

# *“It’s like magic, that’s what writing is”*

## **—Gallery of Writing Showcases Writing’s Power**

**One goal of the National Gallery of Writing is “get a real portrait of what America values in writing.”**

**W**riting today is changing—partly in response to new media—but composition in whatever form remains a central and vibrant aspect of everyday life, as the new Gallery of Writing demonstrates.

“When people talk about writing, they say how nobody can really write well anymore and there’s this kind of nostalgia for when everyone wrote like Shakespeare,” says Kent Williamson, executive director of NCTE. “It’s a bit of a destructive myth because it tends to discourage people from thinking they can write well or believing they can improve as writers.”

Similarly, just because someone abbreviates “u” for “you” in a text message doesn’t mean he or she will do this in another type of communication. “People can write in more formal registers, too,” says Williamson. Not to mention that texting, emailing, and instant messaging also count as writing, especially when “you’ve written something powerful.”

Williamson says misconceptions like these are why NCTE decided to set up a National Gallery of Writing. The purposes of the initiative were first, to make visible the importance of writing in the everyday lives of people at all ages and in all professions; and second, to demonstrate the multiple ways in which people write and the many purposes for which they write.

To make these points, NCTE decided to “show, not tell.” The National Gallery of Writing, which premiered on October 20, the National Day on Writing, is an attempt to “get a real portrait of what America values in writing,” says Williamson, by throwing open its digital doors to anyone who wants to submit a single piece of writing (whether as a link to an audio or video file, or in more traditional text form).

Williamson and others believe the National Gallery can help make the case that literary writing is thriving, and that everyday writing—from Facebook to Twitter and beyond—is also valid written communication, and not in any way the death knell for literacy that naysayers proclaim.

Here are descriptions of several of the more than 2,136 galleries, containing over 19,000 submissions, that you’ll find as you browse the National Gallery site, showing just a hint of its diversity and flavor.

### **Cedar Crest Memoirs**

Earlier this year, New Jersey high school English teacher Helene Zablocki started teaching memoir-writing classes as a volunteer at the nearby retirement community of Cedar Crest.

**LOG  
ON**

You can submit your writing to the Gallery of Writing through June 2010! Logon now to browse samples and contribute your writing: [http://www.galleryofwriting.org/gallery\\_browse.php](http://www.galleryofwriting.org/gallery_browse.php)

She was “amazed from the first class on.” Her students, ranging in age from their late 60s to late 80s, were prolific and full of stories.

“I have been teaching high school for over 30 years; I know how hard it is to write . . . but you wouldn’t believe the stacks of writing they’ve created since March,” says Zablocki.

She decided to create a gallery and place one piece of writing from each of her students in it. On the Day of Writing, her students held a reading for other residents of the center (which has 2,000 residents).

“They all have an individual voice in their writing,” says Zablocki of her students. Some of their pieces have been about tragedies—about war years and the deaths of loved ones; others have celebrated more joyous moments.

“All are really speaking from the heart.. They have triggered things in each other as they have been writing. It’s like magic, that’s what this thing called writing is: it’s magic.”

One Cedar Crest writer is Betty Driver, 81. As a child of 12, Betty read her poems on the radio, thanks to her aunt, Florence Clarke, a poet who was president of the National Pen Women’s Association. As an adult, Betty’s poetry writing became an occasional pastime—grabbed whenever she had time while raising her four children. Now, thanks to the memoir class, she says she is “making up for lost time.”

Betty writes both light and dark: humorous pieces about events and trips, but also essays about alcoholism, lifetime regrets, and diversity.

“Writing excites me and makes me feel so alive,” she says. “I can’t walk without difficulty or sometimes pain, but I can soar on the wings of remembrances enjoyed and wisdom learned.”

“The course of my life is nearing its end. Now I can gather up all my memories and package them with the written word.”

## A View from the Peak

Vince Puzick, the literacy and language arts coordinator for Colorado Springs School District District 11, curates the View from the Peak Gallery—open not only to Coloradans with Pikes Peak-related stories but also to those from anywhere in the world who have experienced a “peak” moment.

“The theme for the gallery is the individual journeys we make—it could be geographical, professional, personal, spiritual,” says Puzick.

Some submissions he has accepted include a poem sent by a teen in New York called “Sunrise on the Hudson”—“about a moment of insight she has sitting watching boats on the Hudson Bay at dusk,” says Puzick. “She ends her poem with an insight about finding the rhythm of your life.”

Other submissions include a story about a woman’s recovery from alcoholism and drug addiction; a piece about the power of answering machines to keep people connected; an account of a Coloradan’s mountain climbing adventure.

Some of Puzick’s submissions have come about due to personal contact—friends who heard about his gallery through Facebook, for example. But others, such as the teen who wrote about the Hudson River, found his gallery by browsing the National Gallery website.

