

Highlights of Our Lives

A guide to creating Writing Circles for Seniors



Prepared by Maree Thair
College of New Caledonia
Prince George, British Columbia
June 1998

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INTRODUCTION

"It's not quite compulsive, but I've written more since joining the Writing Circle than in the last 20 years." This is a quote from Dave Bowman, a member of one of the four Seniors' Writing Circles which operated in Prince George from September 1996 to April 1998. The Writing Circles were a first for Prince George and quite unique in the province. They were jointly funded by the Provincial and Federal governments and administered by CNC, the Prince George Regional Community Care Society, and the Prince George and District Senior Citizens Activity Centre Society. The project involved 62 Seniors.

Part of the project involved the exchange of ideas between Seniors and ABE students. As the Seniors were writing highlights of their lives at Senior Centres, ABE English students were writing in their English class at CNC. In December of 1996, the two groups came together to share some of their writings. From that evolved an anthology of their stories, *Writers Young and Old Share Experiences*, which was published in February 1997. It was the first publication of its kind in Prince George. For both groups, this process resulted in well-deserved pride in their achievements and a heightened awareness of the power of writing.

Another exciting outcome for the Seniors during the two-year project was growth in self-esteem and confidence in writing. The commitment of their stories to paper seemed to validate their lives. It gave new significance to their experiences—experiences they had perceived as normal or uninteresting. Their comments changed from, "I don't have anything worth writing about," to "What will I write about next?" The process they went through was as important as the writings themselves since intellectual stimulation contributes to overall wellness. As one Senior said, "It stimulates our brains. There's a sense of accomplishment about writing itself, and about leaving some heritage behind."

As enthusiasm grew, the volume and depth of writing expanded as writers recorded for posterity their memories, fantasies, philosophies, and goals. Some Seniors wrote substantial individual books containing highlights of their lives. It was a joy to see these Seniors come to believe in the uniqueness of their lives and the value of writing stories for the next generation. Forty percent of the Seniors were in their eighties and had a gold mine of information and wisdom to share.

This guidebook documents the development of the two-year project. A structure for the writing circles was created to address the perceived needs of the community and the Seniors. As the writers became more confident, they began to develop personal goals and made suggestions about the types of products they wanted to create (short stories, letters to the editor, longer autobiographies). They also made requests for certain skills they felt were important in the writing process. Consequently, the original structure was augmented with their suggestions. This manual is intended to provide insights and assistance to those who may wish to organize similar Seniors' Writing Circles in the future. Have fun!

Maree Thair

GOALS/OBJECTIVES

The idea to introduce Senior Writing Circles in Prince George arose in 1996 during an enthusiastic discussion with two colleagues. We were lamenting the results of the 1987 Southam report on literacy which claimed that nearly half of the 4.5 million functional illiterates identified in centres across Canada were 55 years old or older, and represented 29% of the total population. We discussed the potential of using Writing Circles as a vehicle for improvement in literacy levels of Seniors. As children of Seniors ourselves, we also recognized the value of providing an opportunity for Seniors to write about their life experiences as legacies for present and future generations. Thus arose the idea of creating Writing Circles to address literacy and legacy issues.

The formal objectives for the program follow:

1. To provide "in house", onsite writing circles for Seniors
2. To provide intellectual stimulation—a necessity for overall wellness and quality of life
3. To increase independence and self-esteem
4. To provide opportunities for rejuvenation, maintenance, and development of literacy skills
5. To affirm the dignity of aging adults
6. To create written legacies/memoirs to share with family and community
7. To provide Seniors with the skills to deal with print
8. To promote intergenerational exchange of ideas

PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

Sixty-two Seniors attended the program. Their backgrounds ethnically, educationally, geographically, and socio-economically were varied. Their ages ranged from 70 to 91. The vast majority, with the exception of two, were female. Two, of European background, could not read or write in English. Of those surveyed, 70% had below the Grade 10 level of formal education. Seventy percent of the participants contributed stories to the two intergenerational sharing of writing days, and 50% were represented in the anthology, *Writers Young and Old...Share Experiences*. Twenty percent of participants produced personal books containing highlights of their lives. A small number of Seniors with disabilities—hearing, sight, memory, language barriers—attended. All of these completed at least one Language Experience story and attended the sessions for varying amounts of time. All Seniors applauded the value of being part of this group.

SETTING UP

The initial step in developing a Writing Circle Program is to approach Senior Centre Coordinators or Directors to introduce your idea and objectives for the introduction of writing circles for their clients. If a Centre is interested in offering the program, investigate the following with the director:

1. Is a private room or section of a large common room available for use?
2. Does this room or space have electrical outlets, VCR, television, chalkboard, suitable tables and chairs, good lighting?
3. Is this room wheelchair accessible and in a quiet spot?
4. What type of a timetable for your program would fit into their existing timetable?
5. Determine a designated day and time, start and end date for your program. Consistency of day and time is very important for commitment and attendance of the Seniors.
6. Ask for suggested names of enthusiastic Seniors who could become a liaison and "spokesperson" to spread the word about the program in the centres.
7. See if the Centre's intake forms for the prospective "clients" indicate the educational levels of those Seniors. If this information is available, make sure your access to it does not violate privacy. This information, in advance, could assist in the planning of strategies and course materials. In the centres in which I worked, this information was not included on any intake forms. I gathered the information from participants after my programs had begun.
8. Accumulate the following materials:
 - portable whiteboard and pens
 - flip chart paper and felt pens
 - tape recorder and blank tapes
 - stapler
 - file folders
 - paper clips
 - sticky notes
 - paper, pens, pencils
 - coffee, tea, and goodies

9. Consider the following when arrange meeting times:

- between 9:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m.
- weekdays
- same time every day
- set up start and end day and date
- don't use the lunch hour
- sessions should be no longer than two hours
- two 10- or 12-week sessions—fall and spring
- avoid sessions mid-November to mid-January (Christmas preparations and vacations become the priority)
- check schedule at Centre in order to avoid conflict with other activities

10. Suggested size of group

- Six to ten is ideal

FIRST SESSIONS

After the first month of preparation, the group could begin to meet on a regular basis. At the first sessions, it is important to be an "active" listener in order to learn about the sensitivities and interests of the Seniors. This is a further opportunity to dispel fears and assure the group that although there will be structure, such as reaming about the Writing Process, the individual's scope and outcomes will be in his/her own hands. The final products may be group books, individual books, individual pieces, or any combination of these.

