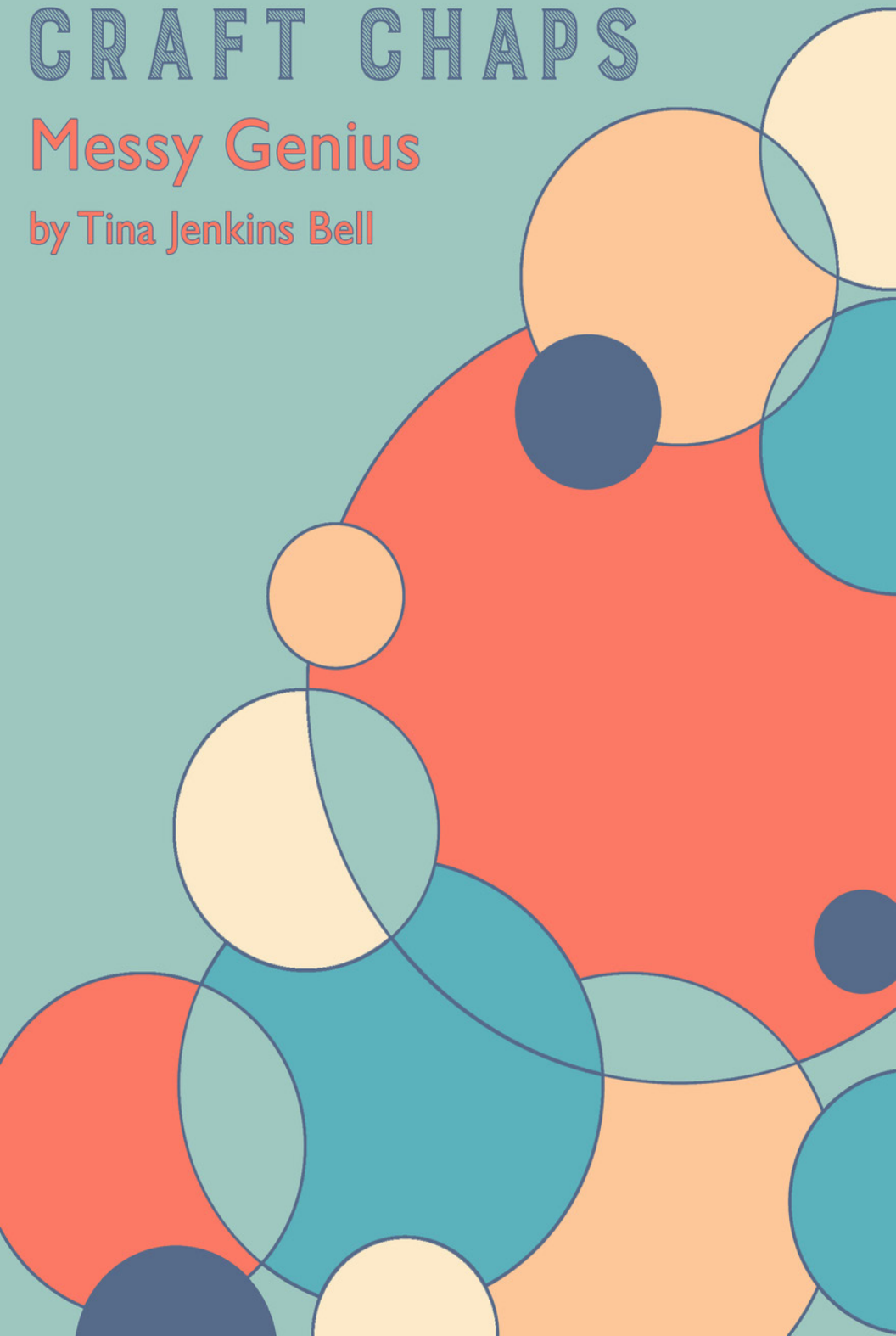


CRAFT CHAPS

Messy Genius

by Tina Jenkins Bell



**MESSY GENIUS:
THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS**

TINA JENKINS BELL

INTRODUCTION

About two years ago, I sat in the audience with Janice Tuck Lively, an English Professor at Elmhurst University and fiction writer, as we both composed ourselves to read the collaborative piece, “Looking for the Good Boy Yummy,” a fictional hybrid published in *They Said* anthology. We’d been asked by Simone Muench, one of the anthology’s editors, to share our collaborative process before or after reading an excerpt from the short story. I don’t know about Janice, but I wondered if we would tell the entire truth, including the “gory” aspects of the process or just the glorious parts—memories prompted when the bouncy baby book was placed in our palms and we were all teeth and cheek-to-cheek grins.



Turns out, those first few times, Janice and I fell into line, choosing to recall only the “glorious” experiences we shared while co-writing our short story. Like the other writers, we focused on the beauty and wonder of the process for co-authoring prose. Our chests swelled with pride as we discussed our decision to create a hybrid over a single genre, blending three voices* into one, the care we took to portray the last hours of a young boy who was tripped by every social crack until one gap led to his death while also honoring mothers who had lost their children to gang and gun violence, and our process for sharing and integrating research.

Finally, somewhere around our fourth reading, Janice and I decided to tell the whole truth about collaborative process, described as “frankensteining” language or story in *Suture*, a chapbook of sonnets, by Muench and Dean Rader. Looking into a pond of expectant faces, I took a deep breath, squeezed my eyes shut, and shared my truth about

the process of coauthoring prose with two other talented, experienced, and thoughtful authors. The collaborative process, I remember saying, is a beautiful and wonderful thing accompanied by mind-blowing labor pains—complete with mutual respect and the beauty and genius of the process, yes, but also the disagreements, indecision, fleeting confidence, imbalanced contributions, chaotic work and writing schedules, and that’s the short list.

