

Oregon Writing Festival

By Ulrich H. Hardt

Every first Saturday in May, hundreds of students in grades four through twelve gather at Woodburn High School to practice and celebrate writing. They come from all parts of Oregon, bringing a sample of their best writing as their admission ticket.

The Oregon Writing Festival was created in 1985 through the cooperation of language arts specialists Tim Gillespie (Multnomah County Education Service District), Mary Bothwell (Portland Public Schools), Frank Mazzio (Oregon Department of Education), Ulrich Hardt (Oregon Council of Teachers of English and Portland State University), and teachers from around the state.

The festival was held at the University of Oregon from 1985 to 1989. It was at Portland State University in 1990 to 2023 whose College of Education co-sponsored the event with the Oregon Council of Teachers of English. The festival celebrated its fortieth anniversary at Woodburn High School in 2025, making it one of the longest-running writing festivals for students in the United States. At the festival, more than 150 adults work with the students, who are placed into sharing groups of ten to present and critique their writing. Students also participate in two writing workshops conducted by teachers and professional writers.

In a general session appropriate for their age group, they listen to award-winning authors such as internationally known children's and young adult authors Jane Yolen, Gary Soto, and April Henry; Caldecott Medal winner Allen Say; Oregon Poets Laureate Lawson Inada, Paulann Petersen, and Kim Stafford; National Book Award winner Virginia Euwer Wolff and finalist Katherine Dunn; Oregon Book Award winners Eloise Jarvis McGraw, Eric Kimmel, Barbara Drake, Graham Salisbury, Susan Fletcher, Roland Smith, Judith Barrington, Fonda Lee, Craig Lesley, Carmen Bernier-Grand, and Primus St. John; and multiple Oregon Spirit Book Award winners Mark Fearing, Deborah Hopkinson, Barbara Kerley, Mike Lawrence, and Elizabeth Rush.

Norah, who had attended four festivals while in elementary and middle school, wanted her "writing-prone peers at Gladstone High School to have this same wonderful opportunity" and sought permission for them to attend. Long-time Pendleton High School teacher John Scanlan wrote: "The OWF is a life-changing event for students, especially those from rural areas who feel isolated until they meet all these other young people with whom they share so much. My students have returned and conducted their own writing workshops for peers and for children in Pendleton elementary schools." Rebecca from Umatilla County attended five times, "taking away more from each experience. The first time I was too shy to read my own story; now I'm the first to volunteer, eager to share raw, just-written drafts. I'm looking forward to returning to the OWF as a teacher." And Ed Kline, English teacher at Oregon City High School, declared, after years of participation, "It's my favorite teaching day of the year, it's on Saturday, and I don't even get paid."

In its first 40 years, 35,000 students have participated in the Oregon Writing Festival; they have listened to 142 award-winning authors and have worked with 1,700 workshop presenters.

Sources

Oregon Council of Teachers of English. "Oregon Writing Festival."

The Oregon Encyclopedia

https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/oregon_writing_festival/