Session 1:

Setting Goals and Dispelling Myths

1. Using the guide contained in the Appendix, "Writing Process Myths and Reality", conduct a session on the qualities of a "good" writer. The expected outcome is that the Seniors will begin to realize that they have something of importance to say—their opinions and experiences are valuable.
2. Set realistic goals with the group. Assure them that they do not have to start at the beginning of their stories and proceed laboriously to the very end. Begin with small goals, encouraging the participants to begin with one "highlight". The chronology of the final product can be attended to when it is time to "publish". Record their "highlight" titles/subjects on whiteboard/chalkboard/flip chart. This brain storming jolts memories, and the fear of not knowing where to begin is reduced. Encourage everyone to record all or some of this list and decide on one "highlight". They can then begin an outline. Ask the Seniors to be prepared to have something *written* and ready to share the next week. Suggest they bring it, even if it is incomplete. Emphasize that they must bring something *written* to share. Their fear at this point is not in the telling of stories, but in the *writing*.

Session 2 and 3: Sharing the First Writing and Learning the Process

A. Sharing the First Writing

Those who have brought a *written* anecdote are asked to read it aloud. Those listening are asked to have paper and pencil ready to jot down any questions or suggestions for clarification of the presented piece. The listeners should also record any ideas for future personal writing, elicited from the presented piece of writing. Having pencil and paper ready when listening keeps the group attentive and is invaluable in the development of personal lists of future topics.

B. Introducing the Steps of the Writing Process:

- *Pre-Write:* Generate ideas through free association. Begin with one key word and a time limit (maybe two minutes), and write as many words or ideas as possible. Record these as lists, clusters, mind maps, timelines, free writes, or Venn diagrams. Practice all methods. Individuals can then decide on their preferred method or methods.
- *First Draft:* Using the ideas from the pre-write, write a piece of prose freely. Do not worry about spelling or punctuation at this point. If a date or name is elusive, leave a blank. Continue writing and fill in the missing details later.
- *Revise:* Look back over the prose. Add in missing details. Delete repetitions. This check could be done when the flow of ideas has stopped.
- *Peer Editing/Class Sharing:* Bring the written passage, complete or incomplete, to class and read it aloud to the group who may help with titles, clarification of ideas, introductions, conclusions.
- *Revise Again:* If appropriate, incorporate any suggestions made at the group sharing. Check again for details. Check sentence structure. Check spelling.
- Bring the completed "highlight" to class for photocopying.

The instructor now photocopies the writing. Next session, he/she returns the original to the Senior. The copy could be included in the instructor's ongoing file as a backup and resource.

STRUCTURE OF EACH SESSION

Each session should be self-contained as Seniors' attendance can be interrupted by illness and vacations. This approach saves frustration for all. It also encourages those who foresee interruptions, to join despite this, knowing they will not feel lost if they miss an occasional session.

Beginning of Session

Set up tea, coffee, and cookies/goodies at the beginning of each session. This is an important informal time for the group to exchange ideas, and it is a time for the co-ordinator to casually ask how everyone's writing has progressed during the week. It is a time also, to discover what books have been read, events attended, and plans made during this past week. Personal highlights that have occurred during this past week may come to light. Comments on the present often lead to comments on the past and enthusiastic discussions about their similarities or differences. This casual discourse can provide an impetus for new topics to be explored. The co-ordinator can record some of these for later reference.

Middle of Session

After the initial socializing and exchange of ideas, the session can enter a more structured format with each member reading aloud what they have written that week. This does not need to be a completed work; it can be a beginning or something ongoing. At the completion of the reading, the rest of the group is invited to comment constructively by offering suggestions for titles, endings, elaborations, details which may make the story/section of story more vivid for the reader. Encourage the listeners to have a notebook and pen available while the reader is presenting, and suggest they jot down ideas for their own future topics. Take a break in the middle of the session for Seniors to stretch and freshen up. It is important to give the group a chance to limber up and recharge!

Conclusion of Session

In the last section of each class, review the topics of the day. Set or review individual goals for the next session. Collect works, complete or incomplete, which were shared that day. Within that week, photocopy the works. Next session, return the originals to the Seniors for them to include in their special file folders; keep the copies for your files. Quickly returning the originals to the Seniors is important, so they maintain a feeling of control of, and responsibility for, their work. They also have an ongoing record of their work. Quickly obtaining a copy for yourself is valuable as a backup and a reference for you.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. Initially, viewed the program with skepticism, passivity, reluctance, fear. Don't be discouraged. Take time to learn about their sensitivities and fears. In so doing, a relationship is developed. Seniors need time to build trust in you and the usefulness of your program.

Some Seniors were afraid and skeptical because, unbeknownst to me, the word "memoirs", in their minds, conjured up only sad memories. They were uncomfortable delving into those areas. It was important to change the term to "highlights of your life" and assure them they could avoid writing about troublesome issues. With this assurance, they became more receptive to the idea of writing. To establish rapport and become a familiar face in the centres, attend as many teas, potluck suppers, lunches, tenant meetings, and bingos as possible. Always carry flyers and examples of small stories produced by other groups. Keep the emphasis on writing *small, happy* highlights.

