

A Guide for Writing Marathon Leaders

Richard Louth

As the articles in this book illustrate, there are many kinds of writing marathons, and depending on audience, time frame, and location, writing marathon leaders may have to adjust their preparations and expectations. However, having led or participated in close to 100 writing marathons since the first New Orleans Writing Marathon in 1994, I offer the following advice for those who plan to lead writing marathons.

1. Leading a writing marathon differs from being on one.

The leader should try to participate, of course, but sometimes that is difficult due to the planning and little details involved. The leader's primary job is to understand the underlying purpose of the writing marathon well enough to communicate it to an audience that may be unfamiliar with it; to introduce the writing marathon concept to the group and to get it started; and to prepare ahead so that the writing marathon runs smoothly and writers don't need to think about much except their writing.

- *In the case of leading a marathon at a school*, this may mean getting permission from parents and school authorities; assigning chaperones when necessary; creating and reviewing a handout with students; picking a location; assigning groups; reviewing the marathon "basics" on a handout; determining how the marathon will feed back into the classroom and your teaching goals, etc.

- *In the case of leading a marathon for adults*, the leader may be involved with other kinds of preparation, including getting a list of names and cell phones of participants; creating a back-up plan for latecomers; having a central location where leader(s) might expect to begin and end the marathon; providing a map of the area and suggested locations for writing; reviewing the marathon "basics" on a handout; planning a read-a-round or debriefing at the end.

In both cases, the leader needs to set the tone by helping the participants feel comfortable, by reviewing the basic purpose of a marathon (enjoyment in writing), by preparing ahead for any eventualities, and by treating the audience as writers (as opposed to "students," "teachers," or "tourists") throughout.

2. A Writing Marathon is all about the writing and writer.

A writing marathon is really quite simple. It's about setting people loose to write. So, emphasize the writing. Yes, it involves small groups, a particular protocol for reading and responding, a common setting, some socialization, and a sense of community. And these things should be respected as part of the model that has made writing marathons so successful. However, I've seen leaders forget why writers gather together on a marathon, or at least confuse their priorities so that the writing takes second place to sightseeing, following an agenda, or bonding. I have witnessed writing marathons where writing took a back seat to something else—to listening to a tour guide, to seeing a particular monument, to visiting a museum, exhibit, to eating in a particular place.

Leaders need to do their best to keep it simple, stick to the model, and keep peripheral issues from taking over the focus or the energy of writers in the marathon. Leaders must be the ones to remember and emphasize that the writing marathon is not about sightseeing (though that can occur). It is not about having to go to a designated place or to write in a prescribed way or for a mandated amount of time. It is not about being with friends. It's simply about writing and

enjoying the writing experience (even though what one writes on a marathon can often be challenging or distressing).

3. The more writing, the better.

I have been on marathons as short as 60 minutes and as long as three days. The point is not so much the amount of time (though more time is usually better) but how the time is used. My students can get three rounds of writing done in a class period. But I have been on day-long marathons where I have barely done three rounds of writing because of the location, the group, the chemistry. While everything that happens during the marathon counts towards the writing—the walking, the talking, the looking in shop windows, the standing in café lines—one needs to remember that if any of these get in the way of actually doing the writing, then they are counter-productive. So, groups should be encouraged to do as many rounds of writing as they can. It helps to begin the marathon with a round of writing together as a large group; however, avoid sharing at this point, as that would waste time and diffuse energy. Let participants leave as writers, in silence.

4. Remember the writing marathon “model.”

The model for the writing marathon comes first from Natalie Goldberg, whose book *Writing Down the Bones* deserves credit for inspiring the kind of writing marathons we do. She taught us the basic protocol: write, read your writing to others, and say only “thank you” after each reading. And do this again and again for as long as you can. That is the model in a nutshell. In our “New Orleans style” writing marathon, we have added small groups, food, talk, place, and movement to the model, but these should never interfere with the basic routine of write, read, say “thank you.”

