

National Novel Writing Month Behind Bars: A Road Map for NaNoWriMo at FCI-Elkton

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Abstract: *Writers and students at Federal Correctional Institution-Elkton use low-tech strategies to participate in National Novel Writing Month. Prisoners reflect on the challenges and power of participating in an entirely prisoner-led event. Over the span of a six-week course, students earn programming credit by responding to prompts, working on their novels, and reporting word totals and goals. The author positions himself as a researcher, practitioner, scholar, and prisoner, who balanced the needs of good teaching and positive educational experiences with the realities of working in a prison as a prisoner.*

Keywords: *prison writing, pedagogy, teaching, National Novel Writing Month*

In 2017, I self-surrendered to Federal Correctional Institution-Elkton, where I would stay for two and a half years as an inmate. I worked at Elkton as a tutor in the GED program. Like me, my tutor partner was an English major in college, and like me, he's a writer. Chris has completed a number of novels since coming to prison. I've started plenty in my life, but never finished, and one day in class, I mentioned I was considering using National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) as motivation for writing my novel, *The Day the Freshman Class Float Exploded*, a humorous book about a monster-movie-obsessed teenager who finds himself involved in his school's Homecoming activities.

Chris said he was interested in giving NaNoWriMo a try, too, and so we issued each other friendly challenges. Elkton has a small but solid community of writers, and word got out about our plans. Other writers became interested. At the same time as these discussions were taking place, the United States Congress was debating legislation named The First Step Act. Though the bill's details were unclear then, we were confident that some of the provisions rewarded programming credit. Chris and I thought that guys who were writing books deserved credit for educational programming. For NaNoWriMo participants to get credit, we'd need to operate through the Adult Continuing Education program (ACE) housed in the Education Department. The staff member in charge of ACE gave us his blessing, and the first NaNoWriMo@Elkton began.

What follows is a description of our "un-class," the structures we needed to put in place, the challenges and success our writers experienced, and a reflection on the event overall. By most measures, even if not all of the books were finished, NaNoWriMo@Elkton was successful and repeatable across other institutions.

Situating Scholarship and Writing in Prison

Pedagogy scholarship has a distinguished history of including teaching narratives and reflections of teacher-scholars who use their own classrooms as their laboratories. My scholarship in this regard is no different, including my dissertation and some of my work since graduation. While many people have written as teachers within prison, overwhelmingly, those teachers could leave after class, heading for homes outside of the prison walls. Given my status



at the time of my teaching at Elkton and the writing of most of this paper, I must situate myself as a teacher-scholar-prisoner, and that offers new opportunities and unexpected pressures.

My experience coordinating NaNoWriMo@Elkton is necessarily a narrative told “from the inside.” Scholarship discussing writing in prison is almost exclusively positioned from the outside looking through the bars. In his blog post on the National Novel Writing Month website, prison volunteer and author Neal Lemery (2017) voices this subjectivity, “Writing in Prison?” he wrote, “I wondered how anyone could manage it.” Simply—and to be fair, Mr. Lemery comes to understand this—prisoners learn to write in prison because they have no other choice.

Even this essay, written on the inside, was written while fighting through all the challenges that the NaNoWriMo@Elkton participants describe in their reflections. I find myself not only the observer of a study, but also a subject, and while part of me wants to configure myself as something different than the other event participants (as a result of my education and experience as a sort of “super-prisoner”), my work was produced on the same paper with the same pens on the same hard metal benches as the rest of the Elkton writers. I will, until my release date, always be an Elkton prisoner. Even now, after leaving, I find myself wondering about the men I met at Elkton, especially my students, and wondering how outside-world events might be affecting them. Perhaps, despite all my efforts and intentions, it will be some time before I have completely left Elkton. If ever.

This difficulty is made obvious in the slippage of voice I can’t avoid while writing and editing this essay. You’ll see me writing as *in* Elkton, and you’ll see me writing from *home*. I’ve decided to let these slippages persist, and I hope they give some insight into the processes behind this essay.

