

# *Writing with Families*

**By S. Arthur Kelly**

Maupin House Publishing, Inc.

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Book and cover design: Mickey Cuthbertson

Cover Photo: S. Arthur Kelly

ISBN: 978-1-934338-50-6

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The Family Writing Project website, [www.FamilyWritingProjects.com](http://www.FamilyWritingProjects.com), is dedicated to publicizing the work of Family Scribe Groups around the country and disseminating information about Family Scribe Groups. The website, [www.WritingWithFamilies.com](http://www.WritingWithFamilies.com), offers ideas and information that expand upon the content of this book.

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# 1 What Are Family Scribe Groups?

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Family Scribe Groups are made up of families who meet, in order to write, with the guidance of one or more facilitators. Participants in Family Scribe Groups write about what they know best: their own lives. They explore the meaning of “community” in their lives through an overarching theme, such as “defining identity,” and corresponding writing activities. During this process, families come closer together with other families. They always publish their writing to document their work and share it with others. Family Scribe Groups also take on some sort of community-oriented culminating activity or project, some work that benefits their communities and publicizes their efforts.

The role of a facilitator is to create situations that encourage a wide variety of meaningful, relevant writing while remaining flexible and attentive to the needs and interests of family writers. Facilitators, the leaders who guide the entire project, assist the family writers towards achieving all these goals through planning and leading activities that result in a variety of types of writing.

While writing is the main goal of a Family Scribe Group, much more goes on in a project than just putting pen to paper. Each week, the facilitators of a project prepare activities and prompts that will get family writers thinking. These might be art projects, such as drawing portraits or designing ceramic tiles that later will become part of a mural, or they might be conversation topics that the writers will discuss with partners or in groups. Eventually, however, all roads lead to writing in a Family Scribe Group.

There is no set formula to the writing, which assumes many forms. Sometimes the writing takes the shape of a list or the jotting down of notes. It might be a journal entry that later becomes part of a group poem or a story that reveals important memories or hopes for the future. *Everyone* writes at a Family Scribe Group, from young children to grandparents. And together, they share their written thoughts.

By the end of a Family Scribe Group, each family will have collected a portfolio of writings in their weekly binders. From their portfolios they assemble pieces to publish in a group anthology. Whether the anthology becomes a booklet, a CD-ROM, a website, or some other media form, it becomes the means of sharing a

group's ideas and beliefs with others. It becomes a lasting artifact of what went on during the project. It also is a reminder for all of the family members of the time they spent in their writing community.

By participating in a Scribe Group, children and parents have the chance to gain an increased appreciation for writing. Many find that writing is something they want to continue after the group ends. They also discover ways of expressing thoughts and feelings that they may not have had an earlier opportunity or inclination to practice. In general, family members say that being in a Scribe Group greatly increases their interest in writing and awakens in them a desire to capture thoughts on paper. This is especially true for reluctant writers and members who tended to hold their feelings inside.

Parents or grandparents often come to the group because they have been invited or urged to join by a child. At the first class they expect to sit back and watch or to help their kids. With time, after a few activities and one or two writing opportunities, these hesitant participants become excited by the entire writing process. At first, they think they can excuse themselves from the writing. Eventually, however, they become writers and are as willing as everyone else to share their creations.

As you might have guessed, the benefits of a Family Scribe Group do not relate only to improving writing skills. Families become closer when they work together on activities dealing with relevant issues and ideas. When they write they share their feelings and thoughts, often expressing ideas that they have never before put into words. Parents look at their children with a new set of eyes. In a Scribe Group, children frequently take the lead, both with ideas and with writing. Parents often are surprised at aspects of their children's lives, feelings, and thoughts that come out through discussions and writing. The same is true for the children, who may discover sides of their parents that they did not previously know existed. For example, a mother might read aloud a paragraph shedding light on her behaviors as a parent. These moments have immeasurable effects on participants and by all accounts help to bring family members closer together.

A sense of community develops, too. Although the children in a Scribe Group might know each other from classes at school or time spent on a local playground, the families themselves are often strangers to one another. Through the Scribe Group, which deals with so many issues relating to family life and common values, families get the opportunity to increase their understanding of one another. On the one hand, families learn about the differences in their lives, such as those having to do with religion, foods, and holiday celebrations. At the same time, they learn that, despite many differences, they share underlying values. They all want what is best for their children, and they all care about where they live and their places in the community.

