

Erika Fitzpatrick

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Spooktober for Young Writers: A Halloween-themed Writing Workshop for Teens

This public library program consists of four 1.5 hour sessions, which will be scheduled once a week on a weekday evening throughout the month of October. Over the course of the sessions, teens will participate in creative writing exercises and listen to themed read-alouds for inspiration, write, workshop, and revise their own creative works, and have the opportunity to share their finished work at an open mic as well as in an anthology. Participants will be encouraged to attend all four sessions to get the most out of the program, but the program is designed so that teens who have to miss a session, or even are only able to attend a single session, will still be able to participate.

The primary target age range for this program is teens between the ages of 14 and 18. The workshop is designed around the framework of building positive outcomes with a focus on connection, contribution, and confidence (YALSA, 2018): it is intended to give teens an opportunity to develop connections with one another, contribute meaningfully to each other's work, and build their confidence in their own work. It also aims to build literacy skills and encourage enthusiasm for reading and writing through ungraded writing activities, read-alouds, and the development of a community of young writers. Additionally, although this is designed as a one month program, because long-term or ongoing programs are more appropriate for this age group (YALSA, 2018), this program will be used to gauge interest in a regularly scheduled writing workshop. If interest levels seem sufficient, this program can be continued either as is

with a new theme for each month, or with additional modifications or adjustments made based on participant input.

Program Outline and Rationale

All four weeks of this program will take place in the teen area of the public library. A display will be set up in the area featuring age-appropriate selections from the library's collection that fit the Halloween theme.

Week 1: Prompts and Writing Games

The first session will open with introductions. Each teen will be asked to introduce themselves by sharing their name, pronouns, what type of writing they are most interested in (e.g. fiction or nonfiction prose, poetry, scripts, songwriting, etc.), and their favorite author or artist. This is intended to help the teens get to know each other, identify others with similar interests, and start building connections with one another.

After introductions, the time left in the first hour will be spent on as many of the following Halloween-themed writing prompts and exercises as time allows for. The time spent on each activity will be relatively short—15 minutes at the most—as the intention is to get creativity flowing and get multiple pieces started so everyone ends up with at least one idea they are interested in pursuing further.

- The participants will be asked to picture the scariest monster they can think of, and then pick one of its physical features—its eyes, its hands, its hair, etc.—complete the sentence “The monster has...” with a description of that feature. Once everyone has their lines written, they can work together to decide the order and create a jointly authored poem.
- Each of the teens will be asked to come up with a brief prompt for a scary or Halloween-themed story (e.g. a ghost in the library, a jack-o-lantern coming to life, etc.)

and write it on a small sheet of paper. The pieces of paper will be put in a bowl, and each participant will then pick one at random and start writing a story about it.

- Carl Sandburg's "Theme in Yellow" will be read aloud and discussed briefly, then the participants will pick an inanimate object and describe Halloween from that object's perspective
- Several Halloween-themed images will be provided and the participants will select one and build a story around the image

The last half hour will be unstructured sharing and writing time. Participants will be split into groups and encouraged to share their work with each other and discuss ideas that they had from the prompts and writing exercises. This will give participants time to socialize with each other or even begin collaborating on writing projects, and will also give them time to continue working on their writing if a particular prompt or writing exercise from earlier in the session has sparked something they are interested in continuing.

Week 2: Small Group Sharing

During week two, teens will be asked to bring a finished draft of a short story, poem, song lyrics, or other short piece of writing to share. However, to allow anyone who did not bring a finished piece to share to participate, the first half hour will be spent listening to a read aloud, and anyone who needs to spend the time writing will be welcome to do so. This will also allow late arrivals to join without interrupting the writing discussions that will take place during the latter part of the program, and will give everyone a chance to settle into a calm and creative mindset. Further, research has shown that children's belief that pleasure reading is important declines as they get older, and, even though they can read for themselves, reading aloud to older children and teens can help them rediscover the joy of pleasure reading (deCourcy Hinds, 2015).

The read aloud for week three will be “The Landlady” by Roald Dahl, which was selected because its length is ideal for a half hour read aloud and its twisted end fits the Halloween theme nicely. Also, the author will likely be familiar to the teens, but many may know him primarily from his children’s books. This may help teens who have begun to associate reading primarily with schoolwork to reconnect with pleasure reading. Roald Dahl’s short story collections will be included on the book display so that teens who enjoyed the story can check out some of his other short stories afterward.

