

Improving the Blank Page: Cultivating Authentic Writing in Virtual Spaces

Supported by a college-access grant, a group of educators in Louisiana created a virtual summer program to help students enhance their creative and critical writing.

Recently, I (Michelle) was reading an assignment from one of my university students, a preservice teacher majoring in secondary English education. She made a note that the ninth-grade students with whom she was working had not had a “normal” school year since they were in the sixth grade. I paused to think about it. I even jotted it down on a sticky note to make sure this was correct. It was. It is no wonder students, teachers, and administrators are feeling the growing pressure of schooling in a global pandemic.

The 2021–22 academic year marked the third year of COVID-era schooling, with teachers at the forefront of this educational shift, as many schools shuttered their doors for months. Among other challenges, the negative social and emotional impacts for students were frequently noted (Dorn et al. 6). For instance, the need to physically distance to remain safe from the virus was a concern for adolescents in particular, “for whom interaction with peers is especially important” (Andrews et al. 585). To address this concern, Jessica Bartlett and Rebecca Vivrette suggested that young people “stay connected even when physical separation is necessary for safety reasons,” including through virtual interactions (1). During a time when in-person experiences are limited, connecting virtually is an opportunity for adolescents to communicate with friends and family to maintain social connections and continue to learn and make academic progress.

As English language arts educators, it is our responsibility to teach, support, and nurture students as readers, writers, and thinkers, even if we

are not in the same physical space. In this article, we share the story of how a group of educators did just that. Through participation in the first-ever virtual Improving the Blank Page (IBP) writing camp, IBP facilitators, teachers, and students embraced the online learning environment to enhance their creative and critical writing.

OVERVIEW: IMPROVING THE BLANK PAGE

Through a local, federally funded college-access grant, Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), we formed a partnership between a local school system and university to support middle and high school students from high-needs schools in their preparation for postsecondary education. Through this partnership, the Improving the Blank Page writing program—originally created in 2006 by a local National Writing Project site director—has worked with students and teachers from area GEAR UP schools to support writing and writing instruction since 2015. Every summer, the project kicked off with an annual writing camp held at the university, with GEAR UP teachers attending the first week of camp and students from the different GEAR UP schools joining during the second week.

Once schools began to move to remote instruction in March 2020, it became evident that the summer camp would be affected. Though we were initially unsure how much interest a virtual writing camp would generate, we decided that teachers and students needed the opportunity to gather, even if

