

SWWC Service Cooperative presents the 34th Annual

CONFERENCE FOR YOUNG WRITERS



January 6, 2026 (snow date Jan. 7) | For all students in grades 3-8
Held at Southwest Minnesota State University, Marshall, MN

Writing is more than putting words on paper, it's an art form and a way to discover your unique voice. Designed to spark the imagination and build confidence, this one-day event connects students and authors in an interactive, hands-on learning experience. Together, they'll explore how to craft stories, express ideas, and turn creativity into opportunity.

Writing opens doors, come see where your words can take you!

Southwest Minnesota Arts Council helps support Young Writers.



Registration

Who can register:

- School teachers register groups of students and their chaperones.
- Parents register their students and themselves.

Online Registration Deadline:

November 25, 2025, at midnight.



*Power
OF
Words*

www.swwc.org/yw



SWWC
STUDENT ENRICHMENT

Contact: Andrea Anderson,
Student Enrichment Coordinator



507-537-2257



www.swwc.org/yw



andrea.anderson@swwc.org

CONFERENCE INFORMATION

General Registration

- Available to students in grades 3-8
- Register Online: www.swwc.org/yw
- All attending adults must be registered online.
- There is no student/adult ratio at this time.
- Not required but prefer contact person be an attending adult.

School Participants

- The schools attending are responsible for collecting and entering registrations. Payments can be made online or see billing option below.
- Don't forget to register all attending adults.
- If your school is unable to attend, direct parents to the website for access to conference information, giving them the chance to attend on their own.
- Please remind parents who are sending students with the school are selecting that they are attending with school and who approved it.
- School district funding may be available to support teacher and student participation in SWWC enrichment programs through MINNESOTA GIFTED AND TALENTED REVENUE MN Statute § 126C.10 2(b).

Parent Participants

- Parents do not have to attend with their school. They may attend on their own with their student(s).
- Don't forget to register the attending adult.
- If a parent misses the school registration deadline, they can still register and attend on their own.
- Check with your school to see if they are participating as a school group.

Registration Fees and Deadlines

Registration Deadline: **November 25, 2025, by midnight**

- \$40/per student
- \$10/per adult

Payments

- Parent payments are made at the time of registration with Credit Card. Payments go through WePay.
- Schools can pay with Credit Card. (optional)
- If a school wants to be billed after the event, they must contact us prior to registering for a billing code.

Lunch

- Bring your own lunch – no refrigeration is available.
- Campus cafeteria is closed for winter break.
- Check with your school about the sack lunch program.
- Place lunches in containers or coolers and label with school/parent name.

Supplies

- Supplies are provided for students, unless otherwise mentioned in the session description. For students only.

Sessions

- The conference features an opening keynote and three, one hr. long hands-on learning sessions for students.
- Students choose six session options (grade appropriate) and are later scheduled into three sessions that fit their schedule.
- Select sessions in the order of preference.
- Choices selected by student **DOES NOT** represent their final schedule.
- The student's final schedule is based on session demand & session sizes; therefore, **we cannot guarantee students will be assigned all requested topics.** We do our best to give them as many of their choices as we can.
- We retain the right to limit the number of students per district in specific sessions.
- A session may be canceled or added due to the number of students registered.

Conference Details

- Conference information is on www.swwc.org/yw
- The **final schedule** and other information will be emailed to the person's email on the registration, a few days before the event, or as soon as it is ready,
- Please share this information with chaperones/parents.
- Chaperones/parents are responsible for knowing the conference details and the cancellation policy.
- Contact person will need to check in and pick up group packet the morning of the conference.

Book Fair - Commuter Lounge (BA Bldg.)

- Paper Pie will run a book fair all day.

Students with Special Needs

- The SWWC Service Cooperative, in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities ACT (ADA), is dedicated to making conference activities accessible to all students. Please contact Andrea for special accommodations by November 25, 2025.

Cancellation and Refund Policy

- Cancellation requests must be received by the final registration deadline for a refund, less a \$10/student service charge.
- After the deadline, no refunds will be processed.
- If a student is unable to attend, try to send someone in their place and notify us of the change.