When I opened my eyes, I was elated to see some fellow contributors nodding their heads in agreement and finally I exhaled—happy to share the real map with any duo, trio, or small group committed to the collaborative process from start to end.

After *That Said*, I must admit that I was smitten with the collaborative process. In fact, both Janice and I would join another writer Sandra Jackson Opoku, in 2019 to write and produce a collaborative play, entitled *Conversations with Lorraine Hansberry and Gwendolyn Brooks*, which was performed as a dramatic reading at Northwestern University as part of the Chicago Humanities Festival’s fall 2019 series, *Power*.

Truthfully, creating something with another person or group of people, when you’re all committed to working toward a shared goal, can be awesome. Its combined outcome has the potential for becoming a “great work” or hermeticism, a mystical union of self and all.

Collaborative process is what Dr. Mattie Moss Clark had in mind when she invented the three-part harmony—a fusion of tenor, alto, and soprano in the late 1950s. To this day, this technique continues to define and distinguish gospel music. Dr. Clark understood that monotonal music was great for cooing babies to sleep, but for inspiring and inciting spirit and even relief, the blended tones and voices of harmony peppered by life experiences and vocal nuances—the crack of emotion, the addition of a scat and spoken testimony—was more likely to make listeners take heed and hit replay repeatedly.

Blending voices in song or in prose is no easy task, but the benefits are many, varying from successful projects to improvements and enhancements in the individual writer’s work, process, knowledge base, and resources.

In summary, the brilliance of collaboration is a union of synchrony and diversity. Its cyclonic process can be recursive as writers figure out purpose, themes, story, parts, schedules, and their individual writing styles and processes. Participants need only to commit to the journey, which can be smooth and bumpy, loud and serene, or choppy and continuous, but in the end, when collaborators reach that place in time when their joint efforts become one wonderful collage sharing one story without showing its seams, then that is the point where each collaborator will appreciate the *messy genius* it takes for two or more people to create one really great work.



