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## A Short on Time Short Story Contest: Inspiring Creativity in the Library

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# A Short on Time

## Short Story Contest: Inspiring Creativity in the Library

*Alexandra Boris*

### INTRODUCTION

Academic libraries are known as spaces to support school curricula and research needs which, while accurate, can often alienate professionals in fields such as creative writing. This can cause some to hesitate when entering the library with the intention of finding support in this subject area.<sup>1</sup> To address this, John C. Hodges Library at the University of Tennessee Knoxville created an event to bring creative writing students and professionals into the library and dissipate any stigmas associated with academic libraries.

The event, titled “Short Story Contest,” included a write-in event tied to National Novel Writing Month, or NaNoWriMo, in which students were challenged to write a short story with specific prompts provided by the library and a limited time frame in which to write and edit their pieces. The write-in portion of the event provided an interactive one-stop shop in which librarians could engage with students looking at careers in creative writing. The Judith Anderson Herbert Writing Center sent writing tutors with specialties in creative writing, and the student-run *Phoenix Literary Arts Magazine* communicated with prospective creators on how they could submit their pieces. Combining all of these services in one space provided encouragement for students with creative writing interests and allowed the university to showcase resources that fit their specific needs.

By allowing students the opportunity to collaborate with professional resources and create an artifact published through the library, this program goes beyond typical write-ins

or workshops based around NaNoWriMo at academic libraries. Uniquely, this program offers creators the opportunity to interact with their peers, professional resources, and librarians to develop an artifact in a low-stress, supportive environment.

## BACKGROUND

NaNoWriMo is an international event that takes place in November in which participants are encouraged to write 50,000 words in thirty days resulting in the first draft of a novel.<sup>2</sup> Grant Faulkner describes the phenomenon as a creative challenge, a journey of self-discovery, and a way of encouraging underrepresented authors to write their stories.<sup>3</sup> As Alex Watson states, NaNoWriMo “write-ins” have become common ever since the event was created. Typically, write-ins have been held in coffee houses, bookstores, and public libraries.<sup>4</sup> The global phenomenon challenges participants while educating them on goal setting, writing with accuracy and speed, and writing fluency.

These goals align with academic libraries’ longstanding goal of contributing to student success through many facets of library service, including physical space, collaboration, and instruction<sup>5</sup> as well as academic libraries’ ongoing efforts to shift focus to the user rather than the collection.<sup>6</sup> Holding write-in events for NaNoWriMo fits into this shift of creating a physical space for students and collaborating with tutoring and writing centers.<sup>7</sup>

Write-ins are described as a gathering of people who write together, discuss tips, and trade writing ideas and stories with one another. Grant Faulkner, who was the executive director of NaNoWriMo as of 2014, said, “Solitude no doubt plays an important part in writing a novel, but in my experience.... I’ve come to believe it takes a veritable village to write a book.”<sup>8</sup> By offering ready-made programming materials, NaNoWriMo creates a useful environment for librarians to host an event with little to no cost and to spotlight their collections dealing with writing and publishing.<sup>9</sup> Although there is a plethora of literature on holding NaNoWriMo events in public libraries, there is significantly less written on holding the event in an academic setting.

The literature on public libraries generally focuses on having a space for writing groups as well as officially registering with the NaNoWriMo writing space list. Princeton Public Library accommodates several writing groups, including one that was formed during NaNoWriMo. With this writing group, the library has no direct involvement in the program other than providing the space as it is run by a volunteer.<sup>10</sup> Academic libraries tend to either hold write-ins or offer workshops. The function of the write-ins that academic libraries offer varies from place to place. At the University of Mississippi, the J. D. Williams Library held a write-in and a workshop inviting participants from the community as well as students to use their space. During this event, the librarians kept the word count progression of the participants in the NaNoWriMo challenge as a way to note the success of the write-in event and workshop.<sup>11</sup> The University of Central Florida released a programming report noting that the write-in sessions and one workshop during NaNoWriMo had little to no attendance.<sup>12</sup> Other universities, such as Maynooth University, take part in the NaNoWriMo-inspired event titled Academic Writing Month, which focuses on

writing for a professional journal rather than creative works.<sup>13</sup> All of these events, while innovative, did not match our focus on supporting students in the creative writing field.