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AGENDA AND KEYNOTE

AGENDA

8:00 am - 9:00 am	Check-In, Refreshments
9:00 am - 9:15 am	Welcome
9:15 am - 9:45 am	Keynote
10:00 am - 11:00 am	Session I
11:00 am - 11:45 am	Lunch
11:45 am - 12:45 pm	Session II
1:00 pm - 2:00 pm	Session III
9:00 am - 2:00 pm	Book Fair (in BA Lobby)

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Daniel Bernstrom

Daniel Bernstrom, an acclaimed picture book author of seven books, overcame early reading struggles—even repeating first grade—to become a celebrated voice in children's literature. His books have garnered numerous accolades, including nominations for state reading awards. Daniel shares his passion for storytelling and literacy as a full-time English instructor at Minnesota West Community and Technical College, where he currently serves as an English Faculty member in Worthington, Minnesota, teaching Literature and English Composition. He lives in Worthington with his wife, Heather, and their six children.

To find out more about Daniel and his books, check out his website at danielbernstrom.com



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SESSION DESCRIPTIONS

Select sessions appropriate for student's grade level 3-5 or 6-8

A. Unleash Your Inner Word Artist!

Gr. 3-5 & 6-8

Become a word artist! In this workshop, you'll learn how to craft vivid poems using special poetic forms. Discover how to make your words paint pictures and tell stories, using precise language to bring your ideas to life. You'll write your own unique poems and then create a colorful drawing to illustrate your words.

***Daniel Bernstrom**

B. Plotting with Post-its

Gr. 3-5 & 6-8

We all love Post-it Notes! They mostly help us remember things, but they can also be used to create a new story plot. In this class, we'll discuss what every plot needs, how to carry action from scene to scene, and why it's important to increase the tension from beginning to end. Students will use this technique to generate a unique story outline. ***Jennifer Davidson**

C. Writing for the Airways

Gr. 3-5 & 6-8

What does it take to be part of the action behind the microphone? In this fun, hands-on session, students will meet a real radio professional and learn what it's like to work in broadcasting! You'll explore how to write your own radio scripts for news stories, advertisements, and public service announcements. Get ready to turn your ideas into something everyone can hear!

***Dan Debates**

D. Write and Perform Sketch Comedy

Gr. 3-5 & 6-8

SMSU Live: Young comedians have the best ideas. In this workshop, you'll team up with other folks who like coming up with zany what-ifs and show them to an audience. Get inspired with some improv games, then learn the basics of writing and performing in your own sketch comedy show like "All That" or "Saturday Night Live" (but all your own). You might leave with a pad full of ideas -- or a script of your own to develop further. At the very least, you'll exercise your creativity muscles and funny bones (wait, can people exercise bones? Sketch idea!).

***Jessica Hennen**

E. TV News in 10 Minutes

Gr. 3-5 & 6-8

Students will learn how to gather news by conducting mock interviews. Then they'll use that information to write a news story that will be broadcast ready. It'll all be done by the time class is over and if it's good enough, it may just end up on the news!

***John Lauritsen**

F. Story Sparks

Gr. 3-5 & 6-8

What makes a story spark in a reader's mind? What draws readers into a story? A good plot and characters, yes, but how we write also makes our writing more interesting. In this session, we will add to and write scenes for our own stories. Come explore how to turn your words into fuel that will make your story fire! ***Erin Makela**

G. "True Crime Detectives"

Gr. 3-5 & 6-8

We will be choosing a story from a few vintage newspapers on a true crime that happened long ago. A crime from a rural community called Sleepy Eye Minnesota. We will set the stage for a young lad that went from good to bad. All the students will be detectives searching for clues of a crime. After the group finds the clues, they will be coached in putting together a True Crime Short Story.

***The Zoo Man**

H. "Create A Quest"

Gr. 3-5 & 6-8

Create A Quest: Do you love dragons, quests, or magical lands? In this session, we'll explore what makes a fantasy story exciting and believable. Then you'll design your own world, complete with creatures, maps, and characters. By the end, you'll have the start of a brand-new fantasy adventure. ***Afton Northrup**

I. How to Catch a Poem

Gr. 5-8

Write It Like You Mean It! Poems can come from anywhere. A sound, a feeling, something you saw on the way to school or on a vacation. We will talk about how to grab those ideas before they slip away. We will mess around with different kinds of poems, try writing a few lines, and see what happens when you make the words your own. By the end, you'll know how to catch a poem when it shows up and master your craft around it. ***Nick Northrup**

J. Painting with Language

Gr. 6-8

The Art of Spoken Word Poetry! Learn about the worldwide art form making space for the voices and imaginations of millions of young people every day. What is Spoken Word? Why do human beings write Poetry? What makes Poetry poetic? Get to the heart of writing poetry with Spoken Word and Hip-Hop Artist SEE MORE PERSPECTIVE. Participants will experiment with language to paint pictures that express their biggest feelings and wildest imagination.

