Laurie Woodford

WRITING LIFE STORIES

Lessons from the College Classroom, Prison Workshop, and Senior Community

Education Studies

Collection Editor
JANISE HURTIG

LIVED PLACES PUBLISHING

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To Bruce, with much love and gratitude

First published in 2026 by Lived Places Publishing

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 9781915734174 (pbk)
ISBN: 9781915734198 (ePDF)
ISBN: 9781915734181 (ePUB)

Cover design by Fiachra McCarthy

Book design by Rachel Trolove of Twin Trail Design
Typeset by Newgen Publishing, UK

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P.O. Box 1845
47 Echo Avenue
Miller Place, NY 11764

www.livedplacespublishing.com

Abstract

After decades of teaching writing, Laurie Woodford is sure of one thing: as a teacher, as in life, she is always a student.

This book chronicles Laurie's classroom experiences teaching a diverse range of adult learners various ways to craft personal narratives with honesty and commitment. As she employs strategies in teaching essay structure, writing process, critical elements of writing, and reliable narration, Laurie is impassioned and humbled by the joys, challenges, and practical and heartfelt considerations of teaching students in an urban community college, incarcerated individuals at a maximum security prison, and 80-year olds in a Texas community center.

It is through teaching writing and committing to the craft of writing that Laurie begins to truly understand the potential for self-discovery when we sit with our lived experiences and do the work of writing our stories.

This book is about teaching writing, specifically narrative writing, and the myriad lessons one teacher and author learned while doing so. Moreover, it is a book about writing—the art, the craft, the work, the writing life—and the transformative power of crafting our stories on the page.

Key words

Writing life stories; teaching writing; community college classroom; incarcerated individuals; senior/aging community; craft of writing; teaching strategies; student-teacher relationship; teaching college composition; narrative writing

Note to readers

In the interest of privacy, names of most of the individuals who appear in this book have been changed. The stories I share of my classroom experiences are true, told from my rather quirky perspective. While I consider myself to have a solid memory, several years have passed since I taught the community college and prison classes and a year or two have slipped by since I taught those particular *Writing Your Life Stories* classes to seniors in my community. Therefore, some of the individuals appearing in this book as characters might recall events, interactions, and conversations differently. That's the nature of memory. Along the way, I may have gotten a fact or two wrong or offered up a slightly misguided interpretation of a situation, but I did my best to convey my experiences with accuracy and vigor.

While I taught writing to a variety of adult learners for decades and cared deeply about being an engaging and effective educator, my manner of teaching is simply one teacher's approach to facilitating learning in the classroom. I don't hold myself up as an exemplary teacher, but rather as a professional who worked very hard at understanding the subject matter I taught and developing competent teaching methods, all the while trying to make meaningful connections with my students.

Likewise, while I've been writing for decades and have worked hard to hone my craft, the thoughts and ideologies I share surrounding writing and becoming a full-time author stem from my

personal experience. There are as many approaches to writing and authorship as there are books. My journey from teacher to writer to author is unique to me, my circumstances, and my personal life philosophy.

Having said all that, my hope in sharing this book is that readers will find the expressed joys, challenges, and methodologies of one educator and author helpful to those embarking on similar paths. Or, at the very least, find my journey interesting and maybe even entertaining.

On a final note, small portions of the chapters in Part II, having to do with teaching writing workshops to incarcerated individuals, were adapted from my book, *Unsettled: a memoir*, published by Unsolicited Press (2024). My thanks to Unsolicited Press for granting me permission to share those previously published portions in this book.

Contents

Introduction

In the summer of 1999, equipped with an MA in English, a few publishing credits, and a harried years' experience as a K–6 substitute teacher, I delivered my resume to English departments at nearly every institute of higher learning in my hometown of Rochester, New York.

My phone did not exactly ring off the hook with job offers, but eventually good luck rang. One afternoon in early August, I was called in to interview with the chair of the English department at a large 4-year university 12 miles from my home.

