

Teaching NaNoWriMo at University

By Ian Randall Wilson

Here's some tips on running your class as part of NaNoWriMo from me, Ian Randall Wilson. I'm an instructor at the UCLA Extension Writers Program in Los Angeles, California. 2010 marks the 5th year I've run an Extension class as part of NaNoWriMo. My completion rate for the challenge has averaged over 80% (while the international completion rate for those who register on the NaNo site is about 16%). My first two groups were about 23 participants in each. I prevailed on Extension to increase the enrollment and in 2008, I had 46 participants. In 2009, we had 44 participants. Once more in 2010, we're trying to get to the full complement of 50. This sounds like a giant class -- and learning all those names is a challenge -- but not nearly as unwieldy as you might think. The sheer mass of writers creates an amazing energy. People write like crazy because they see others around them doing the same.

I'm the author of two short story collections (*Hunger and Other Stories*; *Absolute Knowledge: Stories*), and a novella, *Great Things Are Coming*. Long before NaNo ever existed, I wrote my first novel using many of the principles I later discovered in Chris Baty's book, *No Plot? No Problem!* (which I use as the text book for my class). I'm also an executive at a major motion picture studio. I've recently completed a draft of a new novel, again using many of the NaNoWriMo principles which allowed me to complete the draft in a much shorter time than usual.

Your guidance in a class setting, your support and your commitment toward getting everyone across the finish line of 50,000 words will produce a significantly higher completion rate for your participants than those who are attempting this on their own. It's a form of the Heisenberg effect: That you take an interest will spur people on to write more; some of them don't want to disappoint you; others just need encouragement.

I always set up the class schedule so that the first actual writing class falls on November 1st. This way I believe we get everyone off to a good start as if a race is beginning.

One of your first goals is to manage expectations downward. The goal is to complete the challenge and produce a 50,000 word (first) draft of a novel. The goal is NOT to produce a polished piece of marvelous literature that is ready for publication on December 1 following the conclusion of the challenge nor one that will win writers the National Book Award or the Mann Booker Prize. Participants have to be disabused of such lofty aims from the first meeting; otherwise they'll find ways not to do the writing.

You're running what I call a "writeshop" as opposed to a traditional "workshop" so the object is to keep everyone writing. UCLA Extension's writing program is renowned for its workshops so it's a bit of a shock for people to learn that there won't be any workshopping. But any kind of sharing during the writing phase inevitably means that the "Inner Editor" (see Chris Baty's book) has escaped and is trying to impede the writing progress.

I found that there it's necessary to prepare people for what's to come so I have two classes of preparation (last two weeks of October) before the writing period starts. Participants will have many questions and concerns about the journey on which they're embarking and you'll need all that time.

On a practical note, make sure you have enough electrical outlets and extension chords. You can suggest that people bring their own but it's really helpful to provide them for the class. UCLA Extension has been very good in this regard. We operate out of a room that has an outlet for each seat so there's plenty of power.

Another practical note: I use music extensively so if you decide to do so, make sure your room is set up for it or you have a portable player available.

Most workshops occur in a desk-in-the-round setting. For the NaNo writing, it's better to be in rows. Less distracting I think if people are not looking directly at each other. My room is a sizeable lecture hall.

I've discovered that I'm a cheerleader during the entire of month of November. I don't wear a little skirt or shake pom-poms, but my role is to facilitate and encourage. And if all else fails to get down on my knees and beg the participants to make their daily word count quota. If you have any performer in you, running a NaNo class is ideal for this.

Once the writing begins, at the start of each class session I check in with each participant to find out their word count and I do so publicly in front of everyone. I do the same at the end of the class before I dismiss them. The ones who are on target or far ahead act like a model for the ones who aren't doing as well. I try to offer some tips and strategies to get to the word count quota. I try to find out quickly what might be the obstruction. My student evaluations have indicated that the public call-out of the word count acts as a strong motivator. It occurs to me that this is similar to the public weigh-ins at the diet centers.

I'm also an amateur psychologist during the period. People have all sorts of reasons why they can't write or don't want to write or find reasons to do something else. Part of my role seems to be to plumb those mental shoals and get them going again. Sometimes people want permission to write or to take the time out of their schedule to do so and my interaction with them provides the necessary consent.

I tell people to cover metaphorically their backspace key on the computer and if they're unable to summon up the image, then I tell them to tape it over literally during the writing period. Eliminating the device that allows them to go back forces them to go forward.