***SEE MORE PERSPECTIVE**



SESSION DESCRIPTIONS

Select sessions appropriate for student's grade level 3-5 or 6-8

K. Midwest Realism

Gr. 6-8

Tell us about your life. Much of my own writing, the writing of authors I taught, and the work of writers I published is about their own lives in their own place. This is called "Midwest realism," and it was the agenda of the day for many years. Lately people and their writing have become disconnected from their place. We will look at the work of many writers from this area who "made it," from Laura Ingalls Wilder to Bill Holm to me, and see how they tell us about their lives and their places . . . and about your life and your place. (non-fiction) ***David Pichaske**

L. Mapping Story Worlds

Gr. 3-5 & 6-8

Writers are explorers and explorers need maps. A map doesn't just guide the way; it tells a story of its own. In this session, you will begin creating a story by literally drawing a map of your story's world. Together, we will brainstorm ideas and characters as well as discuss a few storytelling techniques to help you develop a unique place where your story can unfold. ***Gillian Singler**

M. Creative Writing Pitch Session!

Gr. 3-5 & 6-8

The session is designed to push past shyness and talk with other writers who are as excited about your ideas as they are about their own! We will pitch your ideas for your first or next great book or story! We'll talk about how to get yourself (and others!) excited about what you're going to be writing about. Be prepared to share your ideas and get feedback from your writing friends.

***Thomas Kingsley Troupe**

N. Making it Real

Gr. 3-5 & 6-8

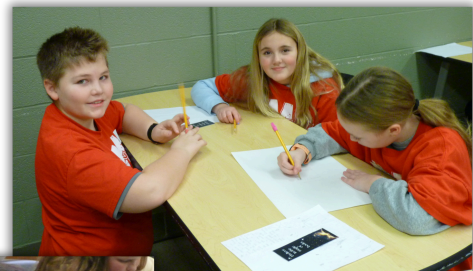
Whether you're writing or storytelling out loud, you create a world for your audience. But building a world for your audience to live in for a while is hard. In this session, you'll get a chance to practice using just enough description to create a world for your audience without them getting lost or bored. Get ready to get creative!

***Julie Walker**

O. Write Comic Books!

Gr. 3-5 & 6-8

Action, drama, humor! Comic books use a blend of amazing artwork and thrilling story to engage readers young and old. But they just don't appear out of thin air. They require hard work and focus from great writers AND great artists to bring a story to life. This session will explore the key elements to writing a fantastic script for a comic book that can be used to partner with an artist to create your very own comic book! ***Scott Welvaert**



Photos, Videos, & Media

By participating in this event, you are giving SWWC permission to use any audio/video recordings and photographs that are taken during the event.



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MEET YOUR PRESENTERS

Daniel Bernstrom

Hi, I'm Dan! When I'm not teaching English at Minnesota West Community & Technical College, you'll find me immersed in my true passions: writing stories and poems. If you were to catch me doing anything, it would probably be creating something—be it through art, reading, or long walks.

Daniel R. Bernstrom is the critically acclaimed author of seven picture books, including the beloved “One Day in the Eucalyptus, Eucalyptus Tree”. His work has received widespread recognition, most notably winning the Minnesota Book Award for “Big Papa and the Time Machine”. His books frequently appear on prestigious lists such as the Banks Street College of Reading Best Books of the Year and the CCBC (Cooperative Children's Book Center).

Further cementing his literary impact, Daniel has earned the Skipping Stones Award for “Goodnight Little Man”, an NCTE Notables Award, and boasts two Junior Library Guild selections. His book “Song in the City” was chosen as an NEA Read Across America selection and nominated for the Minnesota Star of the North Award, while “Big Papa and the Time Machine” was featured in the PBS virtual “Let's Learn” program. He's also been nominated for the Cybils Award and several state awards across Iowa, Arizona, and Illinois.

Daniel holds an MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults from Hamline University. www.danielbernstrom.com

Jennifer Davidson

Jennifer L. Davidson is the