Dressed in navy polyester slacks and blazer, I sat across from the frazzled department chair seated at her desk, which had become a landing strip for paper piles, books, and empty takeout containers. Trying not to look as nervous as I felt, I bullet pointed my scant teaching qualifications, emphasizing my willingness to work hard and learn.

I nearly pinched myself when the department chair said something along the lines of, "One of our adjuncts, who was scheduled to teach three sections of Writing and Literature I and II starting at 8 a.m., has apparently moved to an undisclosed location in Montana. Classes begin in two and a half weeks. You in?"

Boy, was I ever.

She handed me a stack of sample syllabi, the teacher's edition of *Norton's Anthology of English Literature*, and the copier code scribbled on a Post-it note. She said, and I'm paraphrasing here, "Good luck; you're gonna need it. And just so we're on the same page, if students complain to the dean's office about your teaching skills, you and I have never met."

A few Mondays later, I stepped into a basement classroom filled with 27 bleary-eyed male freshmen—all engineering majors. While I knew practically nothing about teaching, I figured that if I wanted my students to engage in classroom discussions about Faulkner, show up for my office hours, and heed my suggestions about improving the quality of their written work, I should try to form some kind of personal connection. And that would start with getting to know them a bit.

I distributed index cards inquiring: student name, contact information, hobbies, favorite song, biggest goal for the future, and what they hoped to get out of my class. When I circulated around the classroom collecting the completed cards, I noted similar answers. Hobbies—Donkey Kong 64. Favorite song: We Like to Party! Biggest goal for the future: either passing Differential Equations or getting more sleep. What they hoped to get out of my class—an easy A.

As I walked to the lectern, shuffling the stack of index cards, I found myself internally grumbling, *Why the hell couldn't administration have given me English majors? I have no idea how to relate to these engineering dudes.*

It was my first day on the job and I'd already hit a low point. Fleeing to an undisclosed location in Montana suddenly seemed

mighty appealing. But I couldn't just quit. I needed teaching experience. And more than that, I really needed the money. I'd have to work through the low point with the few attributes I had going for me. I was eager. I was an over-preparer. I was passionate about writing and literature.

Since, during my job interview, I'd talked up my work ethic and willingness to learn, I devoted countless hours to preparing lessons, class notes, and writing assignments. I arrived on campus every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning at 7 a.m. sharp, then sat in my car rehearsing teaching points before slogging into my 8 a.m. class.

Into each classroom, I lugged book bags filled with teaching paraphernalia along with a load of self-doubt and imposter syndrome. But I also brought with me a tome of literature, a deep love for the craft of writing, and intuition. I made my way through those early classes feeling down, but not out.

Then my students turned in their first writing assignment—their personal narratives—and I glimpsed a bright light at the end of the novice teaching tunnel. Their assigned essays—about a turning point in their lives—told stories of parents' divorces, college admission rejections, physical illnesses, family moves, and loss of loved ones. After poring over their essays, I realized that, yes, my classrooms full of 18-year-old *dudes* spent way too much time playing video games and beer pong and, true, they couldn't identify a semicolon if their lives depended on it. But as I attentively read and commented on each personal narrative, I discovered that not only were my engineering students relatable, they were rather endearing.

I ended up having a great rapport with those college freshmen. At the end of the quarter, they told me they'd learned a lot in my class. I told them they'd taught me volumes.

That first college classroom experience shone a light on both my limitations and potential for growth. I'd carried baggage into the classroom in terms of personal presumptions and my desire to take charge of the environment and the learning process. The experience drove home for me an important message about teaching: let go of assumptions and expectations and teach from a place of open-mindedness and curiosity.