*“Looking for the Good Boy Yummy” was co-authored by Janice Tuck Lively, Felicia Madlock, and Tina Jenkins Bell.

COLLABORATIVE PROCESS: WORKSHOP

“A well-executed collaborative process brings about the right people, talking about the right topics with the right information and process structure to drive informed, insightful, and durable outcomes,” according to Ross Strategic, an environmental consulting firm charged with bringing people together to “chart a strategic direction.”

The above explanation looks pretty on the page, but truthfully it does not represent the totality of real-life collaborative processes, a fact that can be both exhilarating and scary at the same time. The collaborative process, particularly as it relates to writing, is a lot more vigorous, though with time and commitment it will lead to “informed, insightful, and durable outcomes.” To accomplish that goal, process takes work, cooperation, and grit. In the end, both the process and the work produced will be well worth the effort.



What does collaborative process mean for writers?

A collaborative process occurs when two or more writers coalesce to create a story, essay, play, poem, podcast, or some other communication or literary form. There are many occasions for writers and students to collaborate. Collaborators are not always familiar with each other and sometimes come to the table “cold” without prior relationships or knowledge of each other’s strengths, weaknesses, or

processes for creating. Under these circumstances, students may be asked to combine their efforts and talents to produce a project by a given deadline. Professors will usually provide a set of submission or assignment guidelines; other times, they may trust the group to draft and agree upon their own terms.

What is collaborative writing?

Muench, who has participated in collaborative projects since 2006, defines it as “a varied process with numerous approaches.” These collaborations can occur between living authors or a combination of living writers and/or artists and those who have passed on. In 1969, a Random House editor saw a natural connection between the subdued messages and desires suggested in Salvador Dalí’s art and commissioned him to illustrate a special edition of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice and Wonderland*, which was first published in 1865. Carroll, whose pseudonym was Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, died on January 14, 1898, about 71 years after Dalí received the commission.

The example of the Dalí-Carroll pairing brings another point that collaborative writing can be all prose or multimedia—a combination of prose and art or photography.

How many types or forms of collaborative writing are there?

Collaborative writing can manifest in various forms, depending on the groups themselves. The most common kinds are single-genre and hybrid literature.

Single-genre collaborative prose occurs when a group of writers combine their diverse views to produce one type of prose, be it poetry, narratives, articles, fiction, novels, or plays. The list is infinite, and the diversity of views and experiences enhances the outcome. An example of this would be the play, *Conversations with Lorraine Hansberry and Gwendolyn Brooks*, mentioned earlier. Additionally, Zora Neal Hurston and Langston Hughes co-wrote *The Mule Bone*, a comedic play. Barbara Kingsolver collaborated with her husband Steven Hopp and her daughter Camille Kingsolver to write *Animal*,

Vegetable, Miracle, a nonfiction book. Other examples of collaborations that produced single-form prose would be these novels: *Nick and Norah's Playlist* by Rachel Cohn and David Levithan; and *Black Horse* and *The Talisman*, both by Stephen King and Peter Straub. Also, in 2014, during NaNoWriMo, a novel writing initiative held in the month of November, Grammarly.com ran a contest to beat the record of the most authors to contribute to one novel. This alliance resulted in a mystery novel entitled *Frozen by Fire*, which was authored by 500 writers from 54 countries.

Not all collaborations result in single genre prose.

Some collaborations create narratives or stories utilizing various genres. "Looking for the Good Boy Yummy" is categorized as fiction, but it is actually a combination of fiction based on a real-life occurrence, quotes from newspaper articles, and haiku. Also from *They Said* is a hybrid piece constructed by six authors: *Of Breath: After Montaigne*, by Elizabeth K. Brown, Luther Hughes, Caroline Kessler, Ryan Masters, Gabe Montesanti, and Sylvia Sukup, is a collective of eight essays tethered by quotes from poetry and scripture.