The remaining hour will be spent reading each other’s work and providing feedback. To start, the librarian will lead the group in creating a set of guidelines for the workshop. The guidelines do not have to be extensive, and a few simple rules such as whether or not interrupting an author in the middle of their reading is acceptable, how much time should be spent discussing each piece, or how to ensure critical feedback is constructive should be sufficient. This exercise is primarily to give the teen participants an opportunity to have input in the design and structure of the program, as it is particularly important and valuable for this age group to have agency in shaping their own activities (YALSA, 2018). The rules will be written on poster paper and displayed on the wall so that they can be referenced during the remainder of the workshop.

Once the rules are set, participants will be divided into groups of three to four, and will share their pieces with each other. Group members will be asked to discuss each piece and share a couple of their favorite things about it, as well as offer any constructive critiques or suggestions they might have. By providing both positive and constructive feedback, the teens will both provide each other with support and challenge each other to improve, both of which are necessary for the growth and development of teens (YALSA, 2018).

Week 3: Whole Group Sharing

The third session will be organized similarly to the second, with a half hour of reading aloud—week three’s read-aloud will be Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery,” and, again, Shirley Jackson’s other works will be included on the book display for teens who particularly enjoyed “The Lottery”—and unstructured writing time, followed by discussions. In the third week, however, the teens will read their works to the entire group. Once again, after each reading, participants will be asked to share any positive and constructive feedback. This week gives the teens a chance to work out any final kinks in their work, while also challenging them to share it with a larger group, and, in doing so, helping them build confidence in their work. At the end of the session, participants will be able to submit their work to be printed in the anthology.

Week 4: Showcase and Celebration

The final week will consist of an open mic where teens who want to share their work by reading it aloud will have the opportunity to do so. Printed copies of the anthology will also be distributed to participants. Teens benefit from having their accomplishments celebrated (Search Institute, 2020), and the purpose of this event is primarily to celebrate their achievements and give them an opportunity to share their work with each other, as well as any friends or family members they want to invite to the event or show the anthology to.

Marketing

The primary marketing strategy for this program will consist of leveraging existing relationships and partnerships with local schools and youth-oriented community organizations. High school teachers, particularly English teachers, will be asked to share the event with their classes, or with students they think might be especially interested or might benefit from the program. Social media will be used as well. This program will be posted about on the library’s Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter accounts, and community partners and schools with accounts

will be asked to repost or share the library's posts on their own accounts as well. High school literature magazines or other local publications for teen writers also often have their own social media channels, so the library will reach out to them as well to invite them to participate and ask them to share the library's posts. The program will also be advertised within the library with flyers and signs posted around the library, as well as through word of mouth—librarians will recommend the program to teens who attend other programs or regularly come to the library.

In addition to providing flexibility to those who are unable to attend all four weeks, part of the intention of the lax attendance policy is to allow the participants themselves to assist with marketing. Attendees, particularly in the first week, will be encouraged to bring friends they think might enjoy the program to the next session. Further, if the program is successful, and the library decides to continue it beyond October, the celebration on the fourth week will serve as a form of marketing as well. Participants' friends who attend the showcase will be encouraged to participate in the program in the future as well.

Materials

- Paper and writing utensils
- Poster paper and markers
- Printouts of halloween-themed images
- Snacks and drinks
 - Hot cocoa and hot apple cider mix
 - Halloween candy and snacks

Budget

Printing the anthology using a print-on-demand service for a basic paperback book with 50 or fewer pages will cost roughly \$2 per copy, so for an estimated 20 copies the cost will be around \$40 dollars. Most of the other materials needed for the program are readily available at most public libraries, but an additional \$10 will be budgeted for paper and ink for promotional materials, and an additional \$40 will be budgeted for drinks and snacks for the celebration, bringing the total budget up to \$90.

Evaluation

This program will be evaluated by attendance. If most of the participants attend multiple sessions and the overall attendance count is relatively consistent or grows over the course of the four weeks, that will be a strong indication that the program is successful. Informal observation of participants will also be used to evaluate the program. If the program is successful, participants should be observed socializing with each other, enthusiastically sharing their work with each other as well as others not participating in the program, reading or checking out books, especially those from the book display curated for the program, and spending time outside of the program writing, whether that means actually observing them writing in the library or just seeing that they are bringing more writing to each workshop.

Teens will also be asked for their input and feedback regarding the program. During the third and fourth weeks in particular, the teens will be asked if they would be interested in continuing to participate in weekly writing workshops, and, if so, if there is anything they would like to see change going forward. This will not only be useful for evaluating the program and shaping it moving forward, but will also increase the teens' sense of agency in the program's design, which will encourage further engagement.

References

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