2. Illness and holidays occur for individuals at varying times; consequently, it is important to teach skills in self-contained units which can be completed in a single session, yet repeated at another session when the need arises.
3. Although space and tables and chairs were available in all centres, it was necessary to be self-sufficient in supplying the following travel kit:
 - o portable whiteboard and pens
 - o flip chart paper, pens
 - o masking tape
 - o cassette recorder and blank tapes
 - o writing paper, pens, pencils, erasers
 - o stapler
 - o sticky notes
4. Sometimes, the initial hesitation of Seniors to relate parts of their stories may spring from a seeming lack of interest shown by their family members in the past. It is natural for younger family members to sometimes "switch off" when elders begin the, "When I was a boy/girl..." stories. Little do we realize our seniors could be internalizing and generalizing, "I don't have anything interesting to say." This was a statement made many, many times during the inception of the program. Through writing and sharing, the Seniors gradually realized the value of recording their unique experiences. Family members, in fact, showed great interest in the positive outcomes of the writing program.
5. Many seniors love to "tell" their stories. This is an important part of the process, but be firm about using the "telling" as a catalyst for writing, not as an end product in itself.

6. Some Seniors felt that, by today's standards, they had had a minimal amount of formal education, and this contributed to their reluctance to enter the writing program, "I don't know how to write." Of course, many wrote extensive letters for years before they had access to telephones; consequently, they are experienced in descriptive, persuasive forms of writing. By assuring them that there will be instruction in teaching the process, the process ceases to be an issue. Also, through the introductory lesson on "Myths about Good Writers," the Seniors come to see themselves as writers; whereas, previously they had believed the term "writer" belonged to only a select few.
7. For Seniors who want to record their stories, yet are limited and frustrated by memory lapses, it is valuable to write for them as they talk. By doing this, something is recorded for the next session. Copy and save what has been written. Return the original to the Senior. Do a quick review of these notes at the next session, and the client can add to these ideas. This is a very slow, painstaking approach. Many sessions result in a small piece of prose, but there is great pride in the Senior's face when you finally present to them a typewritten story of their own making. They, most importantly, have felt included in the group.
8. For Seniors who cannot read/write, it is valuable to work on Language Experience stories. They dictate. You write. Do a short paragraph. Read the story back to the Senior. Have the participants pick five words they would like to "reem" from the story. Highlight the words in the story. Put these words on flash cards. Read the story to them and have them say the highlighted words when you reach them. Do this as many times as time will allow. You can be doing this during a time when the more independent writers are involved in their own writing. Ask the Senior to try to "rehearse" these words between sessions. Make sure to include the Language Experience story, provided the Senior wants this, in the next week's sharing section.
9. Some Seniors who wanted to write private sections for their personal books, often chose to simply share the material with me, and it was sent for word processing but not shared with the group. As time passed and trust grew, some chose to share painful sections of their stories with the group. They were astounded that they were able to express these traumatic experiences on paper and found the experience accommodated a need for release and closure. For these, the process became cathartic. One lady composed letters to all her deceased sisters, her mum and dad. These were not regretful; they were letters of gratitude.. Intimate stories became part of some members' personal books created for their families.

SKILLS

Being a generation of letter writers, since that was their primary form of communication for many years, Seniors tend to write with clarity and in a free flowing, conversational style. This is commendable and is to be encouraged during the initial stages of writing classes when the participants are developing confidence in committing ideas to paper. As they become more prolific and confident in their writing, the following skills could be introduced, so the Seniors can take more responsibility in, and ownership of, the final stages of proofreading their prose ready for "publication".

1. Varying Sentence Beginnings - Use of Introductory Phrases

After the Seniors are quite comfortable writing, devote some class time to taking pieces of their own writing in which most sentences begin with a subject or pronoun. Note the repetitiveness. Give examples on the whiteboard of how Adverbial or Gerund phrases may be placed at the beginning of a sentence to add variety.

Examples:

- In due time, we...
- Having lost his job, Bob...
- Seeking employment, Larry...
- Feeling overjoyed, Ellen..

Have one or more Seniors volunteer a piece of prose for the group to work on for variety of sentence beginnings. Suggest this type of proofing could be used as part of revising the final work in the writing process.

2. Use of Compound Sentences

And... But... Or... Nor... Yet... Still... So...

These *seven* words are called *conjunctions* because they can be used to join two simple sentences. If they are used for this purpose, they must be preceded by a *comma*.

Examples:

- We were desperate for money, *so* Bob took the first job he could find.
- We rushed to the creek, *but* it was too late.
- The horse drawn buggy was a convenient form of travel, *yet* the Bombardier was a much more exiting vehicle.

Other skills may be introduced depending on the needs of the group.

ADVERTISING

Advertising must be done within the Centres and may be done within the community, if the program is open to the public. Advertising may take on many forms.

Within the Centres

1. Attractive, large print flyers covering "What, Where, When":
 - to display on notice boards
 - to distribute at functions
 - to distribute door to door in residences
 - for collaborators and office staffs to distribute
 - for the designated Senior spokesperson to distribute
2. If the Centres have a monthly newsletter and/or calendar, request permission to include your "ad" in there, and as time progresses, print some of the group's short stories as examples of the program outcomes. The tangibility of these stories often motivates newcomers to join.
3. Create and distribute your own "Writers' Newsletter", containing short stories written by your Seniors.
4. Make a video of Seniors in your centre sharing their writings and present this at various functions.

