

# Icebreakers and Opening Games

chapter  
ONE

## Building Trust

Trust between all teachers and their students, and between the students themselves, requires nurturing. WritersCorps teachers work with youth at sites from public housing to juvenile lockup and have found that a sense of safety rarely exists at the start of a workshop. Trust develops with time, as everyone gets to know one another, sharing challenges and triumphs.

Most of us need an atmosphere of trust and support to learn any subject. This need increases when the activity is creative writing, for such expression often requires emotional risk. A teacher must be certain that young writers feel safe before asking them to shape imagination into stories or to place memories and deep feelings into poem lines.

We're sure that you, as teachers, set clear expectations so that your students know they will be safe during classroom work and conversations. WritersCorps teachers too establish ground rules, discuss expectations, and raise issues of confidentiality. They do so in a manner most consistent with individual style. Some teachers prepare a poster of rules to hang on the wall; others create such a list with their students.

Whatever approach is appropriate for you and your students, it is important to recognize that inviting creative expression in your classroom requires that you pay heightened attention to

**How often do teachers say “please” instead of “do the assignment”?**

—High school student of WritersCorps teacher Beto Palomar

issues of privacy and trust. We can't stress too strongly that as the adults, we teachers must take responsibility for our students' emotional safety when we ask them to write about and then share feelings and personal experiences.

In the beginning WritersCorps teachers avoid asking students to write about sensitive topics, such as their fears, their worst memory, or their deepest loss. Instead, it is usually best to keep first sessions light and somewhat playful.

Reading one's own writing during the first session of a workshop helps establish the WritersCorps teacher as a writer and gives students a sense of the teacher's interests and styles. Such a reading also models a willingness to risk exposure—the very behavior that teachers desire from students.

Some teachers begin by having students write group poems because the process encourages teamwork and is less threatening than facing a blank sheet of paper on one's own. Others have students write individual poems immediately, allowing youth free expression. WritersCorps teacher Beto Palomar asks students to write him about what he needs to know about them to be their teacher.

Often teachers pass out writing journals when they first meet with students and give youth time to create collages on the journals' covers. This allows everyone to work on a nonthreatening and enjoyable project, encourages students to adapt a generic journal to their individual tastes, and validates each student's need for expression.

WritersCorps teacher Michelle Matz begins each class with a journal-writing session. She tells students that they can fold over the page they've written if they wish to keep their words private. Michelle tells students that in the five years she's been at their school, she's never once opened a folded journal page; she lets the youth know that she has the utmost respect for their privacy.

Michelle's invitation gives the young writers the power to determine whether or not they want anyone to read their journal entries. The youth feel the respect underlying Michelle's offer. Both this respect and the power of having a choice do much to encourage their trust.

Beto Palomar reports that students respond to his invitations to write. As one student commented, "How often do teachers say 'please' instead of 'do the assignment'?"

Michelle, Beto, and all WritersCorps teachers continue to nourish trust throughout the year by extending their students' right to make choices about their own

writing. Which journal entries do they want to remain private? Which poem do they want to read to the class? And eventually, which of their writings do they want to publish?

## **SHIFTING THE MOOD**

Even after establishing trust between the youth and between the youth and the adult, WritersCorps teachers often encounter students in moments of stress. Perhaps there has been an altercation in the lunchroom; perhaps the youth argued with her mother right before school; perhaps a child’s father left home; there was a death in the family or a disagreement between friends.

WritersCorps teacher Jime Salcedo-Malo most often begins his workshops with an exercise designed to focus or to calm students. In a classroom of bored eighth graders, Jime dramatically recites one of his own poems by heart. With a small after-lunch workshop of thirteen-year-old girls, he leads a guided meditation that reconnects each student with her own imagination and capacity for peace. This shifting frees students for the writing ahead.

Some teachers use physical activity toward similar ends. As Gloria Yamato writes of her workshop with seven- to ten-year-old students at the Girls After School Academy: “I play with the girls, get into their rhythms, turning and skipping double Dutch. It pays off in workshop buddies and bundles of poems.”

Instead of double Dutch, capoeira, or cartwheels, Gloria sometimes shares yoga with the girls to, as she puts it, “refocus on our bodies.”

## **ICEBREAKERS: THE GREAT EQUALIZERS**

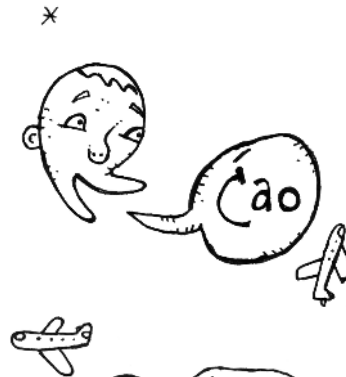
Icebreakers or warm-up games are a great way to begin any class session—and not only the first gathering. They create a feeling of class cohesion, which is particularly useful when the youth come from a number of different schools. They’re also effective when a teacher is working with a group of students who have varying degrees of English-language proficiency or when there’s a substantial age range. “Warm-up games allow each student’s voice to be heard in the beginning of each class,” says WritersCorps teacher Michelle Matz. “This helps the quieter kids feel that there’s a space for them too.”