5. Say—“I am a writer.”

It sounds corny, but to ask your participants at the beginning of a writing marathon to turn to each other and say, “I am a writer,” is not only a kind of ritual that binds all writing marathons together, but an act which really sets the tone and gets the audience thinking about who they are during the marathon and why they are there. If participants do not see themselves as writers, but instead see themselves as tourists of a city, or teachers on a holiday, or parents with other responsibilities, or kids getting out of class, then the writing marathon really isn’t a writing marathon. It is ultimately about the writing, and more importantly, it is about the writer—and giving the writer an opportunity to write.

6. Give thought to how you handle groups.

When I have only 60 minutes for a marathon, and a class of 24 students, what I will do is quickly assign groups of 4 so that no one is left out and no time is wasted in trying to decide who goes with whom. But that is an anomaly dictated by circumstance. My usual approach is to say, “Walk out the door, see who you end up walking near, and go write with them.” Pre-planning groups—particularly with adults—can really spoil the freedom, choice, and risk that add energy to a writing marathon. You need to get across to the entire community of the writing marathon, as a leader, that everyone who participates should fully commit to the experience. Else, they should not be there. And what that commitment means is staying the full time (whatever that may be), following the model for writing/reading/responding; and keeping the emphasis on the writing. Though being with friends, as writers, can be enjoyable, I find that I write better with people I do not know so well because I assume less, fraternize less, have less in common, listen more, and therefore write more and better. It isn’t necessary for groups to decide ahead of time where they plan to go, as the point of the marathon is not to visit a specific place but to discover what it is like to write in places where you least expected to be. (If your crowd wants to visit particular places, encourage them to do so as tourists, later. If they want a writing marathon

experience, encourage them just to go out, see where their feet lead them, and write together.) Encourage groups to remain small (3-4 writers in each if possible) so that they can get seating in places, so that the readings don't take too long, and so that bonding will occur. Also, I think groups that agree, at the beginning, to share their writing every round no matter how bad it is, tend to write better and to enjoy the experience more than groups that don't make such a commitment. And having someone in the group act as timekeeper keeps everyone—as a writer—on track, and has always worked well for me. As much as any other writer, I like to break away occasionally, get my own table, and write by myself for an hour; however, I will honestly admit, whenever I have done that I have not written as well or enjoyed the experience as much as when I sat, elbow to elbow around one table with three other writers, and one of them designated to tell us when 10 minutes are up.

7. Writing occurs even when you are not writing.

NWP's Atlanta Marathon was very instructive to me on this point. I had gone to Atlanta before the marathon to scope out the city, and what I discovered was that the city really wasn't all that suitable to a writing marathon. There were surprisingly few coffee shops and other such places for small groups to gather, and the city itself seemed too large and cavernous. Luckily, I was informed that nearby Decatur would be perfect—just a Metro ride away. After giving everyone a brief introduction to the marathon in a downtown hotel, I held my breath as I asked them all to find their way to the Metro, purchase tickets, and find their way to Decatur. I thought it was going to be a big mess. It wasn't. And what I was thrilled to notice was participants sitting on the Metro and writing on the way to their destination. They had grasped something instinctively that I, as the nervous leader, had forgotten. That is, the marathon begins the moment you gather together for the introduction, and if you think of yourself as a writer from that moment on, then no time is lost in transportation, in finding writing spots, etc. The journey itself is part of the marathon; we do not need to wait until arriving at our destination to begin writing. Participants who worry about wasting time in travel need to know it's not wasted.