Family Scribe Groups generate a broad spectrum of exceptional experiences for family writers and teachers alike. Repeatedly, in their writings and discussions, parents and children point out features of Scribe Groups that they feel are crucial to their projects' successes. Similarly, teachers who facilitate Scribe Groups always identify elements that make their projects succeed. These elements are what matter most in designing and facilitating a Scribe Group; they are what make families excited to write and motivate teachers to work with families in such a unique setting.

It is important that facilitators of Scribe Groups take all of these principles seriously when designing their projects. They are not merely suggestions but rather factors for success that Scribe Groups share.

## Principles of Family Scribe Groups

**Remember that participants are families.** A Family Scribe Group has families as its participants. Families come in many forms, shapes, sizes, and arrangements. Be liberal in your conception of family, and allow your members to define themselves. You will have to decide whether to allow children to attend without older family members, such as parents, uncles, and aunts. Maybe a student will show up with a neighbor or adult volunteer, such as a Big Brother or Big Sister. Usually, as word of your project spreads through your school or site, you will have children come to you to find out about joining. Some may not have adult family members who are able or willing to attend with them. It is difficult to turn any child away, but at the same time, your project is for families and much of a project's writing will derive from families' experiences. Be prepared to decide what you will do in that situation. Perhaps there is an adult at your site willing to work with a child who comes to the project without other family members; be open to other solutions.

**Focus on families.** First and foremost, a successful Family Scribe Group has facilitators who recognize that the group is for the families. Facilitators must remain flexible and be responsive to the directions in which families want to take their projects. The facilitator should not always be at the center but rather must step back and watch what happens when the ideas of parents and children move into the spotlight. A facilitator envisions situations and writing opportunities that give families a chance to explore and express their ideas but does not worry too much if those plans evolve into something quite different in the classroom. The facilitator also works alongside the families as a participant. Facilitators must write, share, and publish with the families. Just as importantly, they must listen to the families and respond to their ideas.

**Recognize families as teachers.** A child's first teachers are at home, not in a classroom. Throughout life, parents, grandparents, and siblings continue

in their roles as teachers. In a Family Scribe Group, children work with the teachers who matter most in their lives: their families. These are the people who have spent years teaching right from wrong and sharing a wealth of knowledge beyond that imparted in the classroom. And families are the ones who will remain with students long after school days are over. Never diminish or overlook the value of bringing together families, not as your students, but as teaching and learning groups.

It is too easy for classroom teachers to assume that kids do not learn at home or to assert that students who are less accomplished at writing are victims of bad parenting. Scribe Groups recognize that every family is a repository of knowledge. There is an expression that asserts that each time an elder dies, it is as if a library has burned down. Parents and grandparents have knowledge far more expansive than any classroom teacher could ever pretend to offer. In a Scribe Group, the wealth of knowledge in family libraries finds expression in conversations and writing.

**Appreciate that kids are people, too.** Again and again, parents and teachers in Scribe Groups realize that the children in their projects are people. They have opinions and ideas; what they believe matters. Teachers realize this when they see children interacting with their families. Parents realize this when they hear their children intelligently discuss ideas and share their writings. Do not discount children's ideas and your project will certainly give each of them a newfound sense of worth and importance.

**Let families shape your project's focus.** The themes and activities of a Family Scribe Group must be relevant to the family writers. A Scribe Group is not the place for a facilitator, administrator, or other person in power to tout a personal agenda. Rather, the Scribe Group is a place where families have access to writing experiences that matter to them. It is from this clear sense of relevance that family writers will gain the motivation to write. It might be that the issues that matter in a Scribe Group are issues almost entirely overlooked or disregarded by schools or curriculum designers. Scribe Groups deal with lived experiences and knowledge gained from family life and with ways of turning those into writing. While facilitators might be experienced with styles or forms of writing, they must recognize that families are the experts of their own lives.