As I worked on this piece, inside the prison and out, I felt the pressure of making sure that whatever I wrote could not be used against me or other Elkton writers. That’s a motive that most scholars (especially tenured scholars) never face. Most scholars in the United States cannot be shipped to live somewhere dangerous as a result of their work, no matter how positive that work might be. This project went smoothly, and was all the right kinds of productive that should make observers of the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) proud, but still, I felt the pangs of fear that perhaps this work would be judged by criteria beyond its truthfulness or ability to make an audience think about prison writing in a new way.

How will Elkton look in this reflection? Its staff? Its prisoners? And, if this work reaches an audience beyond its walls, what kinds of responses might ensue inside the walls? The advice my father gave me for my time here rings in my ears as I write: “Stay out of the bright lights.” Don’t attract attention. Just get home.

But I admit the urge to tell the story of the stories is strong. Like all good scholarship, then, this piece will describe the truth. Because getting consent from fellow prisoners is challenging—and depending on how you read the BOP policies, against regulations—student responses will be generalized. Though the FCI-Elkton staff was supportive of both our NaNoWriMo@Elkton event and the writing of this essay, their endorsement beyond permission to run our event is not meant to be implied.

National Novel Writing Month Background

National Novel Writing Month began in 1999, centered around Internet forums. Though recent years have seen the NaNoWriMo organization stretch their impact into the real world through their camps and library partnerships, the event remains, at its core, an online experience, meant to combat the isolation many writers feel while working. On its website, the organization proclaims “your story matters,” an idea that resonates with prisoners, who feel that they are at the lowest tier of society, but crave the opportunity to build a world outside of walls and mistakes that can contribute to intellectual and cultural growth.

Background of Adult Continuing Education Classes

The education programs offered through the BOP are outlined in Program Statement 5300.21. This Program Statement (2002) mandates that the BOP “affords inmates the opportunity to improve their knowledge and skills through academic, occupation and leisure-time activities.” The Program Statement includes continuing education opportunities in a list of required offerings that also includes General Educational Development (GED), English-as-a-Second Language (ESL), library services, and parenting and recreation programs.

Students enroll in ACE classes primarily for three reasons. Some students are interested in the content of the class. This seems especially true for business classes which regularly meet their maximum allowed enrollment. Another reason for enrolling in an ACE class is to occupy the time at prison. There are prisoners who enroll in an ACE class every day of the week, just to have something to do. Finally, ACE classes count as programming. Prisoners are evaluated by how much programming they complete during their time, and these evaluations can influence a prisoner’s custody score, which can dictate the sort of institution at which the prisoner is housed.

Programming has recently taken new importance in Federal prisons with the 2018 passing of the First Step Act. In this legislation, prisoners are granted bonuses for good time and residential re-entry center (halfway house) time after meeting certain requirements which may include programming. As of February 2020, the BOP has made few decisions regarding the specific application of the law’s provisions, including deciding which—if any—ACE classes meet the law’s description of applicable programming. The law’s wording grants the BOP hundreds of days to evaluate programs and to implement all of its provisions, but prisoners at Elkton have already begun discussing various programming opportunities in the hope that they will count toward the law’s benefits.

An Analog Internet

National Novel Writing Month is a creature of the Internet, where it was born and continues to flourish despite recent incursion of NaNoWriMo into the “meatspace.” Participants register, post, respond, and interact online. The appeal of NaNoWriMo, in part, is the creation of a writing community that allows writers to break through the isolation of the blank screen. The challenge of a word count is a shared experience.

Prison is a shared experience, too; our NaNoWriMo@Elkton writers were already comfortable with the “Us vs. The World” attitude that communal participatory events can foster. One of our goals was to build a space for a positive, nurturing community that allowed for the same kinds of interactions as the world-wide National Novel Writing Month. Early on, with help from someone outside the prison, we looked for an official NaNoWriMo Prison Program. If one exists, we couldn’t find it.

