

THE NATIONAL CONVERSATION ON WRITING (NCoW)

AN INITIATIVE OF

THE COUNCIL OF WRITING PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS'

NETWORK FOR MEDIA ACTION (NMA)

Our Vision

Public discussions about writing and writers rarely focus on the writing that people do, and read, in their everyday lives. Such incarnations of literacy, and the importance of literacy education, gets little attention other than sensationalist stories that tout why “Johnny Can’t Write.” Because the wider message is largely absent, popular conceptions of writing and writers remain somewhat disconnected from their importance in everyday life and work, and so are neglected in public policy discussions as well. This neglect affects not just the ways that writing is taught and learned, but has long-term implications for the future of literacy education and who is included in—and who is excluded from—the discourse of American democracy.

After all, *everyone* needs a voice.

The Network for Media Action has been working to change these conversations by reminding those around us that not only does everyone need a voice, but that

Everyone is a writer.

Our most recent initiative is the National Conversation on Writing (NCoW). NCoW will provide resources and a public forum for multimodal conversations about writing to be conducted in many locations across the United States, conversations that will then be distributed to promote the importance of writing and writing instruction. For more details, read on.

How You Can Participate (and we hope you will!)

- **Talk with us:** We'd be very interested in hearing about your experiences with writing. If you'd be willing, this is in some ways the most important thing you can do to help. The conversations will be informal, and will just give you the chance to help us create a well-rounded picture of how, why, and when people write—and why they find it useful, therapeutic, difficult, inspiring, and so on
- **Create a video:** If you'd like to join in the conversation in another way, you can send us your videos of conversations about writing. It doesn't require lots of expertise or equipment, and many of us have enlisted the help of communications students and faculty who have special expertise in these technologies. Some suggestions to get you started are included below—but feel free to be creative.
- **Audio Tape interviews or writers reading from their writing.** One of the misconceptions about writing is that people are writing less than they used to. But that is only true if we use a very narrow understanding of writing. A good way to overcome this shortsighted understanding of the state of writing is through examples. So, interview people from all walks of life about how writing enhances their life, their work, or their relationships. Encourage them to think about the composing they do in many modes—electronic and visual as well as text-based. Or, you might ask people to read from their work. Both interviews and readings can be collected using widely available and inexpensive digital audio recorders that create easily distributed sound files.
- **Collect written examples of people reflecting on the writing, in all its forms, they do in their our daily lives.** We'll provide a forum for showcasing these reflections, showing how omnipresent the art of writing remains.
- **Sponsor local writing initiatives, and then tell us about them.** Consider developing a writing festival, workshop, discussion group or reading in your area, and document that event in writing, through news coverage of the event, or by video or audio taping. NCoW will provide a central location to showcase these events. We envision videos or still photographs of the events posted to our site, PDF files of news stories, and narratives about the events.
- **Sponsor a writing contest, and let us help us publicize it.** Writing contests can provide initiatives for writing of all sorts, so don't limit yourself to "creative writing" (what writing isn't creative, after all?). Think about essay contests, letter writing contests (including letters to the editors), editorial and political writings, literacy narratives (in which people talk about their own experiences learning to write), etc.
- **Share innovative writing projects with other teachers.** We'll provide a space for teachers to exchange on ideas on innovative assignments and methods.
- **Be Creative.** The above are just some examples. Come up with more on your own and tell us about them!

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR THOSE DOING VIDEO (or audio) PROJECTS

Even with documentary films and interviews, it is important to have a goal—a point that you wish to explore and develop through film.

For example, in the preliminary stages of our work, we created a documentary film, meant to showcase the National Conversation on Writing and to provide an example for others interested in joining the effort. Our work began by trying to showcase the following points:

- Writing is pervasive and, in broad ways, everyone is a writer
- Often, people move from thinking they're not writers to thinking about writing in deeper ways

For the initial NCoW video, *Who is a Writer? What Writers Tell Us*, we began with the following guiding questions; but feel free to extend your work from this starting point:

Who writes, and why do they do it?