Within the Community

1. Newspapers often contain a Community News/Upcoming Events column wherein you can advertise, sometimes free of charge, sometimes for a minimum charge.
2. Newspapers are often very willing to do a cover story on your program. Contact the editor concerning this. If the newspaper is coming to do a coverage, make Seniors aware of this in advance. Quotes about the program seen in the newspaper are a really valuable way to develop community awareness of the program.
3. Some Seniors, feeling empowered and confident by the writing experience, opt to write a Letter to the Editor espousing the virtues of the program.
4. Newspapers are sometimes interested in publishing Seniors' writings about the community in the past. Their stories add authenticity to the history and growth of the community.

RESOURCES FOR WRITING

Seniors are their own resource for story starters. Because they have witnessed two world wars and advances in the medical and technological fields, have seen upheavals in values and attitudes towards family roles and structure, spirituality and morality, the arts and education, they are equipped with a wide base of experience from which to draw. The instructor's role is to bring this information to the surface for discussion, and provide acknowledgment that committing these experiences to paper adds authenticity to personal historical accounts. Their stories bring history off the page and give it life. This commitment to paper of their personal experiences seems to have the effect of validating their lives.

Once the groups form and Seniors begin listening to each other, each one's memory comes alive with his/her own associated experiences. That is the time for participants to have that notepad and pen available to jot down ideas for their own personal story/subject list. Each week during the sharing section, this active approach is recommended.

Initially, before this snowball effect begins, you could use some of the following topics to begin the generation of ideas:

A. Themes or topics:

- transportation
- traditions
- childhood
- schooling
- jobs
- job training
- the Depression
- local towns
- my community - now and then
- my very first memory
- my first day at school

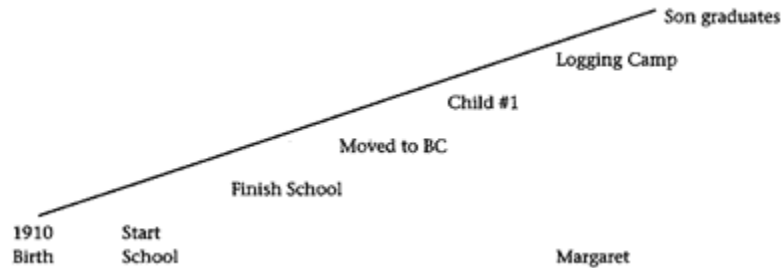
B. Old Pictures or Photographs:

- house on the prairie
- orchard

- railroad
- horse and buggy
- old aeroplane
- post-war government housing

C. Timelines:

With the group, prepare a timeline on the whiteboard.



Prepare individual Timelines. Each individual makes a timeline on small paper or on large papers. These can be displayed and shared. This sharing provides further stimulation of ideas. The timeline now becomes another personal resource for topics.

The following is a list of titles from my Seniors' group book, *Writers Young and Old, Share Experiences*. These titles could be used as suggested topics.

Remember When...Memorable Moments

- The Day the Aeroplane Came to Our Farm
- The Queen of Hearts Ball
- Caption—E. Shaw Hit A. Hogg
- Coca-Cola
- The Moose
- My Life as a Child
- That's My Kid
- My First Car Accident
- Dangerous-Fearful Walk Home
- My Christmas Gift
- The Sun
- Fire on the Roof
- Mystery Photographs

The Things Were...Traditions

- The Chautauqua
- We Didn't Have Coffee
- The Hobo Years
- Making Maple Syrup
- The Shivaree
- The Bombardier
- Eaton's Catalogue

Where Was I...Places

- From New Brunswick to British Columbia
- Christmas In St. Omer
- Salmon Glacier
- Early Trips to Calgary
- Gyro Beach
- From Sweden to Prince George
- My Favorite Place
- Winter—Peace River
- Penny

INTERGENERATIONAL ASPECT

With the intermingling of two generations, ABE students and Seniors, insights were gained through the exchange of ideas. The motivation to view life from a different point of view grew through this experience. These were beneficial outcomes of the Intergenerational aspects of this program. Initially, an attempt was made to involve Grade 11 and 12 students from a local high school with the Seniors' writing program. This did not come to fruition; however, a group of Fundamental Level ABE students became partners with the Seniors. Both groups wrote stories within their individual programs. On two occasions, both groups came together. A program was prepared alternating the presentation of ABE and Senior "Students" writings. After the readings, the participants joined in a light sit-down lunch where they exchanged ideas. During the second "sharing day", a son of one of the Seniors volunteered to videotape the session. His intention was to create a tape in honour of his mother's upcoming 85th birthday. However, he also offered a copy to us. The video was used for advertising at an Open House booth at one of the Centres. The two groups also attended two plays in a local theatre and shared responses after these.

On other occasions, a few Seniors came to the College to share their experiences when a theme or idea, explored in the ABE classroom, was related to one of their personal experiences. At one point, a reading on the origination of the Bombardier was covered in a reading in the ABE course. One Senior distinctly remembered the time when the Bombardier was invented, and one was used in her prairie town to transport rural residents to town for medical and dental appointments. History was brought alive for the younger students through this Senior's vivid account of the machine and the excitement of having that new form of transportation. A bond of respect and interest grew between the two generations, and much insight was gained by both groups in this lively exchange of ideas via a variety of activities.

APPENDICES

[Prince George Seniors' Literacy Project Questionnaire Results](#)

[Letter and Return Form for Copyright Permission](#)

[Writing Process Myths and Reality](#)

[A Simply Prepared Program for Sharing Days](#)

[Prince George Seniors' Literacy Project Midway Report](#)

Prince George Seniors' Literary Project September 1996 to May 1997 Questionnaire Results

Number of participants in program	46
Number who answered questionnaire	19
Age range	70 to 90 years
Participants aged 70 to 79	10
Participants aged 80 to 90	9
Formal level of education achieved:	
Grade 0 to 8	40%
Grade 9 and 10	30%
Grade 11, 12	25%
Post Secondary	5%

Midway into the program, the Seniors were asked to indicate, from a given list of questions, any benefits they had derived from the program so far.

Feel more confident about myself	12
Feel more confident about writing	14
Feel an improvement in my writing skills	10
See the value of writing my experiences	16
See the value of having writings to pass onto family members	13
Have learnt, through sharing, that my experiences are important to me, and others	11

Any other comments

I gained confidence.

Good program because it draws us out; helps me to relive the past. I want the gov't to keep sponsoring the program

I enjoyed sharing our stories and listening to others, being together.

Sharing time with others.

Have been waiting for this chance

I enjoy listening to others and getting ideas from them.

Could the program be improved? Explain.

It's good the way it is. It's something that should have been done a long time ago.

No need to improve.

More contact with younger people.

Good as it is.

It's pretty hard to draw people in if they're not interested. I think you're doing a terrific job.

No.

Is the time allowed per week Just right: 13 Too much: 0 Too little: 0

Comments:

Being a new resident I made new friends. I would never have written to a newspaper before which I did at Christmas. Maree was and is very good teacher, has a way with people.

This is a good program for Seniors and should be continued and encouraged especially in Senior Citizen's Homes and other Senior groups.

Everything seems fine to me. My grandchildren are happy I'm finally writing about my life.

I think the program is wonderful.

I feel the program is good because I feel at home and able to express myself. The program does a lot of good for those who appreciate it.

I'm very satisfied with the things you're doing. I now have the opportunity to write and pass on my experiences. I have lots of nieces and nephews who'd like to read this stuff.

I've thoroughly enjoyed listening to the others read about their experiences.

I enjoyed the fact that Maree is a good teacher. This is a good program for us to express our viewpoints and should be continued for us and for other seniors.

I would like to see the project continued, as it is a time for sharing with others who have stories to tell.

I have enjoyed Maree helping me and she's a good teacher. I enjoyed everything.

The program has meant a lot to me—but only a start—have lots more to learn—hope it continues a few more years.

It's a good start. The program opens people's minds, brings people together. Gets people out of their rooms rather than sitting around doing nothing. Older people are often not tolerant and interrupt each other. In this program we've learnt to listen to each other, take turns and be tolerant.

I always thought about writing, but I was too lazy to do it. Also, my arthritis makes it hard to write.

Letter and Return Form for Copyright Permission

Re: Copyright Permission

I have been working on a cost - shared project, "Prince George Seniors Literacy Project," for the past two years. This project is funded as part of the federal-provincial adult literacy cost-shared program between the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development Canada, and the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training, Province of British Columbia.

We request permission to use the following copyrighted material for inclusion in our manual:

Title:

Author:

Date of Publication:

Material to be reprinted/adapted:

Use:

Use of your material will be acknowledged on all copies of our manual. If you are willing to grant us permission to copy the material identified above, please sign the enclosed form and return it to me. Thank -you for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Maree Thair
Project Facilitator

Copyright Permission

I grant _____ permission to use the material _____
_____ in the manual for the Prince George Seniors' Literacy Project.

Any conditions to be met: _____

Signature

Title

Organization

Date

Please return this form to:

Ms. Maree Thair
Seniors' Literacy Project Facilitator
College of New Caledonia
C/O Centre for Student Success
Mailbox #156
3330 - 22nd Avenue
Prince George, BC V2N 1P8

Writing Myths and Reality

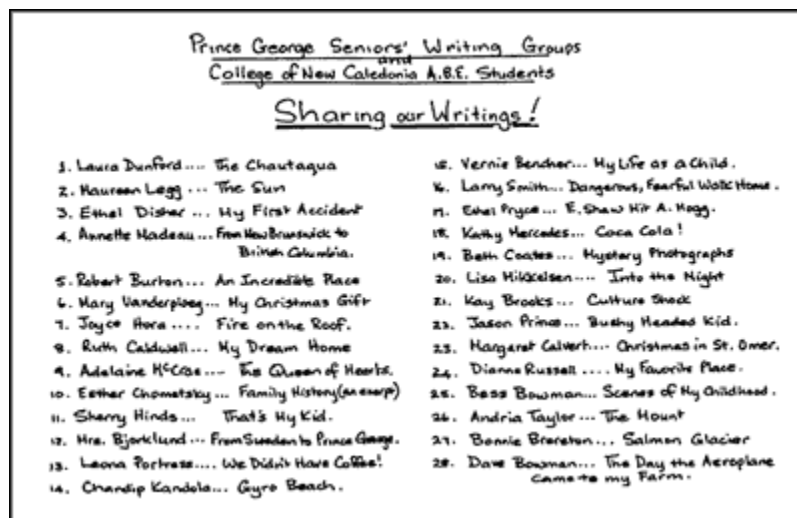
Myth

- Good writers are born that way.
- Good writers "get it right" on the first draft.
- Good writers don't make mistakes,
- Good writers have had more exciting experiences to write about than most people.
- Good writers know how to make an outline before they start writing and then stick to it.
- Good writers sort out their thoughts about a topic **before** they start writing and then simply write down their thoughts.

Reality

- Good writers (just like good skiers, cooks, or carpenters) have **learned** skills and strategies through experience and practice.
- Writing is mainly **rewriting**. All writers produce several drafts.
- **All** writers make mistakes. Good writers focus on readers' interests and needs when they write and correct mistakes in later drafts.
- Good writers know writing **strategies** that enable them to effectively **communicate** their knowledge and experience to a reader.
- Good writers make outlines to help them organize their ideas, but they also feel free to change the "gameplan" during the writing process. Good writers are not intimidated by their outlines!
- Many good writers say that writing about a topic helps them to clarify their thinking on an issue and that they often find out what they really "think" about something by writing about it.

A simple prepared program for sharing days



Prince George Seniors' Literacy Project Midway Report

February 1997

The Seniors writing/reading project began in September 1996. I have been working at four senior centres: one activity Centre and three low-cost housing residential centres. I visit each Centre once a week for 3 hours. Forty-nine Seniors are involved in the program. Ages range from 65 to 87; educational level is generally Grade 8 to non-readers/writers (Fundamental/intermediate Level); instruction is mostly group instruction with one-on-one language experience for the non-reader/writers.

The first month was spent building trust and rapport with the Seniors. I attended many teas, dinners, lunches, tenant meetings and informal gatherings for this purpose and to develop interest in joining writing/reading circles. At first, the Seniors were willing to *talk* about their past experiences, but reluctant to *write*. They showed fear of writing and lack of confidence in their writing skills. They also minimized the importance of their past experiences. I was discouraged at times, but my collaborators assured me that apathy and fear of taking risks is prevalent amongst this age group.

Eventually, things "took off." A small core group developed in three centres and by "word of mouth," others joined. In the fourth Centre, my work is still one-on-one. However, we're in the process of amalgamating with another newly-opened Centre in the hopes of serving more Seniors. There are still other centres in Prince George which are not yet involved.

So far, there has been formal instruction in:

- dispelling myths about what good writers are
- the 5-step writing process
- paragraph development
- variation of sentence beginnings
- some punctuation, where necessary
- the "essence" of a play
- basic poetry forms

We have explored such themes as transportation, traditions, Christmas, Prince George in the "olden" days, highlights of my life.

The contact between my English 020 students and Seniors has been exciting and meaningful for both groups. They met each other through attending local plays together then shared their varied reactions to the plays through writing. Seniors are guest speakers in my 020 class, offering a wealth of firsthand experience of things from the past. Last semester culminated in an intergenerational "Sharing of Writings Day." Seniors and English 020 students met at one of the senior centres, shared their writings and had lunch together. The event took place in a large lounge-foyer at the centre. Other Seniors dropped by and listened. As a result, some came to see me about the program. The Citizen newspaper covered the event, and the reporter asked if we would be interested in publishing some stories in the paper in the future.

The writing/reading experience gives the seniors a new and powerful "voice." I see a growth in self-esteem, a new realization that their ideas are important, and an excitement about doing something intellectually stimulating. As confidence grows, so does the volume of writing.

The program contributes to the overall "wellness" of these seniors. With my continued consistent presence in the centres, by word of mouth, through referrals from my collaborators, and future events where we invite friends of seniors to attend, I hope to draw more of the lower skilled seniors into the program.

This program is unique in Prince George. My goal for 1996-7 is to extend the existing program, continue the intergenerational aspect of the program, and gain community financial support for the future.

Maree Thair
February 1997

ADVERTISING

Free advertising through the Community News section of the newspaper

HERE and NOW

Senior Centre

The Senior Activity and co-ordinator **Maree Thair** invite all seniors to Memoirs with Maree and Book Circle on Tuesdays at 1 p.m. at the Senior Activity Centre library, 425 Brunswick St.

The program begins In October. Come and share memories then get them into your own book. For information phone Karen at 564-3287.

Tertiary institutions in your area may include information about your program in their monthly circulars

CNC STUDENTS AND SENIORS CONNECT

In September, 1996, **Maree Thair** established Writing Circles in four Senior's Centres in Prince George. They are the result of a cost-shared grant. The purpose was to provide the opportunity for our Seniors to write highlights of their lives. The second purpose was for Maree's ABE students and the Seniors to share their writings. A selection of writings from the September Semester English 020 students and Seniors has now been published in a little book Writers, Young and Old, Share Experiences.

Maree thanks her students and CNC staff: **Stu Berry, Doris Hoff** and **Wilma Scott** for their great support and a calming influence in the production of what's now known as "The Book"!

A member of the Writing Circle reports on the program in the Centre's bulletin

January 1997



• • •

Seniors' Writing Group

There's been a group meeting in our library every Tuesday for the last few months with Maree Thair as our teacher. She encourages us to write of our early memories. On December 6, our group met with three other groups at Alward Place - one group from Alward Place, one from 1010 Liard and the third - Maree's adult class from C.N.C.

We each read something we'd written and wound up a pleasant morning with a delicious luncheon.

submitted by Beth Coates

Some of the Seniors' stories were featured in the bulletin/newsletter at the centres.

Old Codgers

After my husband Steve retired he didn't have much to do. He would walk downtown (almost a mile) for exercise and stop for coffee at the Senior Center and then walk home. He had done this a few times and one day he came home and said: "You know, that's a pretty good place for those old codgers." he didn't think he was an old codger yet and he was 76! I've often thought later that we could have gone to the senior dances as he loved old time music and he also was a good dancer. For some reason he wasn't ready for that yet. Are any of us like that today?

The Days of Radio

My Dad was a great one to listen to the news. He started doing that during the war as he wanted to hear how the war was progressing as he had a son Carl in the army overseas. He continued to listen to the news every hour on the hour even after the war was over. He used to say that he wished he could live to the day when he could see that person reading the news. Television hadn't reached our area yet but I'm sure it was in the United States at that time. He passed away in 1955 never having experienced that wonderful invention.

These two short stories were written by Esther Chometsky . Esther is a member of the Senior's Writing Circle directed by Maree Their from the College of New Caledonia. The group is successful at encouraging seniors and others within the community to put their stories down on paper. What a delightful way of recording history for our family and the community. Maree assists the members with writing skills and punctuation. So come along and join the fun It is never too late to try something new and maybe even become an author in your golden years.

**The Seniors Writing Circle
Senior Activity Centre
425 Brunswick
Phone 564-3287**

Times and Dates to Commence in January



Scenes From My Childhood a
Little Coal-Mining Community in Alberta

- Long, glistening icicles hanging from the eaves
- Wondrous Jack Frost pictures on the windows
- banking the house with snow for warmth (a child would not know that these scenes meant the house had no insulation!)
- taking hot water bottles to bed for cold feet
- my lovely red sleigh that Grandad made
- clothes frozen stiff on the line - dancing them around pretending they were *people* when Mom brought them in
- in spring, the meadow behind our house with hundreds of crocus'
- the fascinating song of the meadowlark on a fencepost
- the discovery that if I spun myself round and round and round the ground "*came up and hit me* - the horizon was up-and-down instead of across".
- the pond in the meadow where I studied the tadpoles in the summer and learned to skate in the winter
- we hadn't many toys during the *Depression*, but one kid had a ball, another an old piece of rope, so our games were O'Leary Ball, auntie-I-over, skipping, kick-the-can, rolling old tires, hiking up the nearby hills
- the trap-door in the middle of everyone's kitchen floor, leading to the *cooler* (cellar)
- birthday parties were very special; we always had Jello (which had been put down the cellar to set) and a decorated cake. No gifts, but we never thought about that - the party was the important thing (mine was usually a picnic the meadow - it was May 21)
- getting a satchel of pink popcorn, or an ice cream cone, or a chocolate bar, or 5 suckers, or a package of 5 sticks of gum, or a whole bagful of penny candy, for a NICKEL!

*excerpt from the writings of Bess Bowman,
member of Seniors Writing Circle*

Circulate and post flyers in the centres



New for fall...

"Memoirs with Maree"

Have you ever wanted to put into print some valued memories of your life, but don't know where to start? Maree's here to help! We'll have lots of fun sharing memories and finally getting them into your own book. What a great memento for yourself or to share with someone!



WHEN: Tuesday afternoons, starting October

"Book Circle"



Let's listen, discuss and compare!
A great time to sit back and listen while Maree reads to you.
We'll discuss our ideas and compare the book and the movie.

WHEN: Tuesday afternoons, starting October

Join a group. Sign up with Karen

Use sign up sheets in the centres

**WELLNESS
Program**

"MEMORIES OF DAYS GONE BY" - with Maree

- What brought you to Prince George?
- What has been your favorite holiday?
- What were you doing when World War 2 ended?

Have you ever wanted to put into print some valued memories of your life but did not know where to start? Then come join Maree to reminisce and record your treasured stories. What a great way to share - your history with family and friends! Starting October 1, 1 afternoon/week. Please sign up below by September 24/96 if interested.

"BOOK CIRCLE"- with Maree

- Do you like the cliff-hanger of a mystery novel?
- Does the passion of a romance novel interest you?

Come share your thoughts, ideas and viewpoints on a variety of books. A time to discuss. listen and compare. Follow along in the book while Maree reads aloud or just sit back and listen. Comparisons will be made with the accompanying movie, if applicable. Program starts October 1, 1 afternoon per week. Please sign up below by September 24/96 if interested.

Name:	Memories ...	Book circle	Both

563-1478

PRESS RELEASE



Seniors, adult students publish a unique book by Bernice Trick Citizen Staff

Instructor Maree Thair (far left) discusses the book with Dave Bowman, Ethel Pryee, Bess Bowman and Beth Coats.

"Writers, young and old, share experiences" is the name of a new book filled with the life experiences of seniors and adult students in Prince George.

The name is also the headline of the story about the writing group published in the Prince George Citizen last December. The group chose the story and picture as the cover of the book.

The published work is a first for Prince George because it was the first writing project here for seniors. The writing circles, designed and co-ordinated by CNC literacy instructor Maree Thair, resulted from a provincial decision to extend literacy beyond the classroom and into the community.

"At the same time the seniors were writing highlights of their lives at senior centres, my adult basic education students were writing in English class at CNC. In December both groups came together to share their stories at a writer's sharing day.

"It's an exciting accomplishment for 30 writers who participated and contributed written work for the book," said Thair.

"Through writing the seniors have come to believe in the uniqueness of their lives and the value of writing stories for others to enjoy.

"The change from a reluctant, 'I can't write' to 'What will I write about?' is what I hoped for," said Thair.

There are 500 copies of the book printed, of which 300 will be distributed to literacy facilitators and institutions throughout B.C. Other copies go to the writers and to the

CNC literacy classroom.

The project was made possible with joint funding by the B.C. Ministry of Education, Skills and Training and the federal National Literacy Secretariat.

Funding for this first project will end in May, but Thair has applied for a further year. "My hope is that this new and intellectually stimulating activity for seniors may continue in Prince George."

Reprinted, with permission, from the *Prince George Citizen*.

New resident finds pleasant surprises

On Sept. 1, 1996, I arrived in Prince George to live with my daughter after 40 years in Burnaby.

I had a lot of adjusting to do.

First she introduced me to Knox United Church, then the first Tuesday in October she introduced me to Brunswick Street Centre for Seniors.

As we entered the building an attractive woman with an accent introduced herself as Maree and proceeded to introduce me to a lady sitting at a table, her name was Ethel- what a coincidence and was I going to the writing class which was starting in a few minutes and all I could say was, "I guess so," and wonder what I was getting myself into. I wasn't a writer, I just wrote letters.

When we were seated the lady I had met first at the entrance was the teacher. She introduce herself as Maree and had all of us introduced ourselves.

Maree proceeded to show us how to start out writing a story. I was scared. I had no interesting stories to write about.

For the first three weeks I listened to others in the group talking about events in their lives. I listened to what stories they were writing and decided I could write something.

Now I look forward to our meetings on Tuesdays, hearing what they have written and read what I have written. I have my self confidence back. Maree and the people in the class are new friends I have made. We have fun together, and I'll miss very much our get-togethers because our classes end in May, but I very much hope they resume in the fall again as I'll be there to learn more about writing.

-Ethel Pryce



writing through the **GENERATIONS**

Bess and Dave Bowman, Maree Thair, Beth Coates and Esther Chometsky (from left) are living proof that history dwells inside people, a fact that was recently brought to life in the PG Seniors' Writing Circles' anthology, *Writers Young and Old...*

• *Prince George Senior writers write the circle of our shared history* •

They are candles now, but they burn with the desire to tell of their inferno days. Our senior citizens are history books, adventure stories, craft magazines, and romance novels in the flesh.

Each week a group of them meet through the Prince George Seniors' Writing Circles, which has just released a book entitled *Writers, Young & Old...* full of the tales only senior citizens can tell.

Maree Thair is the co-ordinator of the Seniors' Writing Circles in the city. She contacts seniors on a regular basis to stimulate them into creative writing. People are quite excited about this new creative project, including the seniors themselves.

"Last September I went around to the different seniors' locations and didn't get much of a response," she explains, "Most thought, 'Oh, my life isn't interesting, my life is too sad, I have nothing to say.' Once they started, they had a lot more to say than they initially thought."

There are four groups that meet each week with Maree. One each at Alward Place Seniors Home, Spruce Capital Seniors Centre, 1010 Liard and the Seniors Activity Centre. Each time they meet, be it one-on-one or as a group, Maree guides them through their memories, fantasies, and philosophies and gets as much as possible down on paper. The process is supposed to be as much fun as the finished product.

"It's not quite compulsive, but I've written more [this way] than in the whole last 20 years," says Dave Bowman, one of the participating seniors. "Most of us write personal, interesting vignettes."

Dave has written about his prized fiddle, licking ice cream on the sly as a child, meeting his wife and other snapshots of his full life. His story "The Day The Aeroplane Came To Our Farm" leads off the anthology.

One woman wrote a letter to a deceased family member, as a final message. It not only

turned out to be a touching piece of literature but also a cathartic expression of love.

"There were tears," Maree says with a smile of respect. "They read out loud. We were quite tearful, she was quite tearful, and I think we got a lot out of that. I'm sure it helped her."

"Sometimes getting together like this and talking will trigger memories, little things that we'll suddenly want to write about," says Beth Coates, another senior writer.

"I think it's a lucky thing we have an opportunity to put our thoughts down. Anybody can do it." Her story, "Mystery Photographs," is in the anthology.

Luck is also with those who come after these seniors, because they have put a tool in the hands of younger generations. For anybody who has ever listened to a grandparent or a native elder or the kindly store owner, this collection will be familiar.

"It's important for the younger generations to have this," says Dave. "Sometimes I wonder about all the stories my grand parents had and didn't write down. It stimulates our brains. It's good for us [seniors]. There's a sense of accomplishment and a sense of leaving some heritage behind. I'm often asked how much money I paid to take the course. Well, nothing! Its's amazing!"

Maree knows of only two other writing circles for seniors in the province. She hopes the provincial government continues to fund the program, as it has so many benefits to adult literacy, seniors' self esteem, and, of course, history. The book is not for sale as yet, but can be found in city libraries.

STORY BY FRANK PEBBLES / PHOTO BY JOHN MCKENZIE

Thursday, April 24, 1997. Reprinted with the permission of *The Free Press*, Prince George, B.C.



Their lives' pages opened

By Frank Peebles
Free Press staff writer

Laura Dunford, Bess Bowman, Mary Vanderploeg, Dave Bowman, Ethel Pryce, group leader Maree Thair, Margaret Calvert, Esther Ritchey, Esther Chometsky and Beth Coates gather in the library of the Senior's Activity Centre to revel in the fruition of their literary efforts—a book of their own.

JOHN MCKENZIE/FREE PRESS

Posterity has a new cache of treasure. The seniors' writing group, based at the Seniors' Activity Centre and resourced through College of New Caledonia, has brought the stories of several local elders to the page. Fresh back from the printers, they now have their life stories in book form.

Some seniors chose to write a series of short anecdotes and compile them into a single volume, while others chose to write a chronological memoir. All have now been published, and are available to the public.

The seniors in the writing group didn't take on this literacy exercise simply for the sake of history. They take part in the group to become better writers, to share their love of literature with others, and to fully enjoy the treat of putting their thoughts down on paper. It is a creative outlet, and it is often cathartic.

Group leader Maree Thair remarks that group reading sessions are often emotional and deeply personal. So are these stories. Contained in the pages of these new books are the adventures, romances, practical experiences and sometimes just simple day-to-day events that all add up to a human life well lived.

Maree considers it a gift to be able to share these thoughts and emotions with people for all time, and the seniors admit that it is remarkably special to see their words on a published page. Forevermore they can refer themselves as authors. The books will be available through libraries, and a precious few will be circulated to family and friends.

For more information on the books, call Marie Thair at the College of New Caledonia (562-2131). It was an especially proud day for her, to see a touch of these elders' lives pass on into permanent record.

Sunday, June 28, 1998. Reprinted with the permission of *The Free Press*, Prince George, B.C.

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Jordan Bacon, Publishing Assistant

Thank you all,
Maree



A Sharing Day
Seniors and CNC Students

L to R:

Esther Chometsky, Beth Coates, Laura Dunford, Paul Jalbert, Maree Thair (instructor), Radmila Gavrilovic, Seungchul Oh, Sylvia Tse