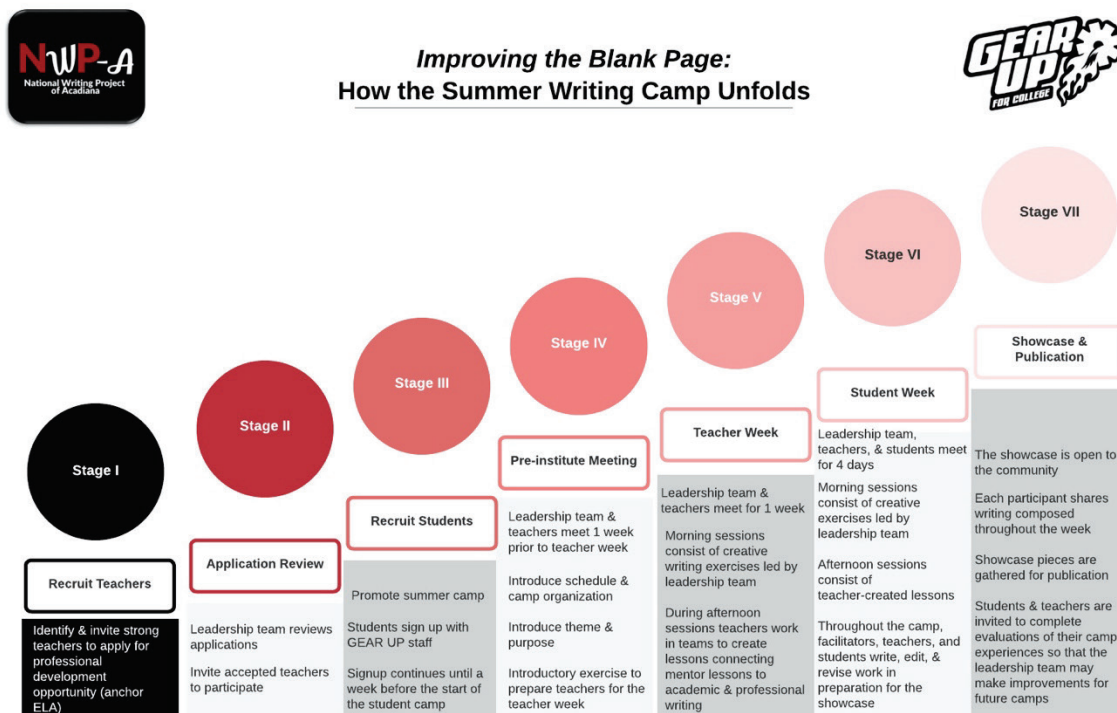


FIGURE 1
The IBP facilitators and participants engaged in a multistage process to plan and produce the summer 2020 writing camp.

virtually, to write and connect. Thus the inability to gather in person due to COVID-19 led to the first virtual IBP camp. In this article, we offer an outline of the format of the 2020 IBP summer writing camp, with significant modifications from previous years as the project went remote (see Figure 1). We also detail elements of the virtual writing camp to demonstrate how we shifted the program to a virtual platform while simultaneously providing enriching experiences for GEAR UP students and teachers.

PRE-INSTITUTE MEETING

In early June 2020, the leadership team and GEAR UP teachers gathered via *Zoom* for the pre-institute meeting to get acquainted, discuss the schedule and organization of the virtual camp, and take part in a writing exercise to model what was expected of teachers in the institute. We explained that the year’s theme, “The Aesthetic Academic,” would make explicit connections between creative and critical writing through participation in vetted creative writing exercises, focusing on elements such as imagery and narrative structure that inform critical/academic

writing tasks. For the creative writing task, teachers reflected on 2020 and wrote vignettes based on memories from the year that related to teaching, friendships, hobbies, and learning. We explained that this exercise would inform a critical writing task: writing a letter to the students who would be participating in the camp. The goal was to help students feel connected to the project—though they were not physically together—by receiving a care package prior to camp that included the letters, a journal, a book of writing prompts, and other writing supplies.

IBP TEACHER WEEK

On the first morning of the virtual camp, three IBP facilitators, two GEAR UP coaches, and fifteen GEAR UP high school teachers met via *Zoom* for a morning of creative writing. After two and a half hours of writing together, participants took a break and then resumed their writing with another two-and-a-half-hour session, this time asynchronously. We followed this format throughout the week.

The next day, the teachers were introduced to their main goal for the week: to design an exercise

using creative writing to inspire and inform a type of critical/academic writing to be implemented in the second week of camp with students. We identified seven types of writing as essential to preparing students for writing success at the precollegiate and collegiate levels: letters/emails, scholarship and application essays, résumés, research papers, argumentative essays, critical analyses, and annotated bibliographies. The IBP facilitators modeled the process as they led the teachers in creative writing exercises aligned with various academic writing tasks. After participating in the exercises, we challenged the teachers to synthesize the ideas in the form of a digital, asynchronous lesson that GEAR UP students would participate in during the following week. This lesson was a major component of the summer 2020 camp that had not been included in previous years, and it was an exciting undertaking, as teachers used

the exercises they participated in to create lessons bridging creative and critical writing for students. On the last day of the teacher week, the digital lessons were presented with explanations of the writing tasks and how they would support academic writing.

IBP STUDENT WEEK

The following week, student writers joined the teachers and project facilitators. As in the first week, we offered a combination of synchronous and asynchronous time for writing to ensure opportunities for the group to connect virtually without experiencing “Zoom fatigue.” (See Table 1 for an overview of the schedule for the second week of the writing camp.)