There are conventional ways of communicating a message, resolution, revelation, gist, or tale and then there are collaborative processes that braid words, story, forms, experiences, styles, insights, and outlooks into one dynamic piece. Whether the alliance produces a single genre or hybrid project, something magical happens when a work emerges from the hindsight and foresight enabled by more than one mind.

Why is the collaborative process important?

Recently, after assigning students in my Composition I course to write the first 250 words of a memoir assignment, I organized the class into two-person feedback teams in which students read their works, reviewed the elements of engaging memoir beginnings (as instructed in class), and then gave each other constructive, non-judgmental feedback based on those elements. Following this task, I asked students if the task was helpful and if so, in what ways. Numerous students responded they were able to better recognize strengths and

needs for improvements through their peers' perspectives.

One student opined, "Just on reading my work on my own, my intro sounded pretty good to me, but then when I read it aloud, I wasn't so certain. She also pointed out that I had a lot of asides in my intro, which interrupted reader engagement. I couldn't see it for myself. Hearing it from someone else was a big help."

Collaborative process involves co-authoring, yes, but it can also involve peer reviewers, tutors, feedback from professors, and whomever else helps move a work from the heads of their creators to a polished state and on to the page, stage, Internet or podcast. These alliance-based processes do not negate the manner in which individual writers create nor contribute to their groups. Instead, they eliminate the solitary nature of composing, which can create a sense of working in a vacuum or tunnel.

The following is a list of other ways the collaborative process allows student writers to:

- Benefit from observing others create.
- Learn and master writing skills by teaching aspects of the project.
- Build confidence as writers create new genres and prose types in a safe, neutral circle.
- Increase insight and objectivity for editing work as a result of feedback and other group interactions.
- Enhance sense of purpose as a result of working toward a common goal.
- Have opportunities to reshape and enhance personal writing processes and figure out how to align those processes with the group's goals.
- Learn or improve time management skills due to the requirement for benchmarked productivity (schedule) and responsibility to self and group.
- Synergize creativity in small groups where each student benefits from listening to the ideas and strategies of others.
- Identify unknown strengths, abilities, and creativity through group commentaries.
- Incorporate new passions and strategies for using rhetorical tools (narration, description, definition, comparison and contrast,

process analysis, illustration, classification, persuasion, and cause and effect) or literary devices (metaphor, simile, anecdote, irony, oxymoron, epistolary, hyperbole, irony, paradox, parallelism, diction, imagery, and others).

- Heighten sense of audience and purpose from collaborative, academic discourse.
- Observe and understand the comprehensive nature of the “fellowship” of writing—one that includes writers, peer editors, tutors, and professors.

Collaborative processes allow contributors to benefit from social constructs that allow each member to: enhance their own knowledge base as a result of what others know and observe or experiment with prose forms or strategies exhibited by others in the group. It takes grit, a combination of courage, passion, resilience, and vigilance, on the part of each collaborator to solder mind, efforts, creativity, and intention into one voice and one final piece. At times, a collaborator may question the worth of the quest. But in the end, collaborators will appreciate the outcome as well as their contributions to it.

Armed with this understanding, a logical question for those who accept the challenge of working together to complete one piece, is: what are the best ways to or steps for processing collaboratively?



What are best practices for processing as a group or team?

Writerly unions or literary collaboratives do not spontaneously come together. And that’s okay. I have mentioned throughout this chapbook that there is *messy genius* and wonder in one project shaped by

multiple collaborators. Consider these ground rules, steps, and etiquette.