I encourage them to bring snacks during the writing session, but I don't want them to be so comfortable that their energy flags. I don't play the most comforting music. I have a theory of right brain writing which says that forcing the mind to overcome a distraction -- in this case the music -- will produce a significant word count. But a note on this: the

first time I ran a NaNo class, I brought in a movie, thinking that they'd hear the soundtrack and keep writing. (I had read that the poet John Ashberry writes poems this way.) Big mistake: Virtually everyone stopped to watch the film. I cut it off quickly and never made that error again.

I run contests throughout a part of the writing period. Because I work for a studio, I have access to some promotional movie swag including T-shirts and hats and soundtracks and the like. The person who writes the most words in the interval wins something.

Everyone in the class has to register on the NaNo site as a participant, and they must update their word count number on a daily basis. That is a course requirement. I then use one of the available NaNo "widgets" which I embed in a webpage so that everyone can see what everyone else's progress is. People I see lagging, I email to find out the problem. Again it came back in the student evaluations that the web page acted as a motivator. Participants loved to see how the others were doing and in many cases it spurred them on to greater writing.

I always send out an email message after every class with a summary of the writing exercises we did in the class, sometimes with a list of the songs I played because people seem to be interested. I include suggestions for what to do and how to approach the writing during the week. Participants seem to like this and I have to say it factors in positively to my class evaluations for those of you getting evaluated by your students.

Every writing session I offer a multitude of exercises which are designed to generate material but are tied in to the progress of the novel. Some of them I've taken from Chris Baty's book, others are my own exercises that I use in some of my other writing classes. I don't make it mandatory that people do the exercises; I simply offer it to anyone who thinks it will be useful to generate new material. I'd say about half the group does the exercises. Here's a simple one: Have the main character lie about something and write the aftermath and repercussions of that lie.

Before each writing session I offer tips and tricks to increase the word count. Some of them again are taken from Chris Baty's book; others are of my own creation. Here's one for you: While Chris suggests that you give a character a first, last and middle name -- and each time you refer to that character you use all three names -- word counts jumps as a result -- I've gone farther and suggest you give a character a long Spanish name such as Íñigo Alonso de Montoya y Pérez de las Altas Cumbres. Word count really jumps every time you use that character's full name. Plus you get an intended comedic effect from the formality of the name.

In the United States, the end of the month of writing includes the Thanksgiving holiday. As I mentioned earlier, my schedule has the writing begin on November 1st and sometimes that falls on a Thursday which means successive writing classes are also on Thursdays. So for the holiday it will be necessary to schedule a Wednesday class just before. Many people will be out of town but a significant number will show up and appreciate the opportunity for the class.

Thanksgiving is a difficult time to be writing because it's generally a family-centered holiday. Chris Baty has some tips in his book about this which I echo. I emphasize to my class that they've gotten their families supporting the challenge so far, the holiday is not the time to stop their support. If the writer can't really participate in the holiday activities this time around, the writer can tell his or her family that they'll make it up next year or at Christmas. Or they'll have a special dinner celebration after the writing is done. You'll have to help your class manage this. And if they absolutely can't write over the holiday because of commitments, you'll have to help them manage that, too, finding ways to make up for the lost sessions.

Every time someone crosses the finish line and completes the challenge I always single those writers out for approbation and applause. I so want the writers to succeed that it's a great feeling for me, too, as they cross. Between class sessions if someone crosses, I'll send out a congratulatory email to everyone and then again recognize the winners in class.

Toward the end, when writers are close to the goal, if they're struggling, I may give them a directed assignment during the class session. I may say, for the next fifteen minutes you'll write nothing but description of the scene you're currently in. Give me 2000 words of the setting. And that may be enough to get them across the line. Sometimes you have to momentarily direct them away from the story toward a pursuit they can easily and obviously accomplish to get that final bit of progress. Then, with the 50,000 word goal reached and still some time available, they can return to filling in.

After November is over, I have one final class the first week of December which is a celebration and class reading. This is the first time the work is shared. Depending on class size and how many want to read, I have everyone come up and read a selection for a few minutes. I explain that as a published author, they will have to read their work in public so it's something to get used to. It's part of the writer's life and now that they have finished a novel, they should claim the mantle of writer and all that comes with it.

I hope this information is helpful to you and good luck with your classes. I'm registered on the NaNo site as IanRWilson so I'm happy to take some questions as you go along.