## DESCRIPTION OF CASE STUDY

Trends in programming for NaNoWriMo show that the majority of libraries, public or academic, hold write-ins and provide a space for those participating. These write-ins varied in participation with little to no attendance at the University of Central Florida<sup>14</sup> and twelve participants at the pilot program from J. D. Williams Library at the University of Mississippi.<sup>15</sup> Considering the successes and pitfalls of other libraries, providing more programming than just a space to write could potentially attract more participants. With this in mind, the University of Tennessee's libraries wanted to promote the ideals of this event and support students by creating an event with participatory activities and meaningful interactions between students and librarians.

The University of Tennessee Knoxville's libraries created a short story contest in which participants had a limited amount of time to create a short story based on specific prompts chosen by the person running the event. The event consisted of an in-person write-in event held in a large group study area at Hodges Library. Students were given the prompts, a six-hour deadline, and a limit of 1,000 to 2,000 words. The inspiration for this event was the idea of writing a novel in thirty days but was shortened to create a flash fiction environment. This also gave students the opportunity to learn how to get their ideas out on paper quickly and then go back and edit.

The participants were given three prompts to choose from and a week to submit their short stories. This set parameters for the event that kept participants on track and within the timeframe. Examples of writing prompts given to students can be found in Appendix A, which were taken from free writing prompt websites.<sup>16</sup> Once submissions closed, stories were sent to judges who were given a week to determine which story is the winner. The submitted stories were then curated, formatted, loosely edited, and published on two platforms within UT Libraries. The first platform is a virtual news outlet the library puts out called *Speaking Volumes*. This reaches students, staff, and faculty across campus as well as alumni and community members. The other platform used to publish the stories is UT Libraries' NaNoWriMo research guide. The research guide provides a permanent home for the short stories, allowing people to read them and show off participants' hard work throughout the year. The guide also provides students with continued access to support for their writing even after the contest.

At the event, the library brought in multiple groups that could provide assistance and resources. This included partnering with the Judith Anderson Herbert Writing Center as well as bringing in creative writing MFA and PhD candidates who volunteered to be available to talk with and coach participants. The candidates also provided an opportunity for the students to connect with others pursuing higher degrees in creative writing. Their conversations included talking through the short stories, asking for writing help, or discussing the craft of writing in general. Having these conversations provided a way

to encourage the participants not only in writing their short stories but also in building up their confidence for other creative writing ideas.

Building confidence and inspiring students in the library is an important part of this event. The library provided tools to fight writer's block and helpful ways to keep students writing. The library provided writing prompts and worksheets to help students in the creation of their world, such as character development and world-building.<sup>17</sup> These worksheets were created specifically to help participants in planning their world and provide them with a better understanding of the writing process.

Another part of the write-in event was the display of writing books and related literature. This created an opportunity to show students in the creative writing profession what resources the library offers, including academic writing resources and leisure reading items. The leisure reading books added included fiction from favorite authors that could inspire the creation of other worlds.<sup>18</sup>

One of the most important parts of holding a write-in is creating a comfortable environment for participants in which to write. We did this by creating PowerPoint slides of inspirational pictures found on Pexels, a Creative Commons website. Interspersed in the slides was content that creative writing students may find helpful, such as research guides and writing tools that can be used through the library. The slides were accompanied by ambient music to set the tone for writing.

Running this event over the last three years, we were able to grow the program and improve each iteration to increase participation. In the first year, fall 2019, we challenged participants to write a short story in six hours or less. While those who participated enjoyed this flash fiction challenge, we found that some students wanted to participate but felt they did not have enough time as they were in the library to study or write for their classes. Keeping this in mind, for the fall 2020 short story contest, we allowed students to write and submit their stories within a week. With this process, we saw more student participation since they did not have to choose between their studies and participating in the event.

Another difference in the events between the two years was that all students were online in fall 2020 due to the COVID pandemic. The library continued to pursue outreach and engagement with the student population and encouraged librarians to find ways to interact with them online. We moved the short story contest online to maintain social distancing while still allowing a space for participants to create in a community. We did this by hosting a kickoff event and write-in in which participants could collectively write with others on a Zoom call. The biggest difference between the in-person write-in and the online write-in was the challenge of creating a supportive space in a virtual location. In the physical space, we could provide students with book displays, worksheets, prompts, snacks, and university-specific swag items. In the virtual space, everything had to shift to links or using Zoom technology to achieve the best writing atmosphere. We utilized the PowerPoint slides of inspiring photos from the previous year and interspersed new slides with URL links to resources. This was then screen-shared and played throughout the write-in event for participants to enjoy while writing their stories.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPACT

In the first year of the program, there were seven submissions to the contest, and each of them was published in the library's online newsletter, *Speaking Volumes*. In the second year, with increased online accessibility, this event received eleven submissions. With the increase in submissions, we added an "honorable mentions" category for participants whose stories were close to winning. Combining all we learned from the first two years, the program grew to seventeen submissions by the third year.