1. Review the purpose for writing or project guidelines.
2. Make time for the group to brainstorm on ideas and strategies for meeting that purpose. Give everyone time to share their perspectives and ideas. More importantly, be considerate and respectful when others are sharing.
3. Agree upon a topic relative to the project's purpose and a strategy (single or multi-genre) for relaying that topic. This step may take time. Participants may want to conduct research prior to suggesting a topic, and once these ideas are shared, it may seem as though a consensus may never be reached—even among two-person collaborations. Allowing the freedom of expression, whatever it may be, will take time. In the end, once a consensus is reached, the decision will have the support and satisfaction of all contributors whose voices were heard. Be patient with this process.
4. Make time for members to share their interests in the project, their expertise, and their proposed contributions. For example, some members may want to write while others may see the revision and editing stage as their best contributions to the group. Be open to alternative contributions.
5. Assign parts of the project to every member.
6. Decide if the collaborative will write individually or as a team.
 - When participants write individually, let each person produce in their own ways. Do not try to dictate how a participant should research, write, or polish their work. (Remember, there will be time for peer reviews.)
 - Writing as a team or group requires members to craft a work in-person or together. Creating as a group or team usually involves members contributing ideas as another member types or writes the draft. However, it is a mistake to have members separately write the same section or category of the project. Ultimately, during the editing process, the works of one or more contributors could be left out. This could lead to hurt feelings, less participation, and negative energy directed toward the project. On the other hand, if the team or group considers, discusses, and agrees upon all offered ideas, then this strategy can be as dynamic as musicians make music

- during a jam session.
- Once collaborators have their assignments—whether producing as a team or individual segments of the project—trust team members and the agreed upon process.
7. Agree upon a schedule, allowing time for the collaborative process to unfurl in these steps: prewriting, including idea generation and review (to eliminate unnecessary information); drafting (as a team or individually); review, revise, edit, and polish. The group may decide to add other elements to the schedule, such as additional time for peer reviews, compilation of submissions (if members worked individually), polishing and packaging the work according to project format guidelines. Consider the instructor or professor's requests for providing an abstract, citing the work's thesis (central idea), major ideas, genre, and timeline. Midway through the project, the professor may also want to conference with the group to gauge progress. All these elements and pertinent deadlines should be indicated in the schedule. Finally, identify a collaborative online tool for sharing information, such as Google Documents. A schedule on Google Documents can be enhanced or revised, and all parties will be aware of it and have access to the same document.

Considerations that deserve repeating...

1. Trust members to do their part.
2. Respect each participant's voice and contributions.
3. Do not minimize nor delete another collaborator's work or make a collaborative project a one-person event.
4. Be willing to disagree. Many times, the greatest ideas and growth come from dissonance. Be willing to listen and be open to new and diverse ideas.
5. Schedule periodic meetings that do not always require in-person gatherings. Consider phone or remote options, such as Zoom or Google Meet.
6. Use word processing that supports "real time" collaboration. Basically, this means all participants can see edits as they occur as well as the names of the author who made changes. Google Docs offers a tool for collaboratives to query, comment, or justify as well.

7. Be honest but also kind when discussing collaborators' works and contributions.
8. Do not think the worst if a collaborator falls behind. Communicate!

Tools for the trade: online tools for working collaboratively

Our recent circumstances with coping with a pandemic have forced us to work and learn from home while shining a light on online tools that support collaborative processes and authoring. The two most popular tools are Google Docs and Microsoft Word Live, which allow participants to draft, edit, review, and comment. Others, such as Dropbox Paper, may allow greater creativity in that students can draft as well as insert documents or media stored in DropBox.

The following list is just a sample of offerings. Click on the links and decide which tool best serves your purpose.

1. Google Docs: docs.google.com
2. Microsoft Word: microsoft.com/en-in/microsoft-365/free-office-online-for-the-web
3. Zoho: zoho.com/docs
4. Ether Pad: etherpad.org
5. Think Free: office.hancom.com
6. Dropbox Paper: dropbox.com

CONCLUSION



In the beginning of this chapbook, I may have teased a bit about the collaborative process being gory or scary, but I also mentioned it is abundantly synergistic and worth the time, effort, and ultimate fulfillment. Besides the two collaborations mentioned in this chapbook that led to publishing or production, I actually have aligned with several other writers and editors to generate work or literary projects or initiatives. Each time, I've enjoyed the social aspects of the experiences and the ability to learn new things within the warmth and acceptance of a community without stress or repercussions. I'm not alone, a fact that is evident in the various collaborative works mentioned in this chapbook and many more that were not shared.