It occurred to me that strong narrative writing required us to do just that. Engaging in meaningful writing about our lives called for us to relinquish control and abandon our agendas regarding what we thought we wanted the writing to become and instead see where it took us. As Natalie Goldberg, in *Writing Down the Bones*, reminded us, "Of course, you can sit down and have something to say. But then you must let its expression be born in you and on the paper. Don't hold too tight: allow it to come out how it needs to rather than trying to control it" (2016, p. 39).

In each narrative writing class, whether teaching college freshmen, incarcerated individuals, or senior citizens, I invited students to consider their life experiences and their memories—both joyful and painful—with curiosity rather than judgment or regret. Our lives were unique and complex; our human hearts held the capacity to experience seemingly conflicting emotions all at once. Our lived experiences were not narrowly linear; they were broad as the universe.

Writing our life stories with inquisitiveness and abandon, trusting in the process of writing and allowing ourselves to see where the writing would lead, could offer tremendous personal benefit.

Through 24 years of teaching writing in the college classroom, prison workshop, and senior community, along with decades of being a writer, I observed and personally experienced the benefits of writing our stories. Offering ourselves time and space to sit with our lived experiences and write about them oftentimes led to self-discovery, gained perspective, and emotional healing. In *The Art of Memoir*, Mary Karr summed up the benefits like this, "In terms of cathartic affect, memoir is like therapy, the difference being that in therapy, *you* pay *them*" (2015, p. xxi).

In conversations with my students, many expressed that in the process of writing their personal narrative essays or memoirs, they worked through emotional tumult and gained insight into their lives and relationships. Some students at an urban community college whom I led through prewriting, drafting, and revision of their personal narratives about a significant event in their lives, confided that the process de-escalated feelings of pain and anger that they'd carried for years. Many of my incarcerated students were drawn to personal essay writing, they told me, because it transported them, provided a vehicle for exploring their pasts and the forces at play in their lives, which allowed for a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them. Some elderly students in my *Writing Your Life Story* classes revealed that writing their personal narratives helped them take inventory of their lives, providing a full perspective of their accomplishments rather than their original focus on regret or perceived limitations. In my own experience, after writing about

events from my childhood that had weighed on me emotionally into adulthood, troublesome memories from my past lost all emotional charge. Some of my Writing and Literature students—those 18-year-old engineering majors—told me that after writing about a turning point in their lives, they felt a sense of relief and could put their experiences into better perspective. Writing our stories, it seemed, was freeing.

As Anna Quindlen noted in *Writing for Your Life*, "Sometimes people ask whether a particularly difficult or challenging situation is made cathartic through writing. I'm not sure writing about things always makes us feel better, but perhaps it sometimes does make loss, tragedies, disappointments more actual. It can turn them into something with a clearer shape and form, and therefore make it possible to see them more deeply and clearly, and more usefully turn confusion and pain into understanding and perhaps reconciliation. On paper our greatest challenges become A Real Thing, in a world in which so much seems ephemeral and transitory" (2022, p. 172). She went on to say, "Writing can lead to reflection, reflection can lead to understanding, understanding can lead to happiness" (2022, p. 154).

As a writer, I was sold on the benefits of writing, the way the writing process held potential for transformation. As a reader, I was sold on the power and beauty of the art and craft of writing. As a teacher, I was struggling to figure out how to best demonstrate, describe, and bring to life the intricacies surrounding the craft of writing as a process.

Then, a year or two into my teaching career, good luck rang again. I was offered the opportunity to observe a writing class taught

by an experienced professor at the university where I taught writing and literature.

Up to that point, as an adjunct at a large institution, I'd elicited teaching strategies from books I'd read and graduate courses I'd attended. I wasn't mentored, handheld, or quite frankly, given more than 5 minutes of a seasoned colleague's time. I'd learned as I went along—with a bunch of rowdy engineering students watching—slowly figuring out what worked and what didn't, class by class.

Having the opportunity to observe the professor's writing class felt incredibly valuable. I was able to see her in action as she led students through writing exercises, described writing as a process, answered questions, and interacted with students. I received the gift of role modeling.

