

CAN YOU NANOWRIMO?

NaNoWriMo. No, it's not the name of a new move that has engulfed dance floors. Nor is it the name of a newly discovered species of dinosaur. It's the frantic scratching of pens against paper, the wild tapping of fingers on keyboards, and the whiz of plot-lines through brains on fire.

NaNoWriMo is National Novel Writing Month (www.nanowrimo.org), an annual adventure that transforms hundreds of middle and high school students, teachers, artists, bakers, and mechanics into novelists—all within the span of a month! Though it only takes place in November, its impact lasts all through the year.

Founded in 1999 by Chris Baty, an Oakland, Calif.-based freelance writer and author of *No Plot, No Problem!*, NaNoWriMo started out as an individual experiment. Baty had always loved to read novels but never felt talented enough to actually write one of his own. One day, he had a brainstorm—why not try writing a novel in 30 days? He recruited 21 of his friends to join him on his literary escapade.

The rules of Baty's writing game were as follows: Participants were allowed to think about their novels and plan them in advance, but they could not write a single word until midnight on November 1. They then had until midnight on November 30 to write 50,000 words and complete their stories!

Chris Baty never expected his experiment to morph into a worldwide phenomenon. But it did. In 2000, 140 people signed up for NaNoWriMo—and over the past six years, the numbers have steadily grown.

NaNoWriMo novelists commit

to the “spontaneous stupidity” for many reasons. Some like the personal challenge. Others enjoy writing without fretting about logic or criticism. Many are simply in love with words—the more the better!

Although not everyone reaches his or her word count, it's the thought—or in this case, the trying and the doing—that counts. For NaNoWriMo people, revision always comes later—that is, during the rest of the year. November is purely a month for getting the stories and characters that live in the mind out onto paper.

Oh, my, what a *novel* and fun concept, you say. That's right! The concept is probably why NaNoWriMo has a growing appeal for more and more young writers.

YOUNG WRITERS JOIN THE CLUB

Last November, more than 59,000 people took up the NaNoWriMo challenge. More than 4,000 students—from second graders to high school seniors—set sail on the maiden voyage of the first-ever NaNoWriMo Young Writers Program. (Unlike the adult participants, they were allowed to choose their own word count.)

Sarah Wasson was one of the participants. An eighth grader at Mendenhall Middle School in Livermore, Calif., her goal was 9,000 words—just about 72 double-spaced typed pages!

Sarah divided her word goal into bite-sized portions of 300 words a day. By the end of November, she was surprised to discover that she had written 10,000 words. “I learned that I could reach a goal that seemed impossible, and I discovered that I truly do love to write,” Sarah told *Writing* magazine.

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“Writing a novel in a month is both exhilarating and stupid, and we would all do well to invite a little more spontaneous stupidity into our lives.”

—the creators of NaNoWriMo

Sarah liked her story so much—it's about two girls who are conjoined at the heart—that she is at work on a sequel.

Sarah wrote her NaNoWriMo novel in good company. All 78 of her eighth-grade classmates took part in NaNoWriMo, and their word counts ranged from 2,000 to 30,000. On Tuesdays and Thursdays throughout November, they were allowed to sprawl out anywhere on the classroom floor, even next to their best friends. Their teacher, Kaarin Greene, provided blankets, cups, and hot water and allowed them to bring in their own instant beverages to drink. Mmmm, hot chocolate!

THE WRITER'S CAFÉ

Participating in a writer's-café is a major highlight of the NaNoWriMo experience for many young writers. In Susan Midlarsky's fifth-grade class at Jewish Community Day School (JCDS), just outside Boston, many NaNoWriMo participants attended weekly write-ins at a local bookstore. There, they had timed writing competitions (Word Wars), schmoozed with adult NaNoWriMo writers, and read their writing aloud.

Samuel Rosenstein wrote an



Samuel Rosenstein

11,000-word first-person story about a 32-year-old pilot named Jay. For him, those write-ins were the best part of the month. Samuel told *Writing*, "My most favorite thing about

NaNo was going to the bookstore with all my friends and having Word Wars. NaNoWriMo taught me that writing is very hard, but it was amazing. I'd do it again!"

Samuel and 22 other students at JCDS surfaced from their writing expedition in December with the realization that yes, they too could be writers.

BEYOND WRITER'S BLOCK

In Amagansett, N.Y., students at East Hampton Middle School inspired one another to reach their goals. On each day in November, their teacher, Meredith Cortes, held class in the computer lab and



"Sometimes my students and I just ... mumbled 'words hard' like crazed cavemen."

gave them tips for writing, as well as time to build their stories.