Each morning the students, teachers, and IBP facilitators gathered via *Zoom* for a writing exercise led by an IBP facilitator, a review of the day’s events/tasks, and time for questions. Throughout the week,

TABLE 1
Improving the Blank Page: Student Week (i.e., Week 2) Schedule

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	
8:30–9:00	Teachers and facilitators gather on <i>Zoom</i> call					
9:00–10:00 Synchronous via <i>Zoom</i>	IBP-led writing exercises and expectations for the week	IBP-led writing exercises	IBP-led writing exercises	IBP-led writing exercises and preparation for the showcase	9:00–10:30 Showcase	
10:00–11:30 Asynchronous	Teacher-created writing exercise	Teacher-created writing exercise	Teacher-created writing exercise	Teacher-created writing exercise		
11:30–12:30	Lunch break					
12:30–2:00 Asynchronous	Teacher-created writing exercise	Teacher-created writing exercise	Teacher-created writing exercise	Revision time		
2:00–3:00 Synchronous via <i>Zoom</i>	Sharing and debriefing Writer talk (guest speaker)	Sharing and debriefing Writer talk (guest speaker)	Sharing and debriefing Writer talk (guest speaker)	Sharing and debriefing		
3:00–4:30 Asynchronous with <i>Zoom</i> option (as needed)	GEAR UP teachers and IBP facilitators available via <i>Google Drive</i> and <i>Zoom</i> for student support					

Week 2 was designed to support a writing community and participant collaboration through both synchronous and asynchronous writing, feedback, and sharing activities.

a “word of the day” kicked off each morning’s writing, with participants (including IBP facilitators) engaging in three minutes of nonstop writing using the word of the day as a starting point. The words related to the day’s focus and included terms such as *artistic*, *juxtaposition*, and *collaboration*. Following the warm-up, the camp participants engaged in creative writing, including six-word stories and imitative writing (Day 1), writing from different points of view using pictures and songs (Day 2), and scene writing (Day 3). A brief explanation of writing exercises from Day 1 is included in Table 2.

Following the morning’s whole-group gathering, students worked on two teacher-created, asynchronous

writing exercises. To ensure engagement as students worked independently, the teachers designed the asynchronous lessons to be interactive. For instance, they used *Bitmoji* avatars with embedded audio files in their presentations, recorded videos to talk through writing exercises with students, and tasked students with composing pieces of writing by the end of the session. We used a shared *Google Drive* folder to store materials students needed to access the writing exercises, along with individual folders for everyone involved in the camp to store in-progress and completed writing pieces. Additionally, during the asynchronous writing time, there was a rotation system in place in which a small group of teachers and a facilitator would be on the *Zoom* call at any given time. This way, if students had questions about a writing exercise or wanted feedback on their writing, they had the option to log in and speak with a teacher or facilitator. They also had the option to submit their writing in *Google Drive* and request feedback (having a teacher or facilitator comment on the shared document). Providing opportunities for teacher support to the students during these independent writing times was an important decision made by camp facilitators, who sought to find a balance between synchronous and asynchronous writing. Throughout the week, a number of students logged in to *Zoom* during lunch, sometimes asking a clarifying question and at other times seeking specific writing feedback. One GEAR UP coach noted that some students who logged in at this time might not have felt comfortable speaking up in front of the entire group.

After asynchronous writing time, everyone gathered on *Zoom* at the end of the day to share their writing, debrief the writing exercises, and, in some instances, hear from a guest speaker. Guest speakers included a state poet laureate, a successful screenwriter and poet, and a writer-in-residence, all of whom were easier to schedule for a virtual meeting than in person. Lastly, a small group of teachers and a facilitator remained on *Zoom* for an additional hour and a half after the final synchronous session of the day to provide students with feedback if requested, though these sessions were less frequently attended than the optional *Zoom* support during the middle of the day. Toward the end of the week, however, students sought more writing feedback (whether

