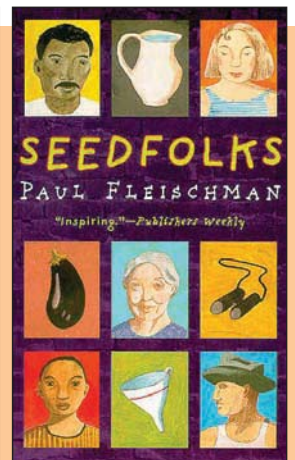
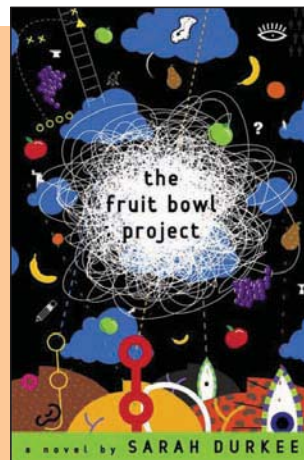
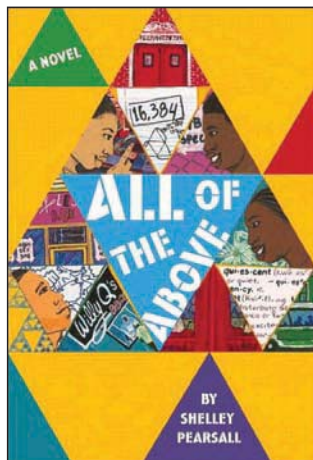


Writing with a Team Approach

Bring students together with a group writing project that takes its inspiration from novels told in multiple viewpoints. **By Mindy Hardwick**

One of the many challenges of being a teacher is motivating students to work together as a group. As a writer who collaborates with classroom teachers through writer-in-residence programs, I spend hours trying to figure out how to bring students together. One approach that has worked for me is to turn to young-adult and middle-grade novels written with multiple viewpoints to teach both team building and writing. I ask students to read these books and then create what I call the “team writing project.”



Introducing the Project

I open the team writing project by sharing *Why Did the Chicken Cross the Road?* (Dial, 2006). On each spread of this humorous picture book, a different children's illustrator offers a new punch line to the riddle. The wide variety of answers and art styles helps introduce the idea that each illustrator brings a unique way of seeing the world to the page while at the same time contributing to a larger goal.

Reading a Novel

Depending on the age group, the length of time that I am working with the students, and the ability level of the group, I ask students to read one

of the following multiple-viewpoint novels involving characters coming together to complete a project or goal:

- *All of the Above* by Shelley Pearsall (Little, Brown, 2006), about seventh-grade math students who build a tetrahedron.
- *The Fruit Bowl Project* by Sarah Durkee (Delacorte, 2006), about the collective efforts of an eighth-grade writers' workshop.
- *The View from Saturday* by E. L. Konigsburg (Simon & Schuster/Atheneum, 1996), about sixth-grade Academic Bowl team members.
- *Whirligig* by Paul Fleischman (Holt, 1998), about a teenager's involvement in a fatal drunk-driving accident.

If I am working with students for a shorter time and reading a whole novel is not possible, I turn to these collections of linked short stories:

- *Seedfolks* by Paul Fleischman (HarperCollins/Joanna Cotler, 1997), about an urban garden that unites a diverse group of neighbors.
- *Kissing Tennessee and Other Stories from the Stardust Dance* by Kathi Appelt (Harcourt, 2000), about eighth-graders at a graduation dance.

If we are focusing on poetry, I share one of the following novels written in verse. (Before we read, I make sure to explain to students how novels in verse are different from poetry collections.)

- *The Brimstone Journals* by Ron Koertge (Candlewick, 2001), which explores brewing violence in a suburban high school.
- *Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes (Dial, 2002), a series of poems and monologues read during Open Mike Fridays in a Bronx high school.
- *Keesh's House* by Helen Frost (Farrar/Frances Foster, 2003), about troubled teens who find temporary shelter and safety in an inner-city home.

As we read the novels, we discuss character and voice. I ask students to think about how authors create multiple voices. How is each voice distinctive? What are the strengths and weaknesses each character brings to the story that contribute to or hinder the “project” or “goal” of the story? And how does each character overcome his or her individual differences and become part of the “team” of characters as a whole?

Writing a Group Story

After we have read and discussed the books, students are ready to start “team writing” and begin a group story. In order to provide students with a bit of structure, we brainstorm a contest or a project that a group might accomplish together. I remind them about the community garden in Fleischman’s *Seedfolks* and the quest to build the world’s largest tetrahedron in Pearsall’s *All of the Above*. Our ideas have included everything from creating a school mural to participating in a sports championship.

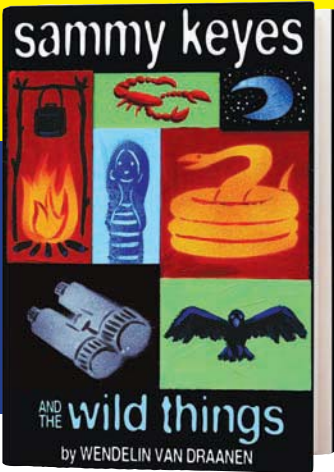
Next, we talk about where our group story will take place. We consider whether it will be a group of characters in a school, community, or even a group home. Often, students choose a location and type of school that is similar to their own. I emphasize that although the setting may be familiar, the characters are fictional and not people we know or recognize.

