference on College Composition and Communication, the National Institute of Education, Vassar College, Adelphi University, the New York City Board of Education, the Scarsdale Teacher Center, and others. He is coordinator of Writers-in-Lynbrook, a district-wide program of writing workshops in Lynbrook, N.Y., and he

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has worked extensively with teachers.

Poetry by his students comprises the text of *Almost Grown*, a book of photographs of teenagers by Joseph Szabo. He was creative consultant to *We Don't Act Our Age* (WCBS-TV), which was written and performed by his students and won a N. Y. Emmy Award for Outstanding Children's Programming. He has read his work—sometimes with jazz accompaniment—at the Manhattan Theater Club, Union College, Hamilton College, West End bar, Arthur Kill Correctional Facility, on National Public Radio, and others.

Alan co-edited *Some* literary magazine and Release Press, and served as field representative for the New York State Council on the Arts Literature Program. He is a member of the Poetry Society of America and PEN.

About his background as a writer, Alan says, "My beginning as a writer was when, 12 years old, I kept a journal of a family trip and had my first serious brushes with puns and irony (I wrote that "we hit the road at 9 A.M. until our hands hurt, then we drove off"). My subsequent forays into writing were sporadic and tentative until college, when I got hooked on journalism and songwriting, two forms that avoided academic judgment while receiving instant public response. A post-college poetry workshop with David Ignatow changed the course of my life. I waded into the world of writing workshops, small presses, and poetry readings, until I found myself swimming in it. I stayed, and Teachers & Writers became my home base. I love to be there when students light up their own eyes with their first wonderful experiences with language."

Poems by Alan Ziegler

Outside

"What's it like outside?" she asks.
Outside? I haven't been out yet,
nor even dared to peek my head
between the curtains (as if the world
had said, "And now presenting, once again...").
I haven't yet turned on the radio
with its news of outside activities,
nor answered the phone, where a voice
might have said,
"What are you doing inside—you'd
never believe what's going on out here!"

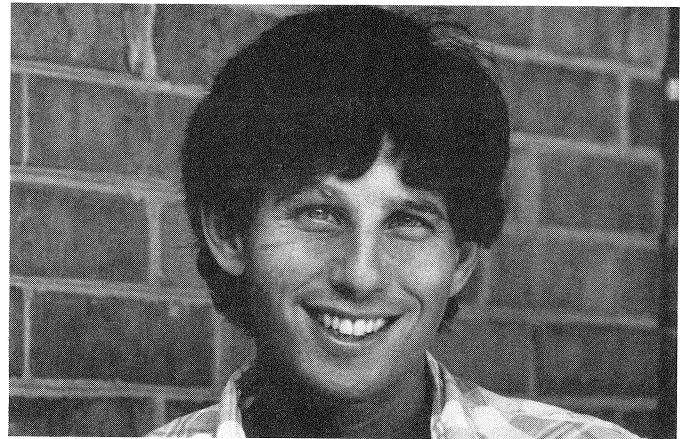
What's it like outside?
I haven't the fogginess
and she wants a simile to boot.

Hello? Hello? Hello?

You know how in the movies
when a phone connection has been broken
(usually because the other person has hung up),
the disconnected person clicks the plungers
up & down chanting "hello? hello? hello?"
click click click.

In the history of electronic communications
has anyone ever gotten anyone back that way?
Try it. They're gone. Admit it.
Click all you want.
Implore: "Operator! Operator!"
You can't even reach *her* that way.

There is no one there
to hear you say "goodbye."
Face up to the real dilemma:
whether to redial,
dial a new number,
or stay temporarily disconnected.



What Did I Learn in School? (A Recitation)

Am is was were be being been has have had do does did shall
will should would may might must can could sine cosine cosine
sine cosine cosine sine sine to be or not to be that is the question
whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of
outrageous force to the fulcrum force to the fulcrum pie are
squared every good boy does find almighty God we acknowledge
our dependence upon pie are squared force to the good boy was
were be being been nobler in the am is are we sine cosine force
whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the dependence.

Love at First Sight

It was a novelty store, and I went in just for the novelty of it.
She was in front of the counter, listening to the old proprietor
say: "I have here one of those illusion paintings, a rare one. You
either see a beautiful couple making love, or a skull. They say
this one was used by Freud himself on his patients—if at first
sight you see the couple, then you're a lover of life and love. But
if you focus on the skull first, you're closely involved with death,
and there's not much hope for you."

With that, he unwrapped the painting. She and I hesitated,
then looked at the picture, then at each other. We both saw the
skull. And have been together ever since.

The Morning After Forgetting Her

first morning sight
rain-streaked window

awake but not up
planning return to bed

first the mail
surprise postal caffeine

dance through the rain
with my answer

On the Road

That winter the news spread fast through the suburban high school:

Barry Brown has run away.

First he didn't show up for school,
not too unusual, he'd slipped off to Greenwich Village
several times before, always back before panic.

But now it was two, three days, no word,
and his parents used the word "frantic" a lot.

At first we withheld judgement,
excited by the possibilities but also slightly worried,
though not frantic.

Then word started coming in—
someone spotted him in Times Square, outside of Playland,
but he ran when called;
someone else who hardly knew him said she got a phone call
from Texas he sounded real happy and was keeping a journal.
We started repeating things he'd said that fall,
schemes for "getting away from here" as his eyes glowed
during long nights of talk and beer in the field behind the
school.

Our talks resumed without him,
in basements, cars, or around a fire on the deserted beach:
we'd all do what Barry did,
maybe this summer, before our senior year; maybe instead
of college.

I remembered Barry whispering in my ear during an English exam,
"Read *On the Road*, it's the Bible,"
and the teacher accused us of cheating and Barry just laughed.
Summer came, we were still talking and I said damn we talk,
but Barry did it.