TABLE 2
Six-Word Stories and Imitative Writing Tasks

Writing Exercise	Explanation
Six-word stories	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Create a thirty-three-word “word bank.” Eight should be words that make you excited about writing, eight should be words that make you stressed or concerned about writing, three can be coordinating conjunctions, and the final fourteen should be chosen from selected quotes from famous people. 2. Watch the <i>YouTube</i> video introducing six-word stories (“Six Word Stories”), and learn about the supposed Hemingway story that started the entire six-word-story phenomenon: “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.” 3. Create your own six-word story that is your writing memoir so far. The catch: you must select from the thirty-three words in the word bank created in Step 1. 4. Write a second six-word story of what you want your writing future to be (this time using any words you like).
Imitative writing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Read the poem “Knoxville, Tennessee” by Nikki Giovanni. 2. Then, work to construct your own poem imitating Giovanni’s distinctive style (i.e., her repetitious use of <i>and</i> to build excitement about what will come next). 3. Select one of the six-word stories you created in the earlier exercise and use this as a beginning point to start your writing.

Low-pressure writing tasks, such as six-word stories and imitative writing, can help build confidence and engagement.

via *Google Docs* or *Zoom*) as they prepared for the final writing showcase. As part of this preparation, participants were grouped in “teams” that consisted of one member of the leadership team, two or three teachers, and several students. Breaking into small groups as the students prepared for the final showcase allowed them to give and receive feedback as they engaged in revision practices. Given the built-in time for revision, along with the performance-based element of the end-of-camp showcase, students were motivated to obtain feedback and were invested in revising and polishing their writing.

On the final day of the camp, all participants (students, teachers, and facilitators) shared writing they had created over the course of the camp for the virtual showcase. Family, friends, school administrators, and other community members were invited to log in and hear participants share the work they had produced.

CLOSE-UP: TEACHER-CREATED WRITING EXERCISES

SELFIE OF A SCHOLAR

The participants engaged in seven teacher-created writing exercises, each of which began with creative writing and was designed to align with a specific

form of academic writing. One of the exercises was *Selfie of a Scholar*, in which still lifes in art and memoir writing were brought together to aid GEAR UP students in the development of a scholarship essay. The teacher pair who created this lesson used *Google Slides* with *Bitmoji* avatars and audio clips embedded in each slide to communicate content and directions.

Building on a writing exercise led by an IBP facilitator during the first week of and inspired by the 100 Word Story project (“Stories”), the lesson began with writers creating a still life in which they compiled items from their home that defined them and then took a photo of these items. Next, the writers were tasked with creating a 100-word memoir using their still life as a guide. The teachers then explained how the brief memoir could be expanded to form the basis of an essay for a scholarship application. Through each step of the lesson, the teachers shared examples and provided explanations of what to do and how this activity could help students when writing a scholarship or college application essay. By the end of the hour-and-a-half lesson, students had a still-life photo, a 100-word memoir, and the outline for a scholarship application essay (see Figure 2 for images from the lesson).