Both eighth-grader Samantha Harris and seventh-grader John Nolan, completed 50,000 words. (See "50,000 Words in 30 Days.") They were inspired by Ms. Cortes, who has taught NaNoWriMo for the past two years.

Their classmate, Zachary Newburger, 12, also welcomed the challenge. "My goals kept changing over and over. [My word count] was first 5,000 because I thought I couldn't do it. Then it became 8,000, then 10,000, which I reached, then 13,000 and then 14,000. I nailed my goal, getting about 500 more!" he told *Writing*. "I learned that ... there isn't such a thing as writer's block if you set your mind to it."

After the buzzer went off at the end of November, Zachary made the decision to continue

his story about a monster that attacks a young boy. Now, he's revising it.

Chelsea Field, another student of Ms. Cortes's, did not meet her word goal of 10,000 but decided to keep writing anyway. She found NaNoWriMo to be a "worthwhile project" because it taught her "how to extend a story with colorful descriptions and how to make a reader feel like the character itself."

WORDS HARD!

Molly Backes teaches seventh and eighth graders in Moriarty, N.M. All but six of her 135 students voted to participate in

NaNoWriMo. "Every single day, the kids spread out across my classroom and the hallway just outside, making spaces for themselves to write," Backes told *Writing*. "Sometimes my students and I just looked at one another and mumbled 'Words hard!' like crazed cavemen and then went back to our novels."

At the end of the month, Molly Backes was just one of the many teachers who could proudly say that her middle schoolers had written novels—and were official writers. Now, what could be better than that?

Many young NaNoWriMo authors who participated in the Young Writers Program used the 31 days of March to complete National Novel Editing Month (www.nanoedmo.org). What's next on their plate? We at *Writing* suggest NaNoPubMo: National Novel Publishing Month!

50,000 WORDS IN 30 DAYS

Meet four young writers who met the adult NaNoWriMo goal of 50,000 words.

"When I got writer's block for the first time, I thought I wasn't going to reach 50,000 words. I got nervous. But I charged through it by putting in something that happened to me that day. That way, I could keep up the word count and have a new place to go the next day. With that strategy, I didn't have writer's block very often." —*John Nolan, grade 7, East Hampton Middle School, Amagansett, N.Y.*



John Nolan

No Losers in NaNoWriMo

Even though Bryon Cahill, our associate editor, didn't meet his word goal of 50,000, he learned some important lessons ... after he beat himself up.

On the first of November, I had such high hopes. I can do this, I thought. And I will.



But I didn't. Around the 35,000 mark, my words just bled dry. I could bore you with excuses, such as my weekend trip to Seattle or Thanksgiving, but in the end, excuses are just scapegoats of the truth. The truth is that my story just fell apart on me.

I'll tell you what, though: I wouldn't trade my NaNoWriMo experience for anything. Even though I failed to reach my 50,000-word goal, NaNoWriMo forced me to actually just sit down and write! I have to go back ... and I will. Writers always go back for more.

"Sometimes the thing you want to do least is write, and sometimes the thing you want to do most is write. Either way, NaNoWriMo is a race to the finish, so you have to write."

—*Samantha Harris, grade 8, East Hampton Middle School, Amagansett, N.Y.*



Hannah Anderson

"I started at exactly 12 a.m. on [November 1]. I laid my head on my arm as I typed 2,000 words with one finger. By the end of week one, I was upset because I didn't like the quality of my work. ... I decided to keep going. But then [around November 10,] I got very sick and lost six days of writing. That's a lot.

After that, I ended up having to write 3,500 words a day, 500 an hour. That's when it truly became tiring, and stressing, and Oh-my-God-I-just-want-it-to-be-over! But I kept on going because I knew I would regret stopping later. NaNoWriMo taught me that nothing is ever perfect, but you can always smooth out as many wrinkles as you can later." —*Hannah Anderson, grade 7, home-schooled, Ontario, Canada*



Samantha Harris

"1,667 words. That number is what you need to write each day of November in order to reach the 50,000 mark. That number is the only thought that you have when, sitting in the dark with only the faint glow of the computer screen in front of you, you realize that you are the only person in the house who is still up, fighting sleep for the gain of the necessary words that will keep you on schedule. The final joy comes in the triumph at 11:59 p.m. on November 30, when you type the last word. You can write about green llamas or volcanoes if that is what pushes you to that 50,000th word."

—*Erin Mundahl, grade 8, home-schooled, Independence, Minn.*



Erin Mundahl

Aspiring Young Novelists: It's never too early to download *A NaNoWriMo Survivor's Guide* at tinyurl.com/c3m5p. It was created by Michael Cook, an 18-year-old student in England. He's been writing fiction since he was 10, and this year, he finished his second NaNoWriMo.