We then discuss the types of characters who might be in the story. I create a list on the board that usually includes the following: a straight-A student, a learning-disabled student, a student with a secret, a student in trouble at school or home, two best friends who are fighting, and a boyfriend and

girlfriend. At this point, we also talk about whether the project or goal will be successful or not. We discuss what type of personality traits might contribute to the success or failure of the goal or project. We don’t flesh out the character types, as this will be done later in student group writing.

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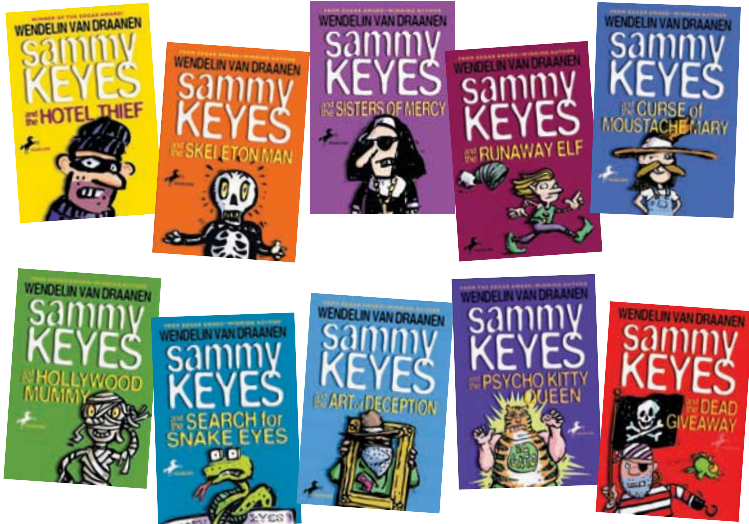
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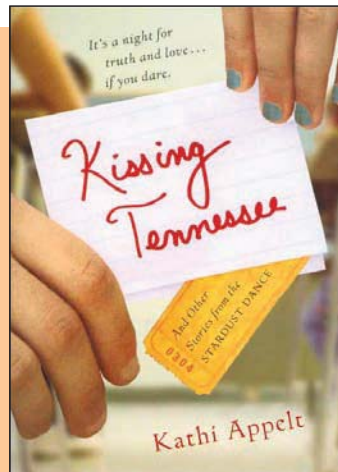
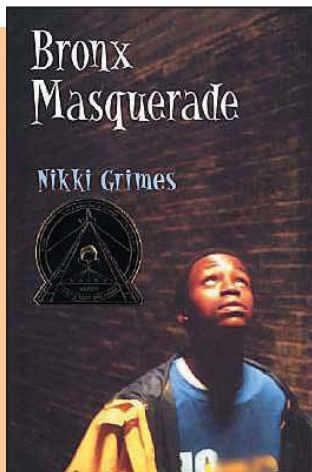
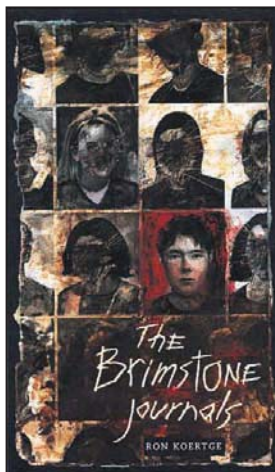
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Writing Character Scenes

Each student in the group chooses a character type from the list. Students are then asked to write three separate character scenes. If we are working on poetry, students write three poems. At this point, I spend some time instructing students on the structure of a scene. We talk about a scene's purpose and the elements that need to be included in it. I remind them that each scene moves a story forward. For instance, a character should change locations from one scene to the next. I also talk about some of the key elements of a scene, such as giving characters a goal, creating action with conflict, and including details that relate to the scene. Often, we will talk about various scenes from the novels we have read and discuss why they work. I ask students to focus on the following when writing their character sketches.

Character Scene One

Introduce the character, his or her problem, strengths, and weaknesses. How will that character bring these traits to the group project or goal? Will he or she help the project or hinder it? Is the character a harmonizer, or does he or she create discord? What is the challenge the character must overcome in the course of the story?

Character Scene Two

The team is struggling. The character is either creating harmony or discord, depending on what was established in the first character scene. Show how the character is impacting the progress of the project or attainment of the goal.

Character Scene Three

The team is beginning to come together and work as a group. How is the character changing? What does he or she realize during this process? How does the character contribute to the success (or the failure) of the project?

Group Writing


Character scene writing is spread over a period of at least a week. Students are allowed at least two days to write each individual sketch before being asked to participate in group writing. When students move into groups, they are reminded that they are each bringing a character with individual traits into one story with many different voices. We talk about how being on a team sometimes means compromising on an idea for the good of the whole, and I remind them of something often heard in athletics: there is no *I* in the word *team*.

Sharing Scenes

Once in their groups, students are

asked to read their character scenes. Then they are asked to make revisions to their scenes based on the group's feedback and direction for the story. In revision, students are encouraged to look at the "why" of their character's decision-making in each scene. What motivates a character to make specific choices? The goal is to get students working together in building a cohesive story as they revise their character scenes during each meeting. This process does not come easily for students, and we move slowly through this stage with much whole class discussion.

Once students think they have a cohesive group story, they share their scenes through performance pieces, with each student taking a turn reading. Students enjoy listening to the different voices and perspectives as they blend together to create a whole story.

At the end of the project, we debrief and talk about the difficulties and successes of working together as a team. Students usually admit that although challenging, the final product is much better than they ever could have completed on their own. 

Mindy Hardwick is a writer and educator in Lake Stevens, Washington, who works as a writer-in-residence at Denney Juvenile Justice Center and Lake Stevens High School.