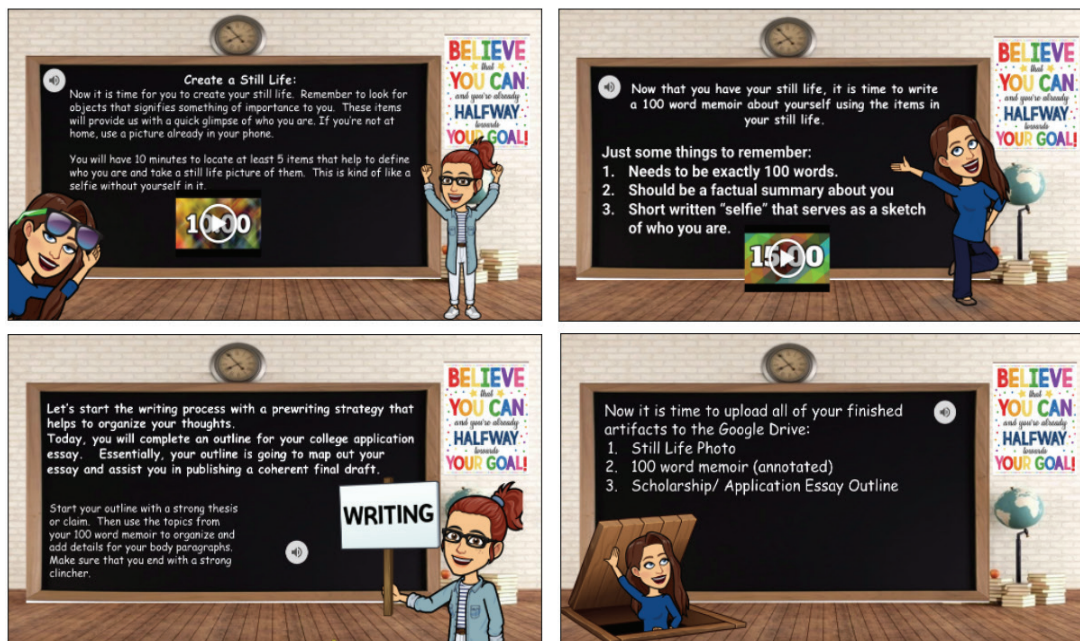


FIGURE 2

One of the exercises asked students to create a still life, compose an accompanying memoir, and then, using the content they had generated, draft a scholarship or college application essay.

CAN YOU SEE WHAT I'M SAYING?

A creative writing exercise that IBP facilitators had been leading for years during in-person events was the Out-In-Out poetry-writing exercise, which typically occurred at a local art museum and was inspired by Philip Levine’s poem “The Simple Truth.” In this activity, writers objectively describe a piece of art (the first “out,” since the writer describes something in a purely objective way), then write a memory prompted by the piece without referring to the artwork itself (the “in,” since the writer is making a personal connection), and finally bring the two sections together in the last portion of the poem (the second “out,” in which the writer makes the connection between the art and the memory, combining the objective and subjective). Gathering in a museum was not an option for the 2020 camp, but there were still opportunities

for writers to engage in this fan-favorite exercise from wherever they were. The teacher pair who created this asynchronous lesson combined the Out-In-Out exercise with argumentative writing, building the fact that participants were in their homes into the exercise. Since participants could not visit a museum, the teachers who created the asynchronous lesson tasked them with selecting an object in their home to compose a poem or piece of prose, focusing on sensory details (the first “out”). Then, participants wrote about a memory the object evoked (the “in”). The third portion of the writing (the second “out”) combined the objective and subjective parts. The teachers then demonstrated how this format could be applied to argumentative writing to aid students in composing a thesis statement (see Figure 3).

Through these lessons, the IBP participants engaged in creative writing while drawing explicit connections to academic writing tasks. Through asynchronous and synchronous writing exercises, hearing from professional writers, and sharing writing, those involved in the 2020 virtual IBP summer camp created a virtual writing community and produced creative and critical writing. On the final day of the two-week camp, the participants shared pieces of their best writing and how their involvement in the partnership project between GEAR UP and IBP would continue to influence them. At the virtual showcase, one student shared a poem inspired by the Out-in-Out writing exercise. The final portion of the poem (the second “out”) is included below:

*Out-In-Out
Argumentative Writing: Explanation*

How you can use Out-In-Out:

The type of thinking required to complete the OUT-IN-OUT can assist with argumentative writing. You go through critical thinking from the outside, a summary. Then you think about things inwardly, which is like an analysis. The final out is where you combine the two and create a thesis. If you were actually completing an argumentative essay on a controversial topic, you would:

1. Write an objective summary of the issue by telling the multiple points of view supported by research. **(out)**
2. Write subjectively about the topic including your feelings or connection to the issue. A personal narrative related to the issue may be used. **(in)**
3. Create a balanced thesis about your issue. **(out)**

Challenge:

1. Pick one of the articles or websites from the resource slide.
2. Read and annotate the text using the symbols we showed you.
3. After reading and annotating, complete the Out-In-Out process.
4. **Part I Out**—List all of the concrete details/facts you found in your reading.
5. **Part II In**—Reflect on the information from the text and create your own viewpoint on the topic. How do you feel? Tell your story!
6. **Part III Out**—Balance your objective facts from Part I and subjective thoughts from Part II to create your intro. paragraph (thesis) as if you were using this to begin your argumentative essay.

