

The NWPNH Writing Marathon

The “NWPNH Marathon”:

The writing marathon was inspired by an exercise by Natalie Goldberg, and by Ernest Hemmingway’s moveable feast. The activity developed at the New Orleans site of the National Writing Project and has become a standard activity at many NWP events. This handout describes the way the activity has developed at our site here in NH.

The basic format is always the same.

1. We split into small groups (3-4 people). It is advisable to work with people you know less well. Each small group of writers begin a marathon by turning to each other, introducing themselves, and saying, “I’m a writer.”
2. Each group has a map noting places of interest. Sometimes these are historical sites, other simply places of local interest. Groups look over these materials together and decide where they would like to go. They explore each place together, then settle down to write for ten minutes. One of the group members should keep time for the group, and give a one minute warning when the time is close to finishing.
3. When you write, let your writing be inspired by the place, but do not feel tied to writing about the place in a literal sense. Use your surroundings for inspiration. What does this place remind you of? What does it make you wonder about? In each case, let the place work on you, but write what you need to write. There are no restrictions on the topics.
4. We allow about 10 minutes of uninterrupted writing time, then we share what we have written. Should you not want to share, it is permissible to pass. Limit your responses to other group members’ writing to a simple “Thank you” after each reading. 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.
5. After everyone has read, the group moves on to the next location. While there is always time for socializing as you move from one place to another, the emphasis remains on the writing and on allowing yourself to be in and with a particular place.
6. Groups find their own path. Groups can cross paths, join, and reform. At the end of the allotted time for the marathon, all of the groups of writers gather at an agreed upon location to share and celebrate their work through voluntary sharing.

Many people find that the marathon is a great opportunity to develop lots of seeds for future writing. Often at the summer institute, we mine these writings for pieces we can work on and develop during the institute.