It was early in the morning but hot already when they found
him
entangled in an unfinished sewer pipe.
As construction resumed after a bad winter then a long strike,
a worker screamed under the street
not more than two blocks from Barry's house.
They found Barry trapped in some stupid journey, unable to
get very far
or back to where he came from.

His agony hit us all behind the eyes,
though we didn't talk much about it, saving it for moments
of private nightmare.
No one went anywhere that summer.
But eventually we all did.

Hoopla

What is all this hoopla about?
What is hoopla, anyway?
And how can we be sure this
isn't something less?

Or more?

How many people must be involved
for it to qualify as hoopla?

Can we possibly have hoopla
with just the two of us,
or must there be a crowd?

Even so, sometimes we seem to be a crowd,
and it's those times
that make me think of hoopla.
And ruckus, and, occasionally:
brouhaha.

Brouhaha, there's another one;
whatever it is, our brouhahas
have a good deal of ha ha
in the brew.

But I am getting off the subject.

The subject is hoopla.

No, the subject is *us*,
and why all this hoopla.

What is going on here,
that words with more sound than meaning
come to mind?

Still, I *like* the sounds,
like a children's game—
hoopla around the brouhaha
with a double ruckus.

Isn't this fun
just talking about it?



The Writing Workshop: Volume 2

by Alan Ziegler

THE WRITING WORKSHOP: VOLUME 2 DEALS WITH what you might say to students in order to inspire them to write. I suggest that these activities be presented in the context of a writing workshop that emphasizes all phases of writing, from conception to completion; provides feedback and support; and encourages individual initiative. A writing curriculum should induce, not constrict, growth. Most of these assignments can be fulfilled with brief or extended pieces of writing—poetry or prose.

Blues singer/song writer Bukka White, when asked how he writes songs, replied, “I just reach up and pull them out of the sky—call them sky songs—they just come to me.”

If it were only that easy, we could swagger into class like John Wayne entering the Rough & Rumble Saloon and say, “All right, pardners, reach for the sky.” But all too often, writers reach for the sky and come up empty-handed (then it’s time to sing the blues). Students often need an external spark to ignite writing. Writers use instinct, experience, and talent to take the first step of the creative process: finding potential material. A good assignment is anything that helps students take that first step.

There are those who say creative writing can’t be taught through assignments, that the writing teacher’s job is only to respond and encourage. Novelist Mark Harris was once asked by his department chairman to give assignments to his college workshop. Harris later wrote in the *New York Times Book Review*, “I couldn’t teach writing that way, I had never assigned topics before... I expected every writer, however young, however inexperienced, to assign himself/herself his/her own topics, to discover sources by soul searching, by examining their own unexamined lives, etc. One could only be there waiting when the student, inspired by his reading, decided to write something of his own.”

Self-assigned writing is a goal to work toward. I present assignments with the hope that they will become increasingly unnecessary. But although a writing workshop without any assignments or direction from the teacher may work at the college level, it would probably be disastrous on the elementary and secondary levels. Indeed, even highly experienced writers need outside help from time to time. Recently, I got a call from a friend who has published a novel and numerous articles. “Assign me something!” she implored. “Give me something to do to get me going again.”

Some critics of assignments claim, “You learn to write by writing.” Correct premise, wrong conclusion. If you learn to write by writing, then anything a teacher can do to get students writing is teaching writing. There are some students who will thrive with or without assignments, but we can offer even these special students more than the “space to write”; we can help them learn how to shape that space.

The common denominator of all writing assignments is that they inspire writing. Virtually anything that gets students writing is worthwhile, contributing to their growing facility with language. The value of an assignment often derives more from the experience of writing than from the product.

The Writing Workshop: Volume 2 is written in the belief that there is only one writing assignment—“Write”—but that there are endless subdivisions, some of which follow.

Assignment Presenting: The Set-up

I have a fairly high tolerance for varied activities taking place during workshops, but I ask the class to strive toward the platonic ideal of unanimous enraptured attention while I am setting up an assignment. I suggest to students working on writings other than the day’s assignment that they listen to the set-up anyway for future reference; if they choose to write during the set-up, they must do so inaudibly if not invisibly.

The set-up consists of two parts, which are sometimes interwoven: the teacher’s presentation, and questions/discussion. I tell students: “During my presentation, we both have jobs to do. My job is to describe an idea for writing and to conjure images related to that idea. While I am talking, your job is to be an active listener: to visualize the images being presented, personalize details, and fill in any blanks. Then, your job is to remain active during the ensuing discussion, whether you are directly contributing or not. Together, our job is not only to crystallize a writing idea, but to create an atmosphere in which you *want* to write.”

You can preface the discussion/questions segment by asking a student to paraphrase briefly what you have just said. This helps you know if you’re getting through, and it gives students a second shot at understanding the assignment. You can kick off the discussion by asking, “What else *could* I have said?” encouraging students to amplify your ideas.

Find the optimum moment to turn from discussion to writing. A truncated set-up might result in a chorus of “Huh’s?”; going too long can deplete the time and energy for writing. When the discussion is on the verge of peaking, with hands going up like exclamation points, you can say, “Put it on the page instead of saying it.”

The set-up corresponds to all or part of the prewriting phase of the writing process; many students begin writing immediately afterward, while others need more time to mull. Emphasize to students that the set-ups often contain more possibilities than they can handle, especially in one sitting. I often toss around numerous ideas and angles, hoping that one or more will connect with every student.

Titles

Students should visualize the following (which you can embellish):

It is twenty years from now. You are a celebrated author, known particularly for your prolificness and versatility. You have recently published your memoirs, and a national magazine is doing a cover story about you. The reporter is interviewing you in your private study. (At this point, ask the students to suggest what the study would look like and what it would contain; what would be on the desk, in the drawers, on the walls, etc.?)

One bookshelf is devoted to your own works. You have written books in virtually every genre—sometimes just to make some fast money while pursuing more artistic endeavors—including novels, poetry, self-help, how-to, travelogues, cookbooks, philosophy, religion, and sports. The reporter asks you to name your favorites.