Here is an assortment of icebreakers and opening games that have worked for WritersCorps teachers. In general, opening games are longer than icebreakers and can easily lead directly into the primary writing exercise.

## INTRODUCTIONS

### Exercise ***Are You Listening?***

1. Students sit in a circle.
2. Each participant says his or her name and one fact about him- or herself.
3. Each person repeats what the person before has said.



### Exercise ***Lydia, Lion***

1. Students sit in a circle.
2. Each person says his or her name and a word that begins with the first letter of that name—for example, “Simon, snake.”



### Exercise ***Body Movements***

1. Students sit in a circle.
2. Each student says his or her name and does a body movement (for example, placing a palm over the heart and then raising an arm to throw the heart's love into the room).
3. Everyone in the group repeats each name and body movement.

## OPENING GAMES

### Exercise *Musical Chairs*

1. Set up the chairs in a circle, setting out one less chair than there are participants.
2. Select a caller, who stands in front of the group.
3. The students then “number off”: the first person calls out, “Lettuce”; the second calls, “Spinach”; the next calls, “Lettuce” again—continuing this sequence around the circle.
4. Everyone sits except the caller.
5. The caller calls out one of three possibilities: lettuce, spinach, or mixed greens. If she calls, “Lettuce,” all those who had initially called out “Lettuce” must move from their seats and take one of the other vacated chairs. If she calls, “Spinach,” all the spinach people have to move. If she calls, “Mixed greens,” everyone must find a vacant chair, including the caller.
6. Whoever is left without a chair becomes the new caller.

### Exercise *Truth or Lie*

1. In pairs, in small groups, or in the whole group, ask students to tell two truths and a lie. Because students are selecting which truths to share and which lies to invent, they have control over their degree of exposure. Still, we suggest that you choose this icebreaker only if your students are familiar and comfortable with each other.
2. If you want (and if you feel trust is assured), you can ask the group to try to spot the lie.
3. Ask the students to write a poem about the lie they told.



## Exercise

### *Card Charades*

WritersCorps teacher Chad Sweeney created a version of the old party game of charades.

1. Ask a student volunteer to draw a card from a deck of cards.
2. The student then acts out the activity and the emotion of the chosen card, according to the following key:

Ace	Arguing with your parents
2	Brushing your teeth in a hurry
3	Playing a guitar for money
4	Walking a big dog in the park
5	Flying a kite in a strong wind
6	Waiting in line at a bank
7	Getting sick in an airplane
8	Riding a bicycle downhill
9	Walking home in the rain
10	Studying for a test late at night
Jack	Playing the piano at a famous concert hall
Queen	Blowing out candles on a birthday cake
King	Watching a movie with a special friend
Spade	Mad
Club	Scared
Heart	Happy
Diamond	Sad

For example, a student who draws a five of hearts must act out flying a kite in a strong wind and being happy at the same time.

## Exercise

### *Jeopardy*

1. List six categories, such as emotions, colors, household items, geography, animals, and outer space.
2. Ask students to give an example for each category; list these words on the chalkboard or on chart paper.
3. When everyone has contributed words to each category, ask students to write a poem using any of the listed words.

## WRITING WARM-UPS

### Exercise

#### *Three-Minute Stories*

1. Ask students to tell a three-minute story about a time when something amazed them. For example, WritersCorps teacher Kim Nelson begins by telling a childhood story of the time when her family came home from church to find that their seven canaries had escaped from the cages and were flying around the room.
2. The students can also write a poem or story based on their memories.

### Exercise

#### *Sounds Like*

1. Take a piece of paper and crumple it.
2. Make a list of things the crumpling paper sounds like (for example, rain, zipping a zipper, frying chicken, anger, a window breaking).
3. Students can write a group poem or individual poem based on this list.

## Exercise

### *A Pencil Isn't Just a Pencil*

1. Students stand in a circle.
2. One student chooses an object in the room, such as a pencil, a yardstick, or a piece of paper.
3. The student names something the object might be. For example, the pencil might be a toothbrush, a cane for a very small person, or a long earring.
4. The student passes the object to the next person in the circle, who names something else the object might be.
5. Ask the students to write a poem using these metaphoric images (for information on metaphoric images, see Chapter Five).



## Exercise

### *Freewrite*

1. Start a class session with freewriting. The rule is that anything goes. Ask students not to lift pen from paper and not to worry about spelling or grammar. Assure them that you will not require them to read their writing out loud, although they may choose to do so.
2. You can either give your students a prompt (see Chapter Four for ideas) or let them write about any subject that is on their minds.
3. After writing, ask students to circle a word in their freewrites that they like the sound or smell of, as in “I like the smell of hope.”
4. Alternatively, you can ask students to circle five words from their freewrites and pass these words to the student on the right. Each student then writes a five-line poem with the words they’ve just received.