**Create an accepting environment.** It is crucial that participants of Scribe Groups feel like they are members and not just attendees. Every member must listen to others and realize that everyone in the group has unique contributions to make to the community of writers in the project. Facilitators must establish this attitude from the start. Acceptance might be stated implicitly in the diversity of cultures, ethnicities, or religions represented in the group's population at

that first meeting. Or it may be represented in the variety of languages used by family members in their writing. Above all, a facilitator must emanate an attitude of acceptance and trust for the ideas, practices, and beliefs of their families. Otherwise, the enthusiasm and openness of the group will suffer. When everyone feels accepted and valued by the others, an almost magical sense of honesty and sincerity will express itself in every writing activity.

**Give voice to the voiceless.** Scribe Groups give a forum to individuals who might otherwise not express themselves or share their ideas. A father who does not often express himself well at home often will find words for his feelings in a Scribe Group. Students from marginalized populations, such as special education or second language programs, find their voices as they gain a place to write about their experiences to share with others outside their groups. Populations who lack political power or a strong voice in their school or community will find an outlet for their opinions and desires. For these reasons it is absolutely necessary that Scribe Groups publish their writing and share it with their communities and with each other.

**Give writing primary importance.** In a Family Scribe Group, writing is a revered activity, a treasured experience—anything but basic. A Scribe Group will turn to writing to interpret reality and define lives. Scribe Groups recognize that writing is a democratic activity that equalizes individuals and guarantees participation in the community. Everything in the group leads somehow to writing. Even if a family member does not share aloud what is on the page, there will be writing. And, without exception, facilitators practice what they preach and write alongside the families. Family Scribe Groups are an inviting way of promoting and encouraging writing among reluctant writers and of creating authors out of individuals who might never have realized the power of the written word in their lives. It is not difficult to see that a child's experiences in a group can shape how she approaches writing later in life, perhaps with her own children.

**Measure success outside of given standards.** A Family Scribe Group is not the place for curriculum designers to step in and say what is needed or for testing enthusiasts to discover ways to manipulate their statistics. Undoubtedly, there will be those who will want to see their work fall into alignment with state, district, or school standards and benchmarks. Others will feel a Scribe Group's success must be measured and quantified with decimal points and averages. Such aspirations have their places in public school programs, but these individuals entirely misjudge the business of Family Scribe Groups and fail to recognize a great deal of the achievements and successes that members will reach throughout a project. Find other ways to measure success, such as letting family members rate their self-perceptions as writers. Give everyone opportunities during a project to write about how they feel about their project

and its attendant successes, surprises, and failures. These self-evaluations are the most important measures of a project's success. If you feel required to document a project's achievements for others—to school administrators or funding providers, for example—members should have a direct role in deciding what to share and how to compile that information.

**Honor native languages.** Allow family members to write and publish in their native tongues. By doing so you recognize that their native languages, as well as the language of the school setting, have the potential to communicate thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Also, keep in mind that literacy in a first or home language benefits literacy in second languages while also encouraging cultural and intellectual expression.

**Balance mind and heart.** Family Scribe Groups strike a balance between the intellectual and the emotional. Writing is an exercise of the mind that builds communication and language skills, but it is also a way of expressing feelings, dreams, and aspirations. Writing that is relevant to the families' lives will most often contain strong emotional content. It will reveal layers of participants' lives and uncover memories, ideas, and thoughts that may not have otherwise found expression. Facilitators will lead families into writing opportunities that have the potential for strong affective responses. There is, of course, the need to find ways of writing down thoughts and feelings so that others understand them, a need which falls more under the intellectual than affective domains. Here, the facilitator shares ideas and knowledge about writing, its various forms, and processes. The facilitator becomes, in a sense, the technical assistant aiding the experts.

These eleven founding principles combine to give your Family Scribe Group its purpose and identity. A project lacking any of them will probably fall short of its potential. As facilitator, it is your job to keep these principles alive as you plan for your project and meet with your families. It is also important that you model these concepts. Demonstrate respect for every member of your group, model good writing practices, and encourage everyone to participate. The facilitator role is less rigid than that of a traditional “teacher” who stands in front of the class, but it is every bit as important. A successful facilitator draws from participants their thoughts and ideas and creates a trusting environment that encourages their written expression. Keeping these principles alive in your project will go a long way towards helping you to achieve those ends.