But the real issue for our community-building efforts was our inability to access the Internet. Prisoners at FCI-Elkton have no access to the Internet, and nearly zero opportunities to use a computer at all. A true, complete NaNoWriMo experience would be impossible to reproduce within the seclusion of our prison. Without the Internet, then, we’d never become full participants in the National Novel Writing experience. (Theoretically, prisoners with help on the outside could always mail their work, have someone else post on their behalf, and receive relayed feedback. This, of course, is unrealistic in all but the most ideal circumstances.)

Our solution was to build an analog Internet in our prison library. National Novel Writing Month had its electronic bulletin board system; NaNoWriMo@Elkton had a bulletin board. They had digital postings; we had a blue folder at the circulation desk. They had the shared community of a thousand eyes on their work; we would have a couple of volunteers and participant prompts on hard copy. Our analog Internet would never reach the entire world, though prison can grow to encompass the entire world for prisoners without outside ties. We’d reach who we could.

NaNoWriMo@Elkton was fortunate to have the support of the staff member in charge of the library, and the prisoner librarians who facilitated our writers' check-ins. We commandeered half of the library bulletin board for NaNoWriMo@Elkton announcements, making our existence public, like an Internet site. Writers "logged-in" by checking for prompts placed in the blue folder at the library desk, and used the folder to drop-off their work, the meatspace version of making a post. Several times a week, I collected responses and recorded the names of who was participating. Writer responses were added to the bulletin board, most-notably when writers provided the titles for their books-in-progress. The space in front of the bulletin board was often crowded with guys reading our writers' book titles.

We didn't need computers to publicize our event, brag about our success on the "Words Written" tote board or build a community of writers. In retrospect, I wonder if our success in working around the administration's ban of the Internet is helpful or hurtful toward prisoners' future educational goals because we proved we didn't "need" computers to have a meaningful experience. That obviously isn't the case for guys looking to enroll in college courses or other similar enrichment activities, and opportunities for courses via mail are extremely limited.

Practice

We announced NaNoWriMo@Elkton to the prisoner population via electronic bulletin board announcement that directed participants to register in the library. There, writers were given a short packet that described the event.

We broke two molds from the start. National Novel Writing Month takes place in November, but ACE classes last for 16 weeks. To get programming credit, we'd need to extend our activities. Actual book writing still occurred in November—that's when it happens, after all—but we'd include extra weeks of prompts and activities both before and after November. Additionally, our "class" would not meet.

Like our online counterparts, we'd work on our own and "log-on" by signing in and dropping off work at the folder in library. In my letters home, I called NaNoWriMo@ Elkton an "unclass," but really, our program was much more like the online classes I'd taught at the university than it wasn't. I knew the participants through their names, numbers, and writing, but not their faces. (It allowed for two fun interactions where guys on the yard and I recognized each other from the name tags on our uniforms.)

The writers signed in at the folder, picked up new participant prompts, and left behind the prior week's response. The folder was never stolen, never vandalized, though occasionally some fake names (of various levels of cleverness and vulgarity) were left on the sign-in sheets, I suspect by librarians with a bit too much time on their hands.

NaNoWriMo@Elkton began with writers receiving a Participant Information Guide. It was simple background, some explanation, and an attempt to capture the voice of enthusiasm:

Welcome to NaNoWriMo@ Elkton! What started as a challenge between two tutors here at FCI-Elkton has grown into something much larger, and way cooler!

NaNoWriMo is an annual worldwide event. The challenge is simple: write a novel in November. Our event will stretch over 16 weeks, but the challenge is still the same. We will write our books in November. No starting early! That would be cheating.

To get program credit for participating, you'll need to submit responses to prompts and reflections. You'll pick those up on Mondays, and return them by the next Monday.

If you have any questions, track down Jason Kahler (an afternoon tutor here in education). Now grab Participant Prompt #1 and get going! Good luck!

The information guide tried to address one of the biggest obstacles in conducting an event like this: participant communications with the coordinator of the event. I was fortunate to have a job here in the prison that lent me a little visibility and a little accessibility. Had this been a typical online class, students would have simply emailed me with questions. Prisoners cannot email each other, so I needed to rely on the much more analog approach of running into people in the hallway.