Also, according to an online article entitled "Collaborative and Group Writing," composition scholars and authors Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford "enjoyed co-authoring so much that they devoted their career to studying it."

Pulitzer Prize winner, former United States Poet Laureate, and lauded poet Gwendolyn Brooks wrote, "We are each other's harvest; we are each other's business; we are each other's magnitude and bond." Brooks meant we are all responsible for nourishing or enhancing each other, and this is certainly the responsibility and ultimate benefit of collaborative processes and co-authoring, from which progress multiplies and is evident in our advancement as thinkers and writers.

ACTIVITIES



Activity A: Crowdsourcing

Goal: Create a crowdsourced poem. A crowdsourced poem is a collaborative process in which various individuals from the public or members of a group submit words or stanzas (a group of lines forming a verse), focusing on a theme or topic. These poems can be inspired by themes, issues, the times, call outs, or prompts. For example, in August of 2019, NPR (National Public Radio) asked listeners to submit lines or stanzas inspired by their memories of home. They based their call out on Appalachian poet Georgia Ella Lyon’s poem “Where I’m From.”

For more information on crowdsourced poems, visit: crowdsourcedpoetry.wordpress.com.

Learning Objectives:

- Use figurative language and other creative devices to create short verses
- Learn the process of collaboration
- Infer author’s mood and tone

- Identify key words, phrases, and descriptions in stanzas or passages
- Discuss succinct manner in which poetry leaves impressions or communicates ideas
- Increase vocabulary through contributor’s personal efforts and as a result of reading other collaborators’ submissions
- Learn concision or how to use fewer words to share big ideas.
- Understand events or history and be able to apply contextually to prose

Directions:

1. Explain to students what a crowdsourced poem is.
2. Share with them the various attributes of writing collaboratively, including: respect for diverse ideas; discovery of personal voice and aesthetics or sense of beauty, repulsion, and emotion and then choosing the way in which voice and aesthetics are represented on the page; ability to connect creatively with others and exchange ideas; opportunity to use literary elements (diction or choice of words or phrases, tone, imagery, figures of speech, symbolism, and other literary devices; and opportunity to learn from others in a safe, neutral space.
3. Listen to and read NPR’s crowdsourced poem, “Where I’m From,” at: www.npr.org/2019/08/28/754698275/where-i-m-from-a-crowdsourced-poem-that-collects-your-memories-of-home.
4. As students read the poem, instruct them to note the message or meaning behind each stanza. Also ask them to consider the ways in which the various lines or stanzas contribute to the theme of home.
5. Discuss as a class. Ask students about the ideas behind the individual stanzas and how they tie into a theme. Inquire how language entices them to see, feel, hear, smell, or taste and then ask them to identify the specific words or phrases that provoke the senses. Finally, ask them how large ideas are portrayed in single words or phrases.
6. Divide the class into small groups of four to six students and instruct them to create their own crowdsourced poem. Students can choose their own themes, call outs, or prompts from which to spark their poems.

7. Offer ideas for themes, including: the trauma of COVID-19, social unrest, remote learning, politics as usual, pronoun preferences/identity, or climate change. Some call out suggestions are “I Matter Because”; “This Is My America”; “I Am Who I Am”; “See Me Like I See You”; or “Where I’m From.” Encourage students to create their own themes or call outs if none of the above suggestions inspire them.
8. Before releasing students to create, remind them: (1) To introduce themselves; review assignment directions; discuss how they want to work together; choose or create prompts to write by; give each other space to process and create alone; share and peer review individual stanzas; allow writers time to edit individual submissions; convene as a group to organize contributions using Google Docs (make sure the file is shared to all group members); review again and fine tune or edit collaboratively; polish, publish or submit, and present.
9. Time needed: One to two weeks. Time may be given for group meetings in class, but students will need to work independently beyond class as well.
10. Group work follow up: Have students write a reflection about their experience of collaborating with a group of other writers to create one poem. What did they learn about the collaboration process? Were they comfortable depending on others to contribute parts of a whole assignment? Why or why not?