The Short Story Contest helps students grow as both creators and students in a few different ways. The event helps students hone their writing skills since being able to write effectively is essential to student success in higher education. While many programs teach writing skills in more traditional ways, this program gives students free rein by allowing them to focus on getting their ideas on the page. This promotes the student's ability to focus on the skill of writing. The event also utilizes the partnership with the Judith Anderson Herbert Writing Center to talk to participants about their writing skills and encourage them to improve.

This event helps students grow by providing materials to help students get started and work through their writing. Just beginning the writing process can be a roadblock when students have an idea but do not know where to go from there. This event uses worksheets and other materials found online to give students questions and ways to work through ideas they may not have thought of yet. For example, the organizers of NaNoWriMo created a character questionnaire that asks basic questions needed for creating a character, such as name and age. These worksheets give students tangible tools for success and help build confidence to work through any future writing issues. Worksheets such as these are freely available to participants to use in either creating their short stories or to keep for the creation of a bigger idea.

Students who attend this event are also given tools to help with goal-setting and deadlines, which can also be applied to their curriculum work. However, the goals must have specific parameters, including feedback, commitment, and peer competition.<sup>19</sup> The short story contest provides students with peer competition and feedback while NaNoWriMo provides support for managing the commitment aspect of goal-setting. For example, NaNoWriMo's event of writing 50,000 words in thirty days is broken down further by stating that participants simply need to write 1,667 words a day. Grant Faulkner writes that goal-setting and deadlines help keep participants accountable,<sup>20</sup> and by breaking it down to a daily word count, the task of writing becomes less daunting and appears more manageable to achieve. These skills can be transferred by students to their work outside of the program and contribute to their success.

This event also focuses on getting ideas and plotlines on the page and then going back and editing. It can be difficult even for experienced creators to simply write down their thoughts and not edit as they go. The short story contest creates an iterative writing process to help students improve their writing by going back and reading their work. Studies have shown that iterative processes do help increase some writing skills<sup>21</sup> and boost confidence.<sup>22</sup> Other studies show using the iterative process helps students identify



inconsistencies in their work.<sup>23</sup> The short timeline participants have in which to complete the short story forces them to focus more on the idea and plot and less on grammar and editing. Once they get their idea on the page, they can go back and edit. This will continue to be a useful skill in students' future careers as one of the challenges of writing is simply getting thoughts on the page, while editing is something that can be done once all ideas are fleshed out and written out.

This event serves students in the creative writing field by connecting them to resources, publishing their stories, and building their confidence. While the short story contest provides tools for participants to help them write a short story, it also introduces them to all the library has to offer for future creative work. Libraries offer a wide variety of services to an even wider audience. This event focuses on showing participants how the library can be a resource to them in the future. For example, authors who write historical fiction or biographies will need to conduct in-depth research. Even those not writing in these specific genres will spend time researching varied topics, including historical records, art, and scientific information, among other areas. Julia Glassman talks about how she never saw herself as a researcher until she found herself researching coyote habits and how to be a sculptor for a writing project.<sup>24</sup> Having access to these research resources is an obvious way that libraries can support creative writers and provide connections to other resources, such as in-house writing centers, literature on creative writing, and information on the current writing market.

The write-in event helps those in the creative writing field by providing resources to combat writer's block. Writer's block takes many forms and can happen at any phase of the writing process. This event offers several different tools to help fight writer's block and inspire creativity in other ways, whether that be through reading works by other writers or writing a short story based on a randomly selected prompt. The tools provided at the event are designed to be reusable, so even if participants do not need them that night, they will have the resources for the future.