## Legacy Essay Contest Gallery

High schoolers can enter an essay contest through the National Gallery of Writing that could lead to a trip to Washington, D.C., plus cash and computers.

Documentary filmmaker Richard Karz is curating the “Legacy Essay Contest Gallery” and is asking for 1,000-word submissions on the legacy and lessons of the civil rights movement from high school juniors and seniors. Winners receive cash prizes of up to \$3,000 and laptop computers, and will be honored at a Capitol Hill ceremony in February (Karz is working with the White House in hopes of arranging a meeting with President Obama for the winners). One winning essay and five finalists will be selected.

Karz directed the 2008 PBS documentary, “Being Black in America.” He chose the gallery as host for the contest because “it just seemed like the perfect arrangement, especially given that an important reason for doing an essay contest is to stress the role of writing in clarifying ideas and the power writing has in affirming our human bonds, which was an essential feature of the civil rights movement.” Karz hopes students who enter—whether they win or not—will experience “the gratification that comes from fully expressing and realizing one’s thoughts and feelings through writing.”

“We also hope that the essay writers will, in the course of writing their essays, come to appreciate the heroism and brilliance of the civil rights generation and how relevant their values and goals are today.”

The submission deadline is Dec. 15. For more details, visit the Legacy Essay Contest Gallery at

[http://www.galleryofwriting.org/galleries/the\\_legacy\\_essay\\_contest\\_gallery](http://www.galleryofwriting.org/galleries/the_legacy_essay_contest_gallery)

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## Teachers With Stories to Tell About Teaching

James Brewbaker, education professor at Columbus State University, is curating three galleries devoted to English teachers: one for Columbus State College of Education and Health Professions faculty and staff; another for the school's English majors, teachers and faculty; and a third—his favorite—called “Teachers with Stories to Tell About Teaching.”

Brewbaker asked his education students to “be a fly on the wall and describe something they do well with kids.” He has been happy with the “decidedly upbeat” writings he has received: “Teachers need room to focus on their successes.”

So far, Brewbaker has received a narrative about homework (“Homework Queen”), a poem about teaching Macbeth (“I Almost Drowned, Once”), and other pieces that “reflect the angst of young teachers.” He has contributed his own poems, including one (“Jessicas”) about what it's like to be a teacher with three Jessicas in the same classroom.

Brewbaker hopes visitors to his galleries will find “really honest yet positive ‘windows’ into teaching.”

## Family and Friends of Eva Falk and the Rock House

Curator Patrice Hollrah, an English instructor at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, chose to honor her grandmother, Eva Falk, “an amazing woman” who died in 1997 at the age of 93.

“Sometimes people are better able to write about a loved one than to talk about their feelings,” says Hollrah. “I thought the Gallery would be a perfect place to post memories.”

She also wanted to honor Eva's home, a local landmark built from rocks that Eva—along with her mother and daughter (Hollrah's mother)—collected in the early 1930s along Alki Beach in Seattle.

“The house is in disrepair—there is a good chance that it will be torn down in the near future,” says Hollrah. “I wanted people to remember the Rock House before it is gone and replaced by one more condominium.”

## The National Day on Writing— A Celebration and a Conversation

*Enjoyed the National Day on Writing immensely! It felt like my birthday or something—just kind of special all day.*

*I took three of my college classes today to computer labs to view their gallery submissions. They had such fun reading each other's work—oohing and aahing over other entries. A couple students want “do-overs.” It seems they didn't take their pieces very seriously when uploading and now wish they would have. Aah, revision!*

—NCTE member Sandra Barnhouse

On October 20, 2009, NCTE and schools and communities across the nation celebrated the National Day on Writing.

Many NCTE members posted their own and their students' submissions to the National Gallery on the Day itself, raising the total number of Gallery submissions to 18,061 by day's end.

NCTE members also celebrated on October 20th by joining Kylene Beers, Kent Williamson, Carol Jago, and many others in a day-long conversation on writing, via a live video webcast from New York Institute of Technology.

Woven through discussions and anecdotes about writing were videos, podcasts, and highlights from school and community events from across the country—including an amazing range of writing activities developed at Eastern Michigan University by Linda Adler-Kassner and Cathy Fleischer. (Visit <http://emuenglish.org/ndow/>)

Local news media covered many such local events as well (see list at <http://www.ncte.org/newsletter/ndw-news>), sharing details like these:

- In Woodward, Georgia, families gathered for a night of writing “six-room poems.”
- Students at Wenzel Elementary in Sturgis, Michigan, wrote wishes on a wishing tree and read quotations included on a hallway writing gallery.
- Arizona State University students and faculty participated in events ranging from a write-in to a seven-word memoir challenge.
- At Gordon College in Massachusetts, English and chemistry departments joined forces to host an open-mike public reading called “Of Poetry and Periodic Tables: A Celebration of Words and Letters.”
- Purdue University established a haiku wall for the school and community.
- Dean Morgan Jr. High in Casper, Wyoming, opened a gallery to students, parents, staff, and alumni, and plans to use the submissions as examples in class discussions about writing.

### But the celebration of writing isn't over!

The Gallery of Writing will be open for viewing at least until June 30, 2010, and welcomes submissions through June 1, 2010. So keep sharing the news of the Gallery of Writing with your students, colleagues, and community. And if you haven't yet contributed, visit [www.galleryofwriting/contribute.php](http://www.galleryofwriting/contribute.php)

Three generations of Eva Falk's family have submitted pieces, telling about Eva Falk's early years as a vaudeville acrobat; as Miss West Seattle; as a woman who hitchhiked from Seattle to New York City at age 20; as an art-lover who posed nude for college art students in her middle years; as an artist who wrote her religious visions in self-created scrapbooks.

"I hope [visitors to the gallery] can see what an interesting life Eva Falk had," says Hollrah, "and how much her family and friends loved her."

## A (Fri)Day in the Life of an English Teacher

Joan Kaywell, professor of English education at the University of South Florida, decided to showcase the writing teachers do on a given day; she picked Sept. 11, 2009 as the day to capture, in order to show "what a teacher thinks on a day such as 9/11."

One piece she is including was written by a teacher whose mother died on Sept. 11—10 years prior to the 2001 attacks.

She hopes her gallery shows that "teachers do their daily writing, but also make time for [personal] writing."

## Children Speak: Stories About Their Art

What do children from ages two to six have to say about art and about the world? Curator Teresa Schartel, who works with children at the Fifth Avenue Family Child Care Center in Pittsburgh, PA, decided to start a gallery displaying the work of her "very expressive and intelligent" young charges.

To gather submissions, she recorded and transcribed stories children told while painting, playing with play dough and taking walks.

One four-year-old girl told a story about Buddha. "She knew some facts about Buddha and why each of her parents like him," says Schartel. "She thinks Buddha is weird. But despite her wariness, she knew that spirituality brought her parents together."

Schartel believes visitors to the gallery will see the thought-provoking nature of childrens' observations—and learn to "listen to the stories of the children in their lives."

## Writing Any Good Math Lately?

David and Phyllis Whitin teach in the elementary education department at Wayne State University in Detroit—David in math; Phyllis in literature and language arts. The pair also have written two books about the connections and combinations of math and language.

Their gallery reflects this interest. The pair is encouraging teachers, children, parents and others to send in submissions about math patterns, numerical patterns or patterns in nature, or commentaries on data—"on what it says and does not say." They also want to see children describe their "solution strategies" to math problems in drawings or text. The gallery is also open to poetry or any other content that fuses math with language.

David submitted a short opinion piece: "Mathematical Shenanigans at the Grocery Store" (about product "short sizing"), while Phyllis contributed "Geological Geometry," a nonfiction text marveling at the precision in nature found in hexagonal basalt rock formations.

## E-Mich Writes

Linda Adler-Kassner, professor of English at Eastern Michigan University, planned to fill her gallery with submissions created on the National Day on Writing, Oct. 20.

Many of the activities the school planned for the day were designed to solicit writing, such as "writing corps," where writers could blog and tell stories about writing; "erasure poems," where you erase words from an existing text to create a new poem; "roving reporters," where students interview others about why and what they write; a collaborative "finish the story" project; six-word memoirs; a writing marathon; memoir writing for senior citizen students from the school's Elderquest program; night-time workshops in collaboration with a local family literacy initiative, and more.

"People are totally excited about it," says Adler-Kassner.

She hopes the gallery and related writing activities help people "develop new, broader, more interesting ideas about what writing is, what it can be, and what it can do."

## Spidertangle Gallery

Spidertangle is an international Yahoo group formed around an interest in visual poetry, including collage, drawings and computer-generated typography. Crag Allen Hill, associate professor of English at Washington State University (and former high school teacher for 18 years, until 2008) is a member of Spidertangle. Last year, the group published an anthology with work from about 50 contributors, in hopes that it would be used in high school and middle school classrooms to stimulate work in this art form.

Similarly, Hill hopes his Spidertangle gallery will prompt teachers to introduce this form of poetry to students.

"My high school students are already very interested in it because of their connection to electronic media."

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## The Forgiveness Garden

Joanna Falco-Leshin, professor of English and humanities at Miami Dade College, curates this gallery, which was influenced by the college's "Forgiveness Garden" projects in the Middle East and U.S. Those garden projects were literal; Falco-Leshin's gallery is literary.

Falco-Leshin has received pieces that "cover the gamut of human emotion," ranging from a poem about the break-

up of a relationship to a short story showcasing "the sheer terror of a family fleeing a country torn by violence."

She hopes that visitors to the gallery "who have been aggrieved" will find peace by reading its contents. "We hope that like the Balm of Gilead it will restore their soul."

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