Most of the questions revolved around when we were meeting (we weren't) and if finishing the book was mandatory for receiving credit (it wasn't). I quickly decided to "allow" other types of writing because several prisoners indicated a desire to work on memoirs, and one was writing a business book. These projects matched the spirit of National Novel Writing Month, though not the name, and I supported them enthusiastically.

Several writers asked about prison staff reading their submissions. I reminded the writers that staff could access everything we have at any time, and their books would be no exception. Some writers specifically asked about including mature content in the projects. I advised against it. Happily, none of the submissions ever included any elements that even remotely could have gotten someone at Elkton in trouble.

Participant Prompt #1 asked the writers to explain why they'd decided to start NaNoWriMo@Elkton. Twenty-seven men offered their responses, and I took a quotation from each and put them all on our library bulletin board. (Writers were allowed to opt-out of the public sharing by indicating "Please do not share" on their response.) The answers to that first prompt included allusions to motivation, freedom, stories, and a desire to make good use of the time here in prison. Time is the one resource we have in abundance at prison, and perhaps the resource least-available to writers outside of a prison. Our writers were, to a man, optimistic in these first responses, and of the participants who'd signed in for that first week, 100% of them returned Prompt #1. It was a good start: 27 writers. Frankly, the possibility of receiving 27 books to read and reflect on was daunting. Chris, my tutor partner who was part of NaNoWriMo@Elkton from the beginning, generously volunteered to help read finished books.

Responding to finished books only was one of the concessions I'd made to the open scope of our event. In a classroom setting, the number of potential manuscripts is limited by the physical space of the room. Since we didn't have physical constraints, we were forced to focus our revision suggestions to completed projects. Offering "in progress" feedback would be an important change for future NaNoWriMo@Elkton events.

Our second participant prompt asked the writers to predict the challenges they'd encounter in writing their books. Again, 100% of the 27 registered writers responded. These answers to the prompt highlighted what most outsiders probably would expect about the everyday struggles of prison life: lack of resources for either research, supplies, quiet, a physical space to sit and do the work of a writer. "The work of a writer." It seems for the future we need to consider more what a writer at work looks like. History has countless examples of writers working in the worst of circumstances, and future participants of NaNoWriMo@Elkton could be reminded better that books don't need computers, the best paper, or a favorite brand of pen to be written. I was impressed again, though, and often throughout of event, by just how "regular" our writers were. I remembered all the excuses I've made over the years for not writing. I remembered the times, when dissertation deadlines loomed largest, that I absolutely *needed* to dust behind my bookcases. How many of our writers here rearranged their lockers rather than scrape out a few hundred words?

Participant Prompt #3 included a short lesson about genre and a pretest. At FCI-Elkton, all ACE classes must include pretests. The pretests are then revisited as posttests, the notion being that students will fail the first test, learn through the process of taking the class, and then pass the second test. Our pretest anticipated some of the material that would later appear in prompts. As expected, writers did not do well on the pretest.

Additionally, participants were asked to provide the titles of their book projects and explain the genre in which they were working. Our writers focused mostly on fantasy and science-fiction, two of the most-popular sections of FCI-Elkton's library. But other genres were robustly represented: thriller, comedy, memoir, how-to, adventure, Christian, drama and paranormal. I posted their titles on our board, with a theater-marquee-style "Coming Soon" announcement.

In their descriptions of their books, writers often stated they wanted to straddle genres. This isn't surprising: in the genre lesson, I had mentioned how the original *Star Trek* series had been pitched as a Western in space. Our participants also positioned their books within broader series they had planned. This also isn't surprising. Book series are in constant rotation in our library here, and the longer the series—no matter the genre—the more popular the books tend to be. These books are typically sci-fi/fantasy/paranormal novels, and our participants seemed interested in writing what they were reading.

Participant Prompt #4 signaled the beginning of actual novel writing (it was finally November). Prompt #4 reminded participants to complete a weekly check-in, leave word counts, and contained a request for questions. The few questions I received were turned into tips that I posted on our bulletin board.