This event adds more value for students by publishing selected works submitted by participants. The stories are published in our library's online newsletter, *Speaking Volumes*, which is where our library publishes articles intended for its audience of students, faculty, staff, and alumni, informing them about what the library is doing for the community. The stories are also published in the library's NaNoWriMo research guide to showcase the talent of past authors and provide inspiration for others. Our libraries' marketing editor formats each story beautifully and publishes them as PDFs. Not only does this give the participants recognition for their work, but it also gives them the opportunity to say they have been published.

One of the most important benefits of this event is that it attracts creators to the library and allows them to interact in a creative space. Library instruction and promotion generally focus on support for finding scholarly literature to support writing academic research papers. Creators are an important part of a campus and are a group that is often overlooked when the library markets its more research-intensive resources. Once they are through the door, however, it becomes easier to show creators the resources and support the library has to offer. In that sense, the short story contest serves as a marketing tool that can connect

students interested in creative writing to library resources they might not otherwise be aware of. Because not all students who participate are creative writing or English majors, the program reaches a wide audience that enjoys writing in their free time or even those who just need a break from their studies. This event encourages students to work on their writing and creative skills with a low-stress assignment in an enjoyable, comforting, and supportive environment.

Showing students the value of the library may be one of the most direct routes to reaching undergraduates, but it is also important to reach creators at the graduate level. When creating this event, the idea of partnering with others across campus, such as the Judith Anderson Herbert Writing Center in our case, was key to the success of the program. This event specifically calls on tutors from the writing center who are currently working on their master's or doctorate in creative writing. This allowed librarians the opportunity to talk with these graduate students directly and create connections with them. Since this program has been through three iterations, we have had the opportunity to make connections with graduate students in the creative writing program who continue to volunteer and work at the event. One tutor has been to all three iterations of the event because they enjoy interacting with participants and learning something new about the library in the process.

The short story contest and write-in event present an opportunity for expansion. As mentioned previously, the program has reached out to the student-run *Phoenix Literary Arts Magazine* and the creative writing master's and doctorate programs. By understanding creators' needs, we can identify other departments to reach out to and add to the resources the library can connect creators to. This creates partnerships and collaboration opportunities for future programming. An example of how this program could be expanded is through collaboration with the art department to add art to the submitted stories or prompts given. This could bring more creators into the library by having them collaborate on a project.

## CONCLUSION

The growth of the short story contest and write-in event over the past three years has demonstrated the importance of creative programming focused on student success that gives students a low-stress, supportive environment that connects them to resources and experts in an interactive way. Feedback from program participants indicated interest in more programs geared toward creation. This program connects students with resources, but it also helps them create a product. One poignant example happened at our latest write-in event when a student shared that they had never finished a creative writing project before. That student went on to submit their work to the short story contest and was clearly proud to have finished a project. Their story shows how impactful a short story contest event can be. There are lasting benefits: providing students with the confidence to finish a project can translate to their university life and careers.

For any library wanting to emulate this program, connecting to campus partners such as writing centers and creative writing programs is a key starting point. Since these



partners have a network and interest in this area, they have a good foundation for attracting attention to the desired group of participants. UT Knoxville's program was successful in attracting student participation because the library reached out to these partners and secured their investment in the program. Including campus partners in such an event can also build a relationship with the partners themselves, encouraging them to utilize and collaborate with the library in the future.

The short story contest event's initial intentions were to provide a space that encourages creative writing students to enter the library and showcase the resources available to them. Through several years of doing this program, we have succeeded in creating a low-stress, supportive environment for individuals participating in NaNoWriMo. In the years to come, this event will continue to focus on building relationships with the students, staff, and faculty working in the creative writing field on campus and facilitating their connection to the resources available to them.

## Appendix A

Examples of writing prompts given to students.

1. You started listening to a podcast about strange creatures in myths and legends. Jokingly, you start to put out offerings of bread and such, asking permission to cross bridges and fields. One day you hear a small voice in your ear saying, “No one has given me an offering in centuries.”
2. It’s your first night at the haunted house and your door shuts and locks itself. There’s a ghost in the room with you, and it’s trying to keep something else out.
3. Write an old children’s fairy tale but from the perspective of the villain without giving away which story it is until the very end.
4. You were one of the most powerful superheroes and always in constant conflict with one of the most powerful supervillains. Then the day after you retire from the superhero business, you get a phone call. It’s your arch-nemesis. They say, “Hey, um, do ya wanna hang out later? It’s cool if ya can’t.”

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