After class, when I thanked the professor for allowing me to observe her class and complimented her on her teaching approach, she said humbly, "That's the way I like to teach. I'm sure other writing professors do it differently. You should do what works for you and your students."

Perhaps effective teaching was, in part, a process of simply figuring out what worked and what didn't for any given classroom of students. But observing that professor teaching and responding to her students offered me the support I'd longed for. She'd offered me a sense of community, a teaching community, and that helped me feel less isolated, like I wasn't in it all on my own.

With that experience in mind, my hope for readers who are fellow teachers is that this book might offer a sense of community as you join me on my journey teaching writing in the college classroom, prison workshop, and senior community.

My hope for fellow writers is that this book might remind you of the human connection the work of writing can offer. As Quindlen points out, "Sometimes people will tell me something I wrote made them feel less alone. But the fact is, I feel less alone when I write as well. The process models a kind of empathy, because even if you are simply writing your own experiences, your own feelings, it assumes an ability to connect on a human level, to meet some unspoken need of your own, and maybe of someone else's, too" (2022, p. 174).

In the pages that follow, readers will observe me—in all my imperfect glory—in the classroom, at student-teacher conferences, and at my writing desk. You'll join me as I teach narrative writing to college students, incarcerated individuals, and senior citizens. Some of the times, you'll watch me get it right. Other times, you'll see me stumble and regroup. You'll hear me consider the pleasures and challenges of teaching writing and of being a writer. And, perhaps along the way, you'll feel just a bit less isolated.

For teachers, I aim to illustrate meaningful and practical approaches to teaching narrative writing, critiquing written work, and connecting with students. Teaching is oftentimes a practice in flexibility. The act of stepping into the classroom or workshop invites a dynamic experience, an experience that's always in flux, from semester to semester, class to class, learner to learner.

For both writers and teachers of writing, I've devoted the final two chapters of this book to my experiences as a full-time author and my thoughts about the writing life. I talk about the "dream" of publication, the nuts and bolts and ins and outs of writing as a

career, along with the challenges, the joys of writing full time and what, in doing so, truly matters.

While those final chapters may be of special interest to writers, I believe they'll prove helpful to writing teachers, as well. In my experience, as a teacher of writing, especially when teaching writing classes in the community, students frequently voice burning questions about the writing life and how to get their work published. My hope is that those final chapters offer a frame of reference and support for writing teachers who run across similar student inquiries.

My deepest hope is that this book will revive readers' passion for the art and craft of writing and, for those teaching writing, carry that passion into the classroom.

That said, the class bell has rung, so please make yourself comfortable and let the fun begin.

Learning objectives

1. Identify key approaches associated with effectively teaching personal narrative writing to a diverse population of adult learners
2. Describe three personal benefits that can potentially be gained from writing our life stories
3. Identify challenges associated with teaching narrative writing to a diverse population of adult learners
4. List six critical elements of writing
5. Describe methods of effectively critiquing the written work of others

Part I
Introduction: Teaching remedial writing in the urban community college classroom

Throughout the course of 20 years, I taught Writing and Literature I and II, English Composition I and II, and Principles of Writing at 4-year universities in the United States, South Korea, and China.

Each semester, I stuffed my backpack with lesson plans, a grammar reference book, and student handouts, and entered the classroom with optimism and enthusiasm. I enjoyed many aspects of teaching first-year university students, most of whom lived on campus, and appreciated the challenge of finding the sweet spot between upholding institutional academic rigor and tailoring course demands to students' varying skill levels. While

I greatly valued teaching in that environment, parts of the experience felt rather alien and unrelatable to me. Unlike the college freshmen I taught at those universities, I hadn't gone off to college at the age of 18, lived in a dorm, or hung out with friends at the Student Union.

I was a nontraditional student, a 22-year-old Army Reservist who worked full time as a secretary and enrolled in night classes at a local community college. I balanced daytime office work, evening academic coursework, and monthly Reserve weekends.