Activity B: Flash Nonfiction Prose

Goal: Flash or micro nonfiction can be memoir or personal essays or factual writing, like a short article. It is brief and runs between 500 to 1,000 words. It can be a hybrid of prose forms, uses creative or literary devices, and packs the narrative with a combined punch that often delivers the central idea at the end. According to flash nonfiction enthusiast Dinty Moore, “The brief essay, in other words, needs to be hot from the first sentence, and the heat must remain the entire time. My fire metaphor [...] does not refer to incendiary subject matter. The heat might come from language, from image, from voice or point-of-view, from revelation or suspense, but there must always be a burning urgency of some sort, translated through each sentence, starting with the first.”

Teach students how to collaboratively combine ideas about a single issue, subject, or idea to create a flash nonfiction essay of no more than 500 words.

Directions:

1. Read and discuss “A Black Hairstory Lesson” by Niya Marie. What is Marie’s central idea and how does her work emphasize this central idea? What rhetorical tools or literary devices does Marie use to construct her personal narrative? Is her work effective? In what ways?
2. Inform students that they will be writing a collaborative flash essay. Remind them what collaborative writing is and the process that may be needed to contribute several submissions to form one essay.
3. Divide class into groups of four to five students.
4. Instruct them to brainstorm on a few issues, situations or topics on which they might like to write. Suggest students pick the topic that resonates with all parties.
5. Direct students to write 100- to 125 word segments of their essay.
6. Remind them that prior to writing they should assign parts. For example, who will initiate the prose, who will build upon the start, and who will write the summation or end.
7. Allow them time to review their work and edit prior to sharing in class.
8. Time Needed: 45 minutes (excluding presentation of work).
9. Give them an additional five minutes to write a short paragraph about their group’s process.
10. Share in class.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tina Jenkins Bell teaches introductory and intermediate composition at Elmhurst University. She is an author, published fiction writer, playwright, freelance journalist, and literary activist. Her most recent works include: “To the Moon and Back,” a soft sci-fi short story published by *Hypertext Journal* and nominated for an Illinois Arts Council Literary Arts Award; “The Devil’s Alley,” a mini memoir in *Us*

Against Alzheimer’s – Stories of Families, Love and Faith; a collaborative hybrid, “Looking for the Good Boy Yummy,” available in *They Said* anthology, and *The Last Supper*, which appeared in *Revise the Psalm*, an anthology honoring the life and works of Gwendolyn Brooks among several other literary journals and collections. In August 2019, Bell produced, with the help of the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Events, a staged reading of her play *Cut the Baby in Half*. In October 2019, the dramatic reading for a play she co-created with fellow playwrights Janice Tuck Lively and Sandra Jackson Opoku was staged at Northwestern University as a part of the Chicago Humanities Festival fall series entitled “Power.” Bell is the founder and president of *For Love of Writing* and collaborates with other writers and organizations to offer literary programming on Chicago’s south side, referred to as a literary dessert by city stakeholders. She’s also a three-time DCASE Individual Artist Project grant recipient, a two-time Ragdale resident, and a 2015 short story fellow with Colgate University and the Midwest Writers Conference. She expects to celebrate the publication of her first novel, *Mud Pies*, in 2020 and is currently collaborating with writers, artists and editors to produce an anthology of work chronicling the rise, fall, and efforts at regeneration of Gary, Indiana. Bell is a recent empty nester, living on Chicago’s south side with her husband and two dogs Bella and Jackson. Her favorite word and icon is butterfly.

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