The prompt also implored the writers to keep things simple. The prompt mentioned *On Writing* by Stephen King (2000), especially his belief that novels have three parts: narration, description, dialogue. I promised some dialogue pointers later, but for Prompt #4, I wanted the writers to think of their stories in the most basic shape possible. I worried that the writers would construct elaborate backstories and world-building rules before/without ever constructing a narrative. To that end, I challenged them to be able to distill the backstory into one simple sentence, and I provided the following examples:

Magic is real and kids go to school to learn how to use it.

Captain Ahab will go to any length to kill the whale that took his leg.

A country lawyer must fight racism to defend an innocent man while his kids fixate on their weird neighbor.

Several of our writers told me they appreciated the exercise of pushing their stories into these simple summaries. It kept them focused on plot and character development. I've found that the writers here tend to put a lot of energy into building the rules of their worlds. Perhaps it's a symptom of all the role-playing games we play in prison: build the world and sprinkle in all the fun fiddly bits, and someone else will provide the power of narrative. We needed our participants to remember they were at all times both the player and the dungeon master.

Participant Prompt #5 assumed we had all started writing. Participants began reporting word counts (they were encouraged to give ballpark calculations and not spend valuable writing time counting words). This prompt was mostly a short lesson on dialogue. Dialogue should always be doing at least one of two things, I told our writers: reveal character or move plot. Our writers were asked to avoid putting exposition in dialogue, and to avoid verb for "said" that might be distracting. Finally, they were directed to describe accents instead of trying to write them phonically. Participant Prompts #6, #7, and #8 were all just check-ins and word count reports. Number eight did include an allusion to comic book legend Stan Lee, who had recently passed away. In the prompt, I mentioned that in an obituary I read that Lee nearly left comics early on, disillusioned with the stories he was pushed to write. According to an obituary, Lee's wife suggested he write the stories he'd like to read. It was good advice for all writers.

Our ninth participant prompt was the final prompt in November, and the manuscripts were due the next week. With Participant Prompt #10, we shifted to reflections on the event. Number ten asked participants to think about what contributed to our writers' success, and what contributed to breaking any progress. Though I considered any progress—indeed, any at-

tempt—to be successful, most of the writers who didn't finish books expressed disappointment in not finishing. (After reading those responses, I really celebrated our shared word count total, planning, and even the most futile attempts at our novels.) The writers reported that time played heavily in both their successes and challenges. One thing that many outsiders don't understand about prison is that some of us do find ways to lead busy full lives within the walls. Work can be full-time. We find other responsibilities. Daily chores like laundry, dishes and hygiene take longer per task than they do at home. For others, however, the days are largely empty. Time is an asset to exploit. So time appeared as the major contributing factor for both success and "failure."

Our writers continued to bemoan the lack of access to technology, and they cited the challenge of working without a word processor as a major stumbling block. Privacy and physical space also were important concerns. It's hard to find a place at FCI-Elkton to be alone with your thoughts. It's hard to preserve works-in-progress as collections of mismatched pieces of paper tucked into lockers.

Participant Prompts #11 and #12 discussed publishing and literary agents. These lessons originated from questions I'd received from participants about the various publishing avenues and copyright matters. Our writers were, to my mind, needlessly worried about their work being stolen, a paranoia perhaps understandable considering people will steal the toilet paper you've left on your locker top here.

Despite concerns about intellectual property theft, our writers expressed excitement over the prospects of seeing their work in print. They also feared being judged. (Again, perhaps understandable paranoia.)

Participant Prompt #13 asked writers to suggest changes to our event. "Computers" appeared on nearly all the responses. "More practical publishing advice" was mentioned frequently, as was the suggestion that nothing be changed. All of the suggestions for change were marvelously outward-looking. These writers were thinking about the place of their work in the greater world. A profit-motive existed, certainly, but I was impressed by how much our writers focused on the desire to merely be heard somewhere. The same sentiments appeared in many of their final written reflections.