Frequently, I felt discouraged; I was pulled in too many directions, mentally and physically fatigued, and barely making ends meet financially. At the rate I was going, earning a college degree would take many years. Trying to sustain a full-time job, night classes, and military obligations oftentimes felt overwhelming and untenable. There were semesters when I struggled—dropped out of a science class week 12, earned a "D" in an accounting class. Yet I felt committed to the process; deep down, I knew that education was my path forward.

Many years later, I was hired to teach at the same community college where I'd taken night classes. During the day, I held a full-time academic position on campus. At night, I taught a Transitional Studies (TRS) writing course that held a very special place in my heart.

Starting in 2007, I taught TRS writing classes, as an adjunct, on Monday evenings from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. While I was very happy about teaching that class, my students were less happy about having to take my class. My students wanted to enroll in English Composition I rather than TRS Writing, but the skill level of their admissions essay hadn't cut the mustard.

Most of my TRS students were over the age of 24, held jobs, and had family responsibilities. While some had their sights set on transferring to a university and attaining a 4-year degree, many were enrolled in associate degree programs such as Hospitality Management, Graphic Design, Culinary Arts, or Mechanical Technology.

For most, graduating with such a degree would be a game changer for them, and their families, in terms of professional opportunities that would offer increased financial and personal rewards.

TRS courses, at that time, were noncredit bearing, which meant that they didn't count toward degree requirements. Having to take TRS courses oftentimes set back a student's anticipated graduation date by a semester or more. So, imagine my students' thrill when receiving the news from college admissions that they needed to complete TRS writing courses before they could register for English Composition I—a course they already dreaded since their high school English teachers had implied that they "sucked at writing."

Since my students didn't want to take my TRS class in the first place and hated writing because they believed they were bad at it, I stepped into the first class of each semester with a pressing task at hand: to air out all that bad mojo.

In my mind, in order to encourage student retention and student success, it was imperative that I made students feel genuinely welcomed in class, altered their negative relationship with writing, and bolstered their academic confidence. I'd need to forge connections with students during classroom activities and

one-on-one student-teacher meetings, and guide them through practical and meaningful approaches to developing effective writing skills with clarity and creativity.

For the majority of my students, this approach worked well. Throughout the semester, students appeared welcomed and comfortable in class; they enthusiastically engaged in classroom activities and thoughtfully participated in our one-on-one meetings. By the end of the semester, the quality of students' written work, along with their academic confidence, had improved by leaps and bounds.

Sadly, not all of my students experienced favorable outcomes in class. Considering the myriad responsibilities most of my students shouldered and the economic challenges with which many of them contended, it was no surprise that around week 8 of our 16-week semester, a handful of students went AWOL (absent without leave), not showing up for classes and failing to turn in assignments.

Some, at the end of the semester, reached out and asked if they could make up the work and pass the course. Regretfully, I could only offer them a listening ear and my sincere hope that I'd see them in class the following semester.

The explanations for their absences were legitimate and oftentimes heart-wrenching—their boss changed their work schedule which conflicted with class time; their mom got sick and they couldn't find childcare; their teen got in trouble, and they needed to be home to supervise; their boyfriend started drinking again and they had to find a new place to live. All that, with working, caretaking, and college coursework, proved too much and

something had to give. That something was my Monday night TRS class and probably other classes as well.

Some students encountered chronic obstacles to achieving their academic goals and dropped out of their degree programs all together. Others rebounded after the temporary crisis or setback was resolved, returned to my class the following semester, and went on to graduate. For all of my students, I imagined that the road from TRS coursework to college graduation and landing that good job they coveted felt like a very long haul.

While some of my TRS students faced obstacles to college retention, those who stayed the course did so with attentiveness, curiosity, and an enthusiasm for learning. Many came into my class with grade anxiety—graded school papers conjured memories from high school of scary red ink and D's and F's. Teaching writing as a process—rather than teaching a product-centered approach which focused on producing a finished, polished, grammatically correct paper—helped quell students' anxiety.

Teaching writing as a process had been around since the 1980s; since I graduated high school in 1980, I had been taught writing from a product-centered approach. As a high school student back then, in order to get a good grade, I needed to write a "good paper" like the sample student papers highlighted in our English textbooks. I did not enjoy writing back then. Completing those high school writing assignments felt difficult, tedious, and stressful.

Fortunately, I did enjoy reading. I'd grown up in a household with many books and parents who read to me. Subsequently, I loved to read. Therefore, when I was in high school suffering my

way through those writing assignments, I managed to write "B" papers and earned "B" grades. Reading was my writing teacher.

Many of my TRS students confided that they were not readers and found reading tedious. From what they told me, it seemed that in high school, they were taught writing from a product-centered approach. Without a love of reading to serve as a supplemental writing teacher, most had earned poor grades on their written work.

In the TRS classroom, I taught writing as a process. We took essay writing step-by-step, devoting ample time to prewriting, then drafting the essay, then making revisions. That process was followed by feedback via student-teacher conferences or peer review, then a final round of essay revision and polishing. Students' writing proficiency improved significantly and their confidence in their writing abilities increased substantially as they developed a more positive relationship with writing. At the end of the semester, students often said about essay writing, "I feel like I can do this!"

In the following three chapters, I share classroom scenarios that reflect the real-life challenges and concerns of my TRS writing students at an urban community college at that time. I illustrate my approach to introducing students to prewriting techniques and six-paragraph essay structure and share the difficulty I encountered trying to find suitable and relatable sample narrative essays for my students to use as templates. I offer my thoughts on ways to form a trusting relationship with students through one-on-one student-teacher conferences. And I shine a light on my students' strength and resilience in confronting obstacles to learning, moving forward, and gaining significant strides in their writing abilities.

Chapter 1
Writing as a process: Prewriting strategies

It was 5:45 p.m. on a Monday evening. My students who rode the early city bus filed into the classroom, set down their backpacks, and took their seats in clunky chair desks.

Our classroom was on the fifth floor of a historic building in downtown Rochester, New York. Being September, it was light outside when we arrived, but at the end of class—9 p.m.—I urged students to walk in groups, or at least in pairs, on their way to the parking lot or bus stop.

Each Monday night when dismissing the class, I'd say, "Good work! If you have questions, you know where to find me." Then I'd hold up my hand and add, "Remember, buddy system on your way out."

They'd grin in my direction like I was being a mother hen. Or maybe because they thought I was just one more person from the suburbs who got nervous about being downtown at night.

In reality, I was a mother hen who lived in the city. I told all my evening students—whether we were at the city or suburban campus—to use the buddy system.

But I had to admit that I worried more about these city campus students. I worked on this campus during the day as a student retention coordinator and heard stories about occasional incidents of cars being broken into and people being harassed outside the building, especially at night.

There was a security guard who checked student and faculty ID's in the evenings, but occasionally, an incident occurred inside the building as well.

Standing at the chalkboard, I glanced over as a few more students entered the classroom and took their seats. I was about to write homework assignments and due dates on the board when Lashonda said, "Professor, you might want to put something over that window on the door."

I turned my head toward the classroom door, which had a plexiglass window two thirds of the way up.

Barbara shook her head, the beads in her long, black braids clinking. "Yeah. Thursday night math class."

Lashonda nodded, leaning forward in her seat. "In the middle of multiplying fractions, some guy outside the door stood on a chair, dropped his pants, and started whacking off."

I brought a hand to my mouth. "Ugh. I'm so sorry you had to deal with that."

Barbara snorted a laugh. "Our professor called security. Us students all stood up, pointed at the guy, and laughed real loud."

Lashonda pointed her finger in the air. "We were like, 'Talk about a *fraction*!' Then the dude took off."