Little Red Notebook

Can you see what I’m saying?
 It is a late night confession
 or the reminiscence of a dream.
 A painting of a waterfall
 or the thoughts of the girl
 drowning at the bottom.
 A letter to my mother
 or a quick look into the mirror.
 A love spell or
 the ingredients to a potion
 that turns boys into frogs.
 This little red book contains
 the entire capacity of all my powers.

FIGURE 3
The process for the Out-In-Out creative writing exercise can be applied to argumentative writing.


REFLECTION: LESSONS LEARNED

The COVID-19 pandemic has had considerable impacts on education systems. However, through participation in the virtual IBP summer writing camp, participants were able to connect with others who shared a love for writing. One of the GEAR UP coaches explained that “students were looking for ways to keep in contact with each other after [camp],” suggesting that they enjoyed the virtual interactions they took part in through involvement in the camp. Similarly, an IBP facilitator said, “It seemed like they benefited just from being around other people, even if it was virtually.” Forming an online writing community aligns with recommendations to connect virtually and engage with others through shared interests (Bartlett and Vivrette 3–4). While the virtual camp was not designed to be a professional development experience focused on delivering remote instruction, GEAR UP teachers who participated had an immersive experience in which they created high-quality, digital, asynchronous instruction. Linda Darling-Hammond has noted that “educators are hungry for opportunities to collaborate with and learn from their peers on how to deliver engaging learning experiences and to build new approaches to pedagogy that can enrich the way they use technology to support student learning,” and the 2020 IBP camp was an opportunity for teachers to learn with and from each other while implementing digital instruction. Furthermore, the teacher-created lessons will live on in a way that has not happened in previous summers, since camp participants have continuous access to these digital resources.

The shift to virtual instruction was successful, but we want to note that the virtual component, while allowing some students to participate who might not have been able to otherwise, limited other students’ ability to participate. Unfortunately, four students who originally signed up for the camp did not complete the entire week because of technology issues. Access to technology and reliable Internet connectivity is a concern that must be addressed so that all students have access to quality virtual instruction (Masonbrink and Hurley 1). As more devices are distributed and hot spots are made available at the

district level, we hope more students are able to be involved in virtual events hosted by the IBP project.

The cohort of GEAR UP students involved in this project had an abrupt end to their junior or senior year of high school. As my (Michelle’s) university student majoring in English education suggested, students have not had a “normal” year in quite some time. The students involved in the IBP program did not have a normal end to their high school experiences. Some were not able to walk across a stage at their high school graduation, attend their final school dance, or have the first year of college they had expected. However, this disruption to the norm did not mean that their experiences must be “less than.” For those involved in the 2020

IBP virtual writing camp, there was an opportunity to share fears, disappointments, and hopes through writing; to improve as writers or writing instructors; and to connect with others during a time in which opportunities for interaction were limited. We hope to return to in-person writing events, but this experience reminded us how remarkably resourceful educators and their students can be. In a time of uncertainty, it would have been easy to cancel the summer camp until things “settled down,” but writing is a powerful tool that can connect and heal people. Through a virtual writing camp, program facilitators, teachers, and students came together remotely to improve the blank page. 

Forming an online writing community aligns with recommendations to connect virtually and engage with others through shared interests.

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READWRITETHINKCONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

What do the words we write really have to say about us? In this lesson, students examine the power of word choice as they write six-word memoirs of their lives. After manipulating the language of their memoir with an interactive tool, students reflect on synonymous words that they have explored and choose the best one to use to tell the story of their lives. <https://bit.ly/3wgz9pi>