Participant Prompt #14 asked our writers to think about how being in prison affects them as writers beyond the physical limitations. Time, once again, plays its part here. Writers remarked on how prison has gifted—"blessed" was used more than once—them with an opportunity for introspection. They've thought about their writing, and they've thought about themselves. Prison writers understand pain because they've caused it, and because they feel it.

Our writers also reported how many of them have become better readers since coming to prison. Once again, our library is a powerful influence in the lives of the prisoners at FCI-Elkton.

By the end of NaNoWriMo@Elkton, about 15 writers were still regularly checking in. Seventeen writers received ACE class programming credit, and five completed manuscripts were submitted and received comments from either Chris or myself.

As a group we wrote 478,460 words—not counting responses to participant prompts.

Reflections and Directions

How do you measure the success of NaNoWriMo@Elkton? The number of books completed by participants: 5. The total number of words written by its writers: nearly half a million. The number of men who received programming credit through their participation: 17. In prison, we think about numbers a lot.

Returning to the purposes of ACE classes, though, those numbers fail to tell the complete story of our successes. For 16 weeks, up to as many as 30 men were given positive outlets

for the nervous energy and anxiety that prison life generates. They learned the value of planning large projects, of making decisions based on long-term goals. For most prisoners, criminal behavior was a result of short-term thinking. Angling efforts elsewhere is a significant powerful improvement. We can't claim that NaNoWriMo@Elkton will stop people from reoffending, but trying to write a book can't hurt.

Our efforts highlight the deficiencies within rehabilitation services at FCI-Elkton. Most obvious is the almost complete lack of access to technology. A prison of nearly 2,000 prisoners holds fewer than two dozen computers, many of which are frequently broken, all of which are behind two locked doors, none of which allow for simple word processing or basic Internet access. We cannot expect the men who leave here to have the fundamental technological literacy that productive, non-offending members of society possess. I have students in my GED classes who have never been in the same room as an iPhone. Eight typewriter kiosks are just insufficient to prepare them for life beyond prison.

FCI-Elkton lacks an atmosphere that encourages innovation. I want to stress that staff supported our NaNoWriMo@Elkton event, but most of that support materialized in a hands-off approach. In prison, that's often the best we can hope for. No doubt, my role as a GED tutor made efforts to begin and maintain our event much easier than it would have been if my job assignment was elsewhere. In an environment where getting photocopies can be challenging or impossible, the staff's familiarity with me and my efforts as a tutor absolutely expedited the processes to get what we needed for our program.

I was saddened to learn that National Novel Writing Month has no formal outreach into prisons. Hopefully, as the event expands further and further off the Internet, some efforts can be directed toward writers behind bars. If the writers of NaNoWriMo@Elkton are any indication, there is room for growth, and given the space, some quality work will result. Even without the use of the Internet, one can envision completed-book exchanges between facilities, traveling libraries of prison-written novels crisscrossing the country, book awards for incarcerated novelists, and much more. As with everything proposed for the benefit of people inside of prisons, these programs would require effort, funding and the force of will to make them happen.

I will end on two personal notes.

As this essay was revised and submitted for publication, the novel coronavirus pandemic began impacting life worldwide. As of this writing, eight prisoners at FCI-Elkton have died of the virus, the most deaths at any federal institution. Among the deaths is a friend of mine, a man we called Grandpa Dave. His death was announced by the BOP in a press release that included his age, his offense, his punishment, and his pre-existing medical conditions that made him more vulnerable to the virus. It didn't mention his family, his faith, his service, or the fact that he always remembered his friends' birthdays. Even, and perhaps especially, his friends in prison. Stories matter.

And no, *The Day the Freshman Class Float Exploded* isn't finished. My novel succumbed to the pressures that kill many books-in-progress. Writing momentum was gobbled-up by the strain of daily responsibilities. My neck was sore from hunching over the desk in my cube. Other priorities grew more pressing. Our NaNoWriMo@Elkton writers, myself included, succeeded and failed like all the National Novel Writing Month participants across the globe. In many ways—in most ways—the men at FCI-Elkton are just like everyone else.

Written or not, that's a story worth telling.

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