8. Consider whether your marathon needs closure.

I like to tell participants at the beginning of a writing marathon that if they are on a roll, don't bother coming back. It is all about the writing, so if you are writing well, why give that up to come back for a reading? More than once, I have followed my own advice, even though I was the leader of the marathon, and stayed writing in a pub or coffeehouse when everyone else returned to a scheduled read-a-round at the end of the day. So, a read-a-round is not mandatory, nor is any closing event. Still, most writers like them, and if the location and duration of the marathon make it feasible, by all means, schedule a final gathering. It does not have to be in the same place where the marathon begins, though that might seem the logical choice. We have begun marathons in hotel rooms and ended the day at a designated pub. I will say this, however: I have attended both weak and strong final gatherings. The weak ones were either in a place with poor acoustics and insufficient seating, or they started too soon and ended too late.

Here is the ideal closure so far as I am concerned: it is at a location that everyone can find easily, at a time that doesn't cut into people's writing. It has some food and drink (BYOB), and is partly a social. People are asked to come, let's say, at 5 P.M. When they arrive, they have time to mix and talk. We post a sign-up sheet, and ask anyone who intends to read to sign up for a spot. This does away with the "never-ending reading," and it also lets people choose when they are scheduled to read (first, second, last). Before we begin the reading, the leader mentions some ground rules: participants are invited to read from their writing (not talk about it); they are encouraged to choose something that fits the audience and purpose (that is, they are encouraged to keep it short and to not read anything that would be offensive to the larger audience); they are told that it is tradition to applaud at the end of each reading, so we will applaud; and they are told

that if anyone goes on too long, the leader will politely interrupt and say time is up. (A pair of maracas comes in handy here.)

All those ground rules, being known up front, help everyone know what lies ahead and prevent some surprises we have had before and would rather not have again. The marathon leaders usually look at the list of readers and sign up to be last, to make sure the reading finishes when it needs to, and if it has gone on too long, the leaders might just say a few words at the end rather than read. We have recorded some of these readings and turned them into radio shows (with the understanding by the readers that they were being recorded for possible publication). Often, halfway through, we will take a break for restrooms and refreshments. However, it is up to the leaders to keep the reading going and to make sure it honors the writers and writing as well as the day. An alternative to a traditional read-a-round that we have tried is to inform everyone at the beginning of the day that we will gather at the end in order to share our experiences rather than to have a formal reading. This is often preferable, as it gives folks a chance just to debrief and compare notes in a somewhat informal discussion. Occasionally someone will say, “Oh, I must read this,” and that is okay, but the emphasis in this second kind of closing activity is really on not “publishing” the writing that was done extemporaneously, but just talking about the experience.

9. Remember the basic principles behind the Writing Marathon.

If writers are given the freedom of *choice*—where to go, whom to write with, what to write about—they will want to write. And if they feel that they are part of a *community*—the small audience of their response group and the larger community of marathoners spread out across a landscape—they will feel comfort. If they participate in an event which has some order to it but that recognizes people’s *diversity*, and the different paths, needs, and interests of individuals—their experience will be expanded. If they allow for *spontaneity*, they open themselves to the *serendipity* as well as *discovery* that make writers want to write. Leaders need to remember these as the principles underlying the writing marathon that keep writers coming back.

10. Enjoyment is natural to this kind of writing, and it is the key.

If writers do not enjoy themselves on a writing marathon, it is usually because they have not participated in a real writing marathon experience. It is usually because they spent too much energy trying to get into an exhibit, or trying to find a particular restaurant, or trying to catch up with friends, or standing in line, or talking over food, or waiting for table service, or writing to impress. All of those things can happen on writing marathons, and when they do, they usually detract from the experience. *A writing marathon is all about the writing and writer.* And writing is enjoyable, especially when you do not have to do it for anyone else but yourself, when no one will criticize it, when you give it plenty of time, and when you allow yourself to write about things you did not expect in stimulating or comfortable settings. Writers do not need the words of a famous poet to inspire them on a writing marathon or a map to a fantastic location. All they need, really, are some writing tools, time, a few companions, and the desire to write.

11. Final Thoughts

- It is about the writing act, not the writing product. Most of our writing in school and in the publishing life is about product. We teach our students the so-called writing process: draft, revise, polish, edit, and when that is done, they have supposedly learned to write. What they have learned is one way to write. There is an entire world of writers—and enjoyment in writing—that this academically defined process does not tap into. But the writing marathon does tap into it, and we might call it “writing for the sake of writing.” Writing for the moment. Writing for the immediate audience. Writing as the foundation of other writing by peers who respond directly to your thoughts in their own writing. Writing as the experience of a moment or place. Writing for

the self. None of that necessarily puts a paper in a portfolio to be graded, or a book on the bookshelf to be reshelved years later in a used bookstore or shipped to Goodwill, or recycled to become cardboard boxes to contain books shipped to Goodwill. My point: the writing marathon is all about the writer and the writing act, and enjoyment of the writing act, whatever it produces. In that sense, it is subversive, and nontraditional—probably one reason it keeps attracting writers.

- Writing groups can transform writers. The essence of the writing marathon—reading aloud to others who simply say "thank you," and then writing again and reading aloud again, is a key to the marathon's success. What many people who have done writing marathons realize is that by the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th rounds of writing, they are subconsciously responding to the writers who have read to them. Like the place they are writing in and the world they are passing through on the way to that place, the writing circle that forms as part of the writing marathon is an integral part of the experience, and can have an enormous cumulative effect on each participant. It is one of the reasons to try to have as many rounds of writing as possible, for each person's writing reflects the other's as the process continues. This is one of the reasons such a bond can occur between strangers in such a short time, and it is also why people who otherwise would not get along or see eye-to-eye tend to change their opinions of one another after writing together.

- The more time devoted to the writing, the better. For leaders, that means keeping the introductions short, de-emphasizing the closure activity, and doing everything in their power to getting writers out the door and writing.

The "Writing Marathon Handout" that follows might be helpful for leaders to use or adapt for their own writing marathons. To keep myself honest, and because I'm afraid of forgetting something, I read it aloud at every marathon I lead as well as provide one for each member of the audience. (Yes, always have extra copies on hand.) It has become a thread to link not only those that I have led, but to link mine with others across the country.

Writing Marathon Handout

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 by Richard Louth 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. Writers begin a marathon by turning to each other and saying, "I'm a writer." We split into small groups to go to restaurants, coffeehouses, parks, etc., where we eat, write, and share our way across the landscape. We spend about an hour in each place, then move on. If the place is particularly good, we may stay longer. 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. While there is always time for socializing, the emphasis remains on the writing, and doing it for yourself. Groups find their own path.

Groups can cross paths, join, and turn into new groups. Some writers break off to do an hour of writing just by themselves. At the end of the day, writers often gather to share and celebrate their work. Just keep in mind that the emphasis is on giving yourself time and space to write and about doing it for yourself.

4. Writing Marathon Reminders:

We’ll work in small groups of your own choice, mixing in food, drink, and local color. Our intention is to give everyone a chance to write on anything they want and to share their writing while experiencing the city. Try to keep the groups small (3-5 persons) in order 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, and that’s fine. Remember these four steps: 1) Write. 2) Share writing without response. 3) Socialize (eat/drink/talk). 4) Move on.

5. Suggested Schedule:

- It's suggested that you keep it loose, let your small group form naturally, and let your feet lead you to your first writing spot.

- First Hour: Split into small groups. Find a spot. Write about 10 minutes (you might designate a timekeeper), and read to each other without response. Then socialize.

- Then: Find new place each hour for group to write/share/talk. You might choose to write a bit longer each time.

- Read-a-round: At end of the marathon—voluntary. Time and location TBA.

For Further Information:

To read Louth’s original article on “The New Orleans Writing Marathon” in NWP’s *The Quarterly*, visit:
<<http://www.writingproject.org/Publications/quarterly/Q2002no1.htm>>.

See SLWP's website for radio programs and anthologies based on writing marathons:
<http://www.selu.edu/acad_research/programs/slwp/>.