*Make up titles of your books in several genres; write as many as you can think of (you can do more than one title in a genre), including at least one novel, one book of poems, and your memoirs. Remember, titles help sell books, so they should be enticing and/or informative. Most titles are from one to five words, but some effective titles are much longer. Stay away from such mundane titles as a memoir called *My Life* or a book of poems called *Reflections on Life*. The novels category can be broken down into subdivisions, such as *mystery, romance, science fiction, and adventure*.*

Before you teach this assignment, peruse your own bookshelves and make a list of interesting titles to read to the class. My shelves feature such enticements as: *The Punished Land, One Hundred Years of Solitude, Dismantling the Silence, Friends You Drank Some Darkness, Secrets & Surprises, Winner Take Nothing, The Wishing Bone Cycle, Tell Me a Riddle, Lugging Vegetables to Nantucket, and The Baron in the Trees*. (I tend to give simple, but, I hope, resonating titles to my own books, such as *So Much to Do* and *Planning Escape*). Since I don't own any self-help books, I went to a bookstore and discovered the following titles: *The Silva Mind Control Method, The Act of Selfishness, Peace of Mind Through Possibility Thinking, The Art of Hanging Loose in an Uptight World, and Creative Aggression*.

Students should copy their invented titles onto the inside covers of their writing folders, for future use. One student eventually wrote something for all his titles, checking them off as he went along. One workshop never went beyond this assignment, which we did on our first day. Each student embarked on a semester-long writing project stemming from one of the titles, resulting in mini-novels.

Novels: *Undeveloped Film; Private School Cool* (Young Adult); *Love on the First Flight* (Romance); *Monstrous Infants; Invasion of the Foam Snatchers* (Horror); *The Man Who Became a Clown; Center Child; The Flowers Died When You Did; The Mess and His Cousin, Too*.

Poetry: *Rampage on the Brainstorm; What's at the End of the Rainbow; Get Out of My Backpocket*. (The last one was serendipitous: as a student was reading her titles out loud, a classmate put his hand into her backpocket; she uttered this phrase, and I said, "Great title!")

Memoirs: *They Made Me Do It; My Skinny Body; Reflections in a Mud Puddle; What, It's Done?; How I Abused Myself With Love, Money, and Relatives*.

How-To: *How to Help Yourself Go Crazy; One Hundred Ways to Use Eyelashes*.

Cookbooks: *The King of Oatmeal; Hair Cooked Just Right; Vegetables and Their Mystery*.

Self-Help: *What Can Be Learned From Prehistoric Man*.

How to Spot

I was on the subway going to an elementary school on Valentine's Day, wary that the kids would write poems replete with red roses, blue violets, and insulting rhymes. I tried to come up with a Valentine's Day assignment that would result in something fresh, but couldn't think of anything. I decided to read the newspaper for a couple of stops before renewing my quest.

And there, in the *Daily News*, was an idea for the taking. A feature article about a private investigator carried a sidebar headlined "How to Spot a Suspect," which contained a list of incriminating "clues," including:

- Crossing and recrossing legs... It lessens tension on the muscular system.
- Licking lips.
- Verbal gestures feigning deafness. When a person asks, "Will you repeat the question," they are stalling for time to think up an answer.
- Avoiding eye contact.

When I got to school, I wrote "How to Spot a Suspect" on the board and read the list to the class, adding that these are not scientific, surefire symptoms of criminality, but merely indications that someone is nervous. Then I mentioned Valentine's Day and erased "Suspect," replacing it with "Someone in Love."

Write someone's actions and reactions when in love—with you or anyone else.

How to Spot Someone in Love

Spotting someone in love is easy if you know what to look for.

If you tell him she doesn't like him,
and he says, "I don't care, I never liked her"
while he is busy biting his nails or finding
something to break,
he likes her.

If you tease him that he likes her,
and he laughs like he doesn't know
what you're talking about,
but he doesn't throw a punch at you,
he likes her.

Sometimes if you ask a boy who likes a girl
if he likes her or another girl,
he will pick the other one.

Sometimes if a boy doesn't like a girl that much,
and is talking to her,
it will be easy for him to find something to say.
But if he likes her,
he won't find anything to say.

Sometimes if there is a dance coming up,
a boy will pick any girl *but* the one
that he likes.

—Michael Bromley (E)

Occasional Poems

The impulse to write often comes from internal rumblings and interpersonal relationships—we place our private lives into the public arena. But we often overlook public events and situations as possible subject matter. Poetry written about a specific occasion or event—including such semi-public events as wed-

dings, funerals, and birthdays—is called “occasional poetry.” For this assignment, I include poems of social and political commentary that are not pegged to a specific occasion.

Storytellers, poets, and minstrels have always had their say about what was going on; when printing became accessible, writers began distributing topical poems and ballads on broadsides. In *The Uses of Poetry*, Denys Thompson cites a 16th-century poem “against a profiteering landlord, who had turned out a widow to use her house as a corn-store.” Milton, Wordsworth, and Yeats wrote occasional poetry (Milton wrote political sonnets, a form previously reserved for love themes), as do contemporary poets such as Allen Ginsberg, Robert Bly, and Carolyn Forché.

In the 1960s, topical songwriters such as Phil Ochs, Tom Paxton, and Bob Dylan wrote on subjects ranging from the Vietnam War to the death in the ring of boxer Davey Moore. Their songs, including Dylan’s “Oxford Town” (about the integration of the University of Mississippi) and Ochs’s “I Ain’t Marching Anymore,” were sung at rallies, galvanizing emotions and actions. The following poem was written by one of my sixth grade students, who read it at an anti-nuclear rally in Central Park.