Who reads writing, and what do they get from it?

What kinds of writing are meaningful for what people, and why?

If you'd like to make your own film, here's some advice that may help:

NOTES ON SETTINGS:

- If want to have the questioners on camera, you'll need two cameras
- Consider both one-on-one OR small group interviews—but consider background, noise levels, and other technical facets to assure that what you hear will be captured in usable ways

Some Possible Locations

- Coffee shops
- Libraries
- Bookstores
- Malls
- Schools (though permissions might be more difficult there)
- Office cafeterias or other workplace settings

If you don't feel qualified with video techniques, think about enlisting students in your communications program, or conducting audio interviews; digital audio recorders are quite inexpensive and relatively easy to use.

You still may need, however, the capability to do some audio editing (again, communications students might be a great help in this—perhaps ask colleagues to make this a class project!).

And if you do audio interviews, consider taking some still photographs as well, so that the audio can be accompanied by some visuals.

Possible Interview Questions and Conversation Starters (but feel free to see what develops)

BE SURE TO HAVE ALL INTERVIEWEES SIGN A CONSENT FORM.

- How does writing happen/develop?

Prompt: how do you write? What kind of process do you use when you write? Do you wait for inspiration? Doodle around? Make an outline?

- What do you write? Why do you write what you do?

Prompt: grocery lists? Emails? Prompt 'in school' and out of school if necessary...

- Does writing <one kind of thing> help you write <another kind of thing?> (<things> should/could be mentioned in responses to first two questions)
- When is writing hard? When is it easy?
- When is writing fun?
- What's the best thing you've ever written?
- What's the easiest thing you've ever written?
- What's the worst (or most difficult?) thing you've ever written?
- What's the hardest thing?
- Has any person helped you especially with writing? What did she or he do?
- Who reads the writing you do? What do your readers do for your writing?

NMA NCoW Project: SOME ADVICE ON TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Shooting Conditions and Specifications

The overall look of your project will be improved to the extent that interviews shot in discrete locations are technically similar. Here's some advice from our tech experts that will make your product more effective and later editing easier:

- **Plan your shooting location/s carefully** so that you will have strong light on the interview subject—be sure to shoot with the dominant light source to the cameraperson's back, taking care that the cameraperson's shadow does not fall on the interview subject.
- **If your camera tells you that the subject is overexposed**, do not shoot in those conditions. If you intend to shoot at night (say on a street corner or outside a building), plan to light the interview subject. Daylight or indoor shooting is preferable.
- **Plan your shooting location so that you do not have individuals standing or walking behind the interview subject**; if possible, position the subject 2-3 feet in front of a stationary background. If you are shooting in a mall or public area, this is very important, as you do not want incidental persons to be identifiable in your footage.
- **Too much variation in composition will make overall coherence difficult** to achieve.

Consider the following:

- In general, you should shoot the interview subject from the front, with his/her head and shoulders filling the frame. Watch for glare off eye-glasses. Position the camera so that you do not need to zoom to get the subject in the frame in this way.
- Unless you are shooting the scene with two cameras—one on the interview subject and one on the interviewer—keep the interviewer out of the camera shot. Do not swing the camera back and forth between the interviewer and the subject, and do not shoot over the interviewer's shoulder.
- Never zoom in or out while the subject is answering a question. You can create zoom effects in post-production if they are necessary.
- Do not shoot without a tripod unless you have an experienced cameraperson using a shoulder-mounted camera. The image stabilizer on consumer cameras softens

movement, but it does not eliminate it. Interviews with jerky camera movement will likely be unusable.