Occasional Poems can be written in anticipation of an event (perhaps to be read at a ceremony) or as a response to an occurrence (such as Tennyson’s “Charge of the Light Brigade”). When I was writer-in-residence at the Interlochen Arts Academy, I encouraged my workshop students to write Occasional Poems for use in the school. Their topical collaborations included a birthday poem for the chairman of the department, a Thanksgiving Grace (which was recited at the Thanksgiving dinner for the students who were unable to go home), and a dedication poem for the Chapel/Recital Hall. At P.S. 75 in Manhattan my students wrote a dedication poem for the renovated playground (which was named after a teacher who had died).

The Soul of the Playground

Our playground was designed partly by the minds of children.

Built for the energy that comes from children.

It’s a lovely place to play with my friends
or sometimes I come here to sort out my thoughts.
When I play in the playground
my harness has been taken off,
giving me luxurious freedom.
In the playground I get the feeling
that I’m teasing the school.
It’s a playful tease not a mean tease.

When you have bad feelings you can let them out
by running swift and fearless
and letting your bad feelings perish
into the flames of the past.
I feel like the playground changes colors
and I change with them.

The climbing structure is wood instead of metal,
which is good because wood doesn’t get cold and clammy.
The slide may be your invisible unicorn that flies way above
the stars.

Laughter echoes through the trees.
The new playground looks like a lucky kid’s backyard.
You can pour out your soul
to the playground
because it will listen.

Part Two

Mrs. Freeman was a friend to everyone she taught.
Even the bad kids.

At 3:00 you had to leave her, I never wanted to.
When she died I first noticed how beat up the playground
was.
Most of the first and second graders won’t know who she is
because they weren’t around,
but we’re sure they’ll understand how special she was and
how much
people loved her.
Yellow roses and Mrs. Freeman really go together.

Mrs. Freeman was
teaching from a heart that
still was partly child
for the children, to make their lives worthwhile.
So it is only right
to dedicate this playground
to Mrs. Freeman.

—Class collaboration
Carole Karasik’s fifth/sixth grade class

I like the collaboration approach when students are writing for a local occasion. All students can be invited to contribute, and you or a student can combine the best parts. This enables several students to share in the event, and the selection process results in a strong piece.

Write a poem about any social or political event or issue—international, national, or local.

Write a poem for an upcoming or recent occasion, such as a school or civic event, wedding, funeral, or birth.

Night

Night evokes poetry, perhaps because darkness corresponds to our unconscious and awakens dreams. Or maybe it’s because sundown brings the end of the routine for most people, and veils our surroundings in mystery. Night can enchant or frighten.

Things go bump in the night; moonlight inspires lovers and lunatics; “merry wanderers” roam Shakespeare’s midsummer night; “In the real dark night of the soul it is always three o’clock in the morning” (Fitzgerald); “It’s a marvelous night for a moon dance” (Van Morrison); “The poet now and then catches sight of the figures that people the night-world—spirits, demons, and gods” (Jung).

Discuss the night, its physical and psychological components.

Write about the night:

- 1) *A mood piece, describing a place at nighttime.*
- 2) *Someone’s dark night of the soul.*
- 3) *The journal of a “merry wanderer” of the night.*
- 4) *Choreograph a “moon dance.”*

A Night Time Person

As the bright lamppost light dies down and the black night sky takes over, we only have the stars to give us light.

Then the flowers stop dancing to sleep and the wind begins to blow as though it’s looking for something that it’s lost. Maybe what it’s lost is me.

Maybe it’s looking for me because every night it bangs on the shutters and pounds on the door trying to get in.

Sometimes the wind gives up and blows a cool breeze which puts me to sleep, bringing dreams of adventures, mysteries, and scary things to seek out, or rainbows, rooms of crystal, kids helping old people cross the street.

The night time seems like you’re reading a book and you are the writer of the book.

—Maggie Haberman (E)

Profile

Meredith Sue Willis

Fiction Writer and Teacher

MEREDITH SUE WILLIS WAS BORN IN THE APPALACHIAN coal mining region into a family of school teachers. In fact, one of her grandfathers taught in a one-room schoolhouse with only an eighth grade education. During her high school years, she studied biology, chemistry, and physics with her father at their very small high school in Shinnston, West Virginia. Her mother, as a substitute, taught her English, social studies, and geometry.

Influenced by storytellers in her family, preaching and Bible reading in church, and melodramas like “My Gal Sunday” and “Helen Trent” on radio, Sue began telling herself stories before she could read. She also made comic books before she could write, and throughout her childhood imitated whatever books she was reading by writing her own. Early in high school she began a lifelong hobby of submitting her writings to magazines and collecting rejection slips. She did have one acceptance, however, when she was 15, in a national magazine for high school students called *The Student Writer*.

After high school, Sue attended Bucknell University, then dropped out to become a Volunteer in Service to America. She was assigned not to one of her native Appalachian communities, but to a neighborhood in Norfolk, Virginia where her activities ranged from setting up a Girl Scout troop to helping organize a grocery buying cooperative. This year spent with extremely poor people went a long way toward forming political and economic views which she still holds.

After the VISTA year, she moved to New York City, where she has lived ever since. She took a B.A. degree from Barnard College, where she was both a Phi Beta Kappa student and very active in the student anti-war strikes of 1967-1969. At the end of her senior year, one of her short stories won the *Mademoiselle* College Fiction Contest and resulted in her first publication in a commercial magazine. She made the mistake at this point of thinking her writing career would now roll smoothly on to publication, fame, and fortune, but several years passed before she had another story accepted by any magazine, and it was ten years until she had a novel published.

After a year as a recreation therapist at Bellevue Hospital, she returned to Columbia University to work on a Master of Fine Arts degree. It was then that she began working with Teachers & Writers Collaborative, as an artist in the public schools. As part of an experiment using graduate students, Sue found herself directing video and live dramas written by children as well as making comic books, literary magazines, and radio shows—all in the special arts program at P.S. 75 on Manhattan’s upper west side. In later years, Sue’s workshops with children and teachers took her to four of the five boroughs of New York, and to schools in Long Island, New Jersey, and Westchester county.

Meanwhile, she continued to work regularly on her writing, publishing short stories in small literary magazines such as *Minnesota Review*, *Epoch*, *Story Quarterly*, and *The Little*

Magazine, and finishing two novels, one of which still sits in a drawer. The other, however, *A Space Apart*, was published by Charles Scribner’s Sons in 1979. This book received excellent reviews, and was followed in 1981 by another novel, *Higher Ground*, the first volume of a trilogy that follows the experiences of Sue’s early years. The second volume of the trilogy, *Only Great Changes*, based on her experiences as a VISTA volunteer, is due from Scribner’s in early 1985.



Sue lives with her husband in Park Slope, Brooklyn, where she continues to combine writing with teaching, both for Teachers & Writers Collaborative and for colleges such as Pace University at White Plains and NYU. Two of her stories have won the PEN Syndicated Fiction Contest, a program that is trying to put fiction back into America’s newspapers.

Sue likes to think of her work—writing and teaching—as a single quilt of many-colored patches. Her greatest desire is for life to have the wholeness and connectedness of art, and for art to have the stunning vigor of a classroom full of fourth graders.

From *Higher Ground*

MOTHER ASSIGNED US A COMPOSITION THE FIRST week of school, “You’re the advanced class,” she said. “This will be good practice for college.” She wanted us to think very carefully about the topic, “What Is Really Important.”

“Advanced English,” said Gail Gordon after class. “Some

advanced English. Nathan Critch and Garland Odell and half of Coburn Creek.” Then she twisted her mouth at me. “I thought we’d have it easy with *you* in the class.”

I gave her a big smile. “Oh, no, she said she’d be especially hard on whichever class I was in, and she’d give us lots of compositions.” None of that was true, but I thought Gail deserved it. Sometimes I liked Gail, and sometimes I didn’t. Her father had given her a red Barracuda for her sixteenth birthday, and Mother, Daddy, and I all agreed it was a gross indulgence. But I did admire the way she stood up to her parents when they didn’t want her to date Johnny Bardoline. She looked them right in the eye, the way she told it, anyhow, and said, “I can do it in front of you or I can do it behind your back, but I am going to go steady with Johnny.” When her Dad gave her the Barracuda, she said, he handed her two sets of keys in leather cases, one monogrammed G.G., and the other J.B.

I considered beginning my essay with reference to a red Barracuda as an example of unimportant worldly possessions, but finally decided it would be meanspirited to use a real person’s car. I never worked so hard on a composition in my life; I told Mother I had algebra every night for a week, but in my room I was rewriting the essay word by word, thinking in despair that I would never make it through college where they say you have a paper every week. But I was determined that there would be no question in Mother’s mind that I deserved the best grade.

I got my A, and I also received a note and a number indicating that I would read my essay aloud. Since I had number eight, I figured I would be the final reader, and that therefore my paper was the best. The more people who read ahead of me, the more certain I was, because all the papers were boring repetitions of Love and Democracy. Gail Gordon’s was the most pompous thing I ever heard, and India Odell didn’t even get to read. My essay began boldly with what is *not* really important: clothes and other material possessions, teen-age crushes and winning ball games. These things, I wrote, will be forgotten. These things will pass away. What will not be forgotten is what is important, and among the important things are civil rights and missiles in Cuba. I guess it was still Love and Democracy, but it sounded more interesting, and three people raised their hands in the comment period to say they thought it was the best one. Only Gail had any criticism. “I think Blair Ellen is wrong about one thing. Winning games *is* important. I mean school spirit is like patriotism for your country, and also the ending was too depressing.”

“That’s a point,” said Mother, sitting on her desk with her ankles crossed. She wore shirt dresses in the fall, or matching skirt and blouse sets. Looking at her an hour a day, I couldn’t get over how fresh and young she seemed up there perched on the desk. Sometimes, when she got very excited, she would bang her heels lightly against the desk. She and Daddy seemed incredibly attractive to me at school, desirable people, full of force. I understood perfectly the students who told me they wished they had one or the other of them for a parent. At school Mother shed light; even her criticism failed to darken the corners of my eyes: “Yes, Blair Ellen,” she said. “I think Gail may be right. You want to stir the reader to action, not make him crawl in bed and pull the covers over his head.” That got a laugh, and people tried to catch my eye. They still hadn’t got over the novelty of a daughter in the classroom. I was pleased to have caused a little controversy; in school all diversions are welcome. I closed my binder and stacked my books to wait for the bell, but Mother said, “Let’s see, I think there’s one more essay.”

I heard footsteps before I saw who it was because he came from the very last seat in my row. I was amazed that Garland Odell had even done the assignment, let alone been chosen to read. He had transferred into our class under mysterious circumstances a couple of days after school started. It must have been a fight with the other Junior English teacher, but even Mother didn’t seem to know the details. Mr. Thornton had just asked her one day if she would take Garland, and she said yes. Garland had been on good behavior, too; he sat in back with the country boys, but cracked no jokes, made no silly noises.

He had dressed up in a red cowboy shirt with black shoulders and blue and white trim, and cowboy boots too. Nobody dressed that way in our town. Maybe for the homecoming parade if you had a horse, but not for school. I wondered if he’d done it in honor of the reading, and the idea made me uncomfortable. He slouched against the chalk ledge and grinned and someone in the back whistled.

Mother was immediately off the desk and pacing the front of the room, scanning for the source of the disturbance. Squinting, stretching her neck and flaring her nostrils, she seemed dangerous. We were all still until she relaxed again on the desk. “Now, Garland,” she said, “let’s consider this a lesson in public speaking. Stand up straight so your voice will carry all the way to your friends in the back. Take three steps forward and balance your weight on both feet and don’t slouch. Thank you.” Just the instructions she’d given me when I was six and recited in church for the first time.

His essay was about motorcycles. It began with: “What is really important is a solid engine that you can take apart and repair yourself. What is not important is a lot of chrome junk stuck all over it.”

People laughed at the way he curled his lip on the word junk. Mother said, “Be professional, Garland, and if they laugh, wait till it’s quiet before you go ahead.”

Garland read: “People think loud engines are for troublemakers. I think it is important to hear your engine. Then you can tell if something is wrong. A loud engine is important, but not to scare livestock and old people.” That brought down the house, and Garland grinned too, but he didn’t make any faces, he just stood quietly balanced on both feet, the way she’d told him. “The most important thing of all,” he read, “is to be sure your motorcycle is a Harley Davidson.”

The class clapped. They hadn’t clapped for anyone else, but then no one else had been funny. Only a boy, I thought with a special bitterness reserved for things closed to me by sex, only a boy could write something that would get those guys in the back to clap. Only Garland was crazy enough to write an English essay about motorcycles. About what really *was* important to him. I would have died before I wrote about what I really wanted. I wanted peace and toleration of course, but I probably would have traded them in an instant for the chance to be homecoming princess.

Hands went up for comments. “Well, well,” said Mother. “Nathan Critch. I haven’t seen your hand yet this year. What’s the question, Nathan?”

Nathan was a tall, heavyset, country boy who never played sports or carried home books, but Garland said he had shot a deer every season since he was eight years old. He said, “Garland’s the best.”

“Yes?” said Mother. “You have to say why, Nathan.”

He looked puzzled. “Because it was about motorcycles.”

Laughter: everyone in the class wide awake, hands waving.

The boys making their desks creak with their weight as they leaned forward to be recognized. Mother had a sort of innocent, surprised look on her face as she gazed out at the enthusiasm. “I think Nathan is saying that Garland’s essay was interesting to him because of the content. We may not have emphasized content enough, but I believe it is one of the main things on the good composition checklist.”

I had my hand up in the air too, waiting to be called on. She always called on me last, so I had plenty of time to plan something intelligent to say.

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Personal Fiction Writing

Writing Dialogue

by Meredith Sue Willis

THE HUMAN WORLD RUNS ON CONVERSATION. Compromises are made in the halls of Congress; business deals are put together over martinis at lunch; lovers decide to embark on marriage as they sit on a ledge overlooking a mountain vista. We talk constantly, even to inanimate objects and our pets. We talk to babies long before they understand us, immerse them in language, and they begin to learn. We chat and argue, curse and cajole: everything happens to the tune of human conversation. Mme. de Staël, the nineteenth-century woman of letters, considered conversation an art form:

[In France] words are not merely, as they are in all other countries, a means to communicate ideas, feelings, and needs, but an instrument one likes to play and which revives the spirit, just as does music in some nations, and strong liquors in others. It is a certain way in which people act upon one another, a quick give-and-take of pleasure, a way of speaking as soon as one thinks, of rejoicing in oneself in the immediate present, of being applauded without making an effort, of displaying one’s intelligence by every nuance of intonation, gesture, and look—in short, the ability to produce at will a kind of electricity which, emitting a shower of sparks, relieves the excess of liveliness in some and rouses others from their painful apathy.

I love the way Mme. de Staël seems actually to believe in salutary effects to our health from conversation, as if it were a sport. In her day, conversation was considered a lively art, to be cultivated and mastered. People vied for invitations to the house of a great conversationalist, and would later discuss whether or not the talker had been in good form that night. They considered conversation an entertainment and, to some extent, a performance. Today, with less self-consciousness than in Mme. de Staël’s time, we also enjoy conversation and entertain ourselves with it. It is the medium through which we navigate in our relationships with other human beings.

For this reason if for no other, conversation would have an important place in fiction writing. No moment is more revealing and intense in novels and stories than the moment at which the people begin to talk. Dialogue in fiction (and interviews in non-fiction) give people a chance to speak in their own voices, to present themselves in the way they want to be seen. In the previous chapters we have given attention to the indirect revelation of character through gesture, appearance, even setting. In dialogue we hear the way people want to present themselves even as we simultaneously make indirect inferences from the manner in which they do it. What stories do they have to tell? How do they

approach others? How do they react to the others’ approaches? Is the speaking style terse or elaborate? Do they talk a lot, or only rarely? Is their talk more of a barrier between them and others than an avenue of communication? Sometimes the words in a dialogue almost disappear: there is a sense in which the famous breakfast table conflict between Helen Keller and her teacher Annie Sullivan is a dialogue even though it has no direct quotations and one of the participants has not yet learned to speak.

The novelist Anthony Burgess once said that he begins every new book by writing pages and pages of dialogue—no settings, no descriptions, just the words. He hears the people talking in his mind and writes what they say. He later discards the major part of this material, but it has served its purposes; he has worked out his characterizations and plots through dialogue. Writing dialogue is for him a technique for thinking, a way to plan his novel. In my work also I find dialogue to be central. I don’t always *begin* with it, but over and over again I find that the climax of a scene I have written will be the moment when the people begin to talk. Sometimes I do write the dialogue first, and then around it build the rest of the story: how the people look, what they are thinking. After this stage, I often discover that the dialogue has to be changed, but that doesn’t matter because it has acted as a structure for my writing.

This was what I was thinking one afternoon when I said to a class of fifth graders, “Conversation is the *spine* of a story.” I was more or less visualizing a backbone to hang things on, but just to check that I was communicating what I wanted to, I added, “You all know what a spine is, don’t you?”

“Sure,” called out one boy. “It’s what holds you up.”

“No,” said another voice. “It’s where the nerves run back and forth to your brain.”

Of course, I thought. Just so. I was amazed and delighted at the completion of my image. It is the skeleton that holds the rest of the thing up, and it is the channel through which flow the energy, the impulses, and the information.

I find, then, that dialogue writing is one of the most natural points at which to begin writing with students. There are possible yearlong projects using dialogue, in which you can expand pieces of student writing to other media. I particularly like dialogue for the way it organizes a piece of writing and suggests a method of rewriting (that is, the fleshing out of the dialogue-skeleton). I considered beginning this book with the chapter on dialogue because of the ease with which young students and students who are behind their grade level can slip into writing it, but as I thought over the structure for this book I also realized that

dialogue (along with the subject of the next chapter, monologue) is probably the most quintessentially *fictional* of the elements in this book. Dialogue certainly appears all the time in nonfiction (interviews, dramatizations of scenes, reconstructed conversations in biography, etc.), but the relationships between people, the inherent drama and conflict and connecting that occur in dialogue, are at the heart of the fiction writer's art. Dialogue is at once natural and familiar to young children and the functionally illiterate and at the same time a field for the most subtle and delicate fictional techniques. It is at the heart of fiction writing because it is like the greatest novels—highly wrought and artistically formed, yet intensely, inevitably, familiar.

Observing and Remembering Conversations

Dialogue is an especially good way to start those students writing who lack confidence in themselves as writers because it is something that needs no extended explanation or introduction. Everyone knows what a conversation is, and even if the words “conversation” and “dialogue” are unfamiliar to them, they still know what it means when two people are talking. The simplest assignment is one that students who are used to failing at writing will find amazingly possible:

•**Idea 189:** Record an actual conversation you have heard. It can be as simple as “Hi, Joe” and “Hi, Frank.” The only rule is that it be an actual conversation you have overheard.

Argue

Your mama, says the boy to the other. There's a big crowd around them. Boy: When you were born, your mama died when she saw you! Other: When you were born, your mama had a waist 200,000 inches. Boy slugs other. Man comes. Man: Break it up, break it up. Crowd: Blankedy Bleep Bleep. For a little while it goes on. Man: Which one of you started it? Boy: He did. Other: Bull crap. He started. The boys go around the corner and fight.

—Anonymous

•**Idea 190:** Write a conversation that once happened between you and one of your parents or some other adult.

•**Idea 191:** Write a conversation you overheard between some people older than you.

•**Idea 192:** Write a conversation you have heard between some young children you know.

•**Idea 193:** Do the same exercise, but make up a conversation.

Both observation exercises and remembered or reconstructed conversations are important to try. In one case you are trying to capture something as it is happening—the raw material of how people talk—and in the other you are doing some editing, probably remembering the most important part of the conversation, some of the high points rather than every little repetition and throat clearing. If your students try to write realistic-sounding conversation, they need to recognize the difference between *actual* transcribed conversation, which is wordy and somehow flat sounding, and well-made invented conversation which *sounds* natural but is probably much briefer and more pointed than real life conversation would be.

•**Idea 194:** Working in a group, with or without an adult's help, write a conversation. Try to have it feel like something that could really happen in your school. You can use fiction dialogue form or you can write it like a play, in dialogue form.

Fiction dialogue form:

“When you were born, your mama died when she saw

you!” said one boy.

The other boy said, “When you were born, your mama had a waist 200,000 inches.”

Play dialogue form:

BOY: When you were born, your mama died when she saw you!

OTHER BOY: When you were born, your mama had a waist 200,000 inches.

•**Idea 195:** The following fragment of a love story with dialogue is by a group of seventh grade girls in the South Bronx. Finish this story. (You can make any changes you want.)

David and Maria

Maria is a girl who is tall, has light skin, medium size, black hair, has like a switch to her walk, nice smile. She is shy and when she gets around her boyfriend she stutters. She wears tight pants. David is tall, black hair, dark brown eyes, and has dimples when he smiles.

One day in a crowded hallway in the school, students are screaming and running back and forth. People are talking.

“Did you hear what happened to me today?”

“Are we going to play football tomorrow?”

“My boyfriend kissed me!”

David says, in a voice trying to get over the crowd, “Hey, Maria! Come over here!”

Maria says, “What is it, Davey?”

They go dashing through the crowd trying to get to each other. Finally they reach each other.

David says, “Meet you after school under the train station?”

Maria says, “Okay, sugarplum.”

Then he takes her by the hand to a corner where nobody is. He looks at her lips and she looks at his and slowly they come together. Then suddenly, Mr. Miller, an old-fashioned, mean teacher with a potbelly taps David on the shoulder.

Clearing his throat, Mr. Miller says, “Don't you think you two should be getting upstairs now? David, I'll speak to you after class.”

David and Maria give each other a look.

•**Idea 196:** Now try spying. Take your notebook and station yourself somewhere in the school or out of it, and quietly write down exactly what people say, as best you can. Some good places for this are lunchrooms, bathrooms, offices, but any place will do. Younger children love this, and even older students like it if they can do it on their own time, surreptitiously, perhaps on a bus or grocery check-out line.

Here is what a seventh grade teacher from New Jersey observed in her classroom:

—Vinnie, you got a good grade.

—I did? What did I get?

—It's a good grade. Go look.

—I got a 97? I got a 97? I got a 97? Hey Eddie, I got a 97. Do you think it's a mistake?

—No, why should it be a mistake?

—Because I got a 97!

•**Idea 197:** Spy in a public place near your school every day for a week at about the same time. Make a class collection that includes typical conversations in your neighborhood. After reading your class collection aloud, try to draw some conclusions about typical conversations. Do people joke a lot? What do they seem to talk about most? Members of the opposite sex? Teachers? What do adults talk about, as opposed to students?

•**Idea 198:** Try this with a tape recorder.

•**Idea 199:** Tape record some people talking in your class and at the same time write it down. How are the two versions different? How could you make the written one more interesting?

•**Idea 200:** How would you make the taped version more interesting? (Sound effects? Intonation?)

•**Idea 201:** Choose one of your observed or remembered conversations. Extend it. That is, set the scene: describe the place and the people. Tell how they said things and what they did with their hands, what expressions were on their faces.

•**Idea 202:** Take this same extended, or fleshed-out conversation and add even more material to it. Make up what happens next, and perhaps the next day and/or the day before.

•**Idea 203:** Don't forget to include the "how" things are said. For an exercise in putting in the "how," write the following conversation, filling in as much as you can to make it more interesting. You can do anything you want to it as long as you keep the skeleton of the following words:

It's been a long time.

Yes, a long time.

Is this it?

I guess it is.

One student wrote:

The Love Story

Boy—"It's been a long time since I've seen you," in a low voice.

Girl—"Yes, a long time. It's been funny without you," in a high voice.

Boy—"Is this it or isn't it?" in a low voice.

Girl—"I guess it is, my sweetheart," in a high and happy voice.

Boy—"I guess it's time to go to California," in a sad voice.

Girl—"I've been lonely at night in bed," in a disgusted voice.

Boy—"Me too, to be exact," in a sad voice.

Girl—"Why did you leave me when I was going to have the kid?" in a mad voice.

Boy—"OK, I have to leave," in a sad voice.

Girl—"Stay with me," in a sad voice.

Boy—"OK, I will stay with you all my life," in a happy voice.

—Yvonne Montijo, 5th, P.S. 321, Brooklyn

A small group from a teacher education class at Medgar Evers College wrote this from the skeleton story:

They were meeting again at the Rockland County Station. It was deserted and late at night. He was wearing a white fox coat, and he had a wide, deep scar on his right cheek. "It's been a long time, baby."

"Yes, a long time," she said in a scared voice, even though she was dressed like summertime, wearing a floral blouse under her coat and a wide-brimmed summer hat. "Is this it?"

He said, "If you're looking for the best, I guess it is."

They exchanged a brown paper package for a Lord & Taylor bag. . . .

•**Idea 204:** The opposite exercise would be to hand out a sheet describing *how* things are said and have everyone fill in the words said:

"_____, " he said gently, touching the cat on the tip of its nose.

She grabbed the cat away, and snarled, "_____!"

•**Idea 205:** Take one of your real life conversations and act it out as a play. Decide if you need to fictionalize it at all to make it more dramatic. Feel free to rearrange and change things.

Using Dialogue in Plays and Other Media

One of the wonderful things about dialogue—especially with younger children, but also with any group that would benefit from an extended project growing out of their writing—is that you can use it in other media. You can actually plan your dialogue lessons as a sort of springboard to putting on plays, making video or radio dramas, or even making comic books. Children get a lot of satisfaction from reading aloud what they have written. As you share writing—a natural part of many teachers' writing programs—you are already moving into another medium, the medium of public speaking and dramatic reading, which requires skills different from writing. Children who are not necessarily the best writers will often be the class favorites when it comes to oral presentation. A step beyond reading aloud is the reading aloud with pantomime: the writer or someone else reads the piece while other students act it out as it is read. This involves an extra person, and gives the actors a chance to concentrate on gesture and movement rather than memorization. The next stage, of course, is to go through the process of memorizing lines and putting together props and acting out the play or playlet for the class and perhaps other classes. Short plays with a few characters and one or two showy but simple props give wonderful dramatic satisfaction and can be done as a sort of in-school guerilla theater that improves performing skills and prepares a class for a big year-end production, if your tastes run that way. I prefer an assembly of short pieces written and acted by various members of the class to one big play written by professionals, but any dramatic production is wonderful for getting a class to pull together by using everyone's skills.

Dramatic media can also be stimulating for writing in the opposite direction. That is, have students write *after the fact* of the presentation. A simple way to improve listening skills is to have the students write their own version of one of their own members' plays after it is presented. Encourage them, if you try this, to include any gestures or ad-libbed bits that were part of the performance. To a great extent a play is a group effort, and many of the

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greatest playwrights have always revised their work after it was already in rehearsal. Shakespeare supposedly wrote many of his parts to fit the particular talents of the members of his company. Everything is grist for the writer's mill, perhaps especially limitations.

•**Idea 206:** Make a group play. The method for doing this requires a scribe (probably an adult, to write fast enough and know to get down little asides and to include interesting bits of business). To begin you can work as a go-round, having everyone contribute one line or one character, and once things get moving, you can be more open about it.

•**Idea 207:** Read the selection on page 174 from an adult play, Federico García Lorca's *Blood Wedding*, and write your own continuation of it.

•**Idea 208:** Do this, but put the play into the form of a story, describing the people, etc.

•**Idea 209:** Try writing in conversation/story form one episode of your favorite television program. Make it as vivid and interesting as any other piece of your writing, and don't assume that the reader knows the personalities of the characters.

•**Idea 210:** Do the same thing with a movie or a play. When I was a child I used to do this all the time. Whenever my family

came back from the movies, I would rush in and immediately act out or write my own version. I did this with favorite books too; it is a way of claiming something important for your own and tailoring it to your own needs.

•**Idea 211:** Do the same assignment—writing the story of a play or movie or television show—but make substantial changes in it. If it is set in the past, move it to the present, or change the sex of the major characters.

•**Idea 212:** Try some of your favorite pieces of dialogue writing as radio plays. Put them on tape recorders, writing in and inventing your own sound effects: feet walking, fists smacked into palms for fights, etc. Radio dramas can be very effective as productions because they cut down the number of variables and allow more focusing; everything is done in words and sounds. For the moment the actors can forget facial expressions, gestures, facing the audience, etc.

•**Idea 213:** Do some short interviews, using either a tape recorder or note pad. Ask other students about favorite hobbies, or perhaps talk to local business people and workers. After collecting the words, do a little editing to make sure it sounds interesting and natural.

A Special Note

This issue is the second sent out as a self-mailer. Response to this new method has been favorable so far, but if you have been meaning to complain—and haven't yet—about your copy's having arrived all bent and mangled, this is your last chance! On the other hand, if you don't miss the manila envelope ("One more

thing to throw away," as one reader described it) we'd like to hear that, too. In any case, if your copy ever arrives bent out of shape, just let us know and we'll cheerfully send you a replacement.

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