- Try to use an external microphone to capture the interview. The condenser microphone built into the camera is sometimes not effective. Almost all cameras have a microphone input; it's best to use such a camera for this project. If possible, keep the microphone out of the shot, but remember that the purpose of using the mic is to ensure good sound quality. Also remember that the subject's voice is what is important. Don't swing the mic back and forth between the interviewer and the subject; instead, keep it positioned at a consistent distance from the subject. If your camera has a mic input, it will also have a headphone input; the person operating the camera or holding the microphone should wear headphones. This might seem like technical overkill, but even the buds that came with your I-Pod will improve your control of the sound. Note that while many adjustments can be made to the picture in post-production, in large part, what you hear when shooting is what everyone is going to hear in the finished project. A weak voice, a hot or distorted voice, buzzing, hissing, or excess competing ambient noise will make a given shot unusable.
 - If you use a clip mic, do a test with the mic ahead of time. If you're using a boom mic, be sure to hold it outside of the shot.
- **Timecode: This is important:** Every time a video camera is turned on, the "timecode" is reset; you never notice this *unless* you need to edit the video using a software program. The software will "capture" the tape only between timecode breaks. Timecode breaks are very time-consuming. You contribute to the overall efficiency of the project by **keeping the number of times you turn the camera on and turn off to an absolute minimum.** Plan to plug the camera in to ac power, or take lots of battery power. Use the PAUSE function on the camera between interviews. If you have a lot of "dead time," press the power button on and off periodically to keep the camera from timing off. Your help with this will save hours and hours of time in editing.
- In order to have more than just "talking heads," you may want to show something of the setting in which the interviews were shot. **Either before or after your interviews, take some "establishing shots":** if you're interviewing in a mall, take some pictures of the exterior and the concourse, for example. (Take care not to get identifiable individuals in these shots.) You may also want images of the interviewer, which can be sliced in at any point. Provide some footage of the interviewer (from the perspective of an interviewee) in one of those often-satirized shots that show the interviewer listening attentively.

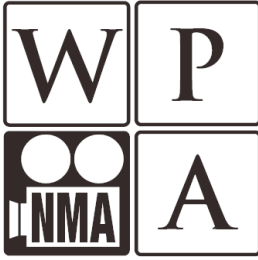
REMEMBER: BE SURE TO HAVE ALL INTERVIEWEES SIGN A CONSENT FORM. A SAMPLE FORM IS INCLUDED BELOW, WHICH YOU CAN ADAPT TO YOUR OWN INSTITUTIONAL AND LOCAL NEEDS.

For More Information or advice, Contact us!

NCoW Contacts:

NCoW content: Dominic Delli Carpini (dcarpini@ycp.edu)
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Consent Form

I, _____ agree to participate in the *National Conversation on Writing*, an effort to talk with a broad range of people about the way they use writing. I understand that I may indicate below how I would like my recorded words to be used. I also understand that the intention of this project is to create a documentary film that will demonstrate the various uses of writing (see our vision statement), and that this film will be shown publicly as a means of promoting an understanding of the importance of writing in our daily lives.

Direct questions to Dr. Dominic DelliCarpini at 717-815-1303 or dcarpini@ycp.edu.

Effective this _____ day of _____, _____, I hereby grant to "The National Conversation on Writing" rights to photograph my image using film and/or video or audio tape, and to own, use and edit in any manner, in any and all media now known or hereafter devised, my performance, image, character(s), portrayal(s), likeness or appearance. I understand that "The National Conversation on Writing" is a non-profit production. I understand that I may receive credit in the film, but will not receive any financial compensation for my involvement with "The National Conversation on Writing." I acknowledge that Producer shall own all rights in and to the results and proceeds of my Performance, including without limitation the copyright therein. I hereby irrevocably assign to Producer any and all rights, title, and interest (including copyright) in and to the Performance, in all media now known or hereafter devised, in perpetuity. I am either over 18 years of age or have obtained permission from my legal guardian.

Signature

Signature of Parent/Guardian (if under 18)

Printed name

Phone number or address

E-mail address if available

CHECK ALL THAT ARE APPLICABLE:

- _____ I would like my interview on videotape, and people **may** see my face.
- _____ I would like my interview on audio, and people **may not** see my face.
- _____ My name **may be** included in the NCoW video. _____ My name **may not be** included in the NCoW video.
- _____ I would like to choose a pseudonym for use in the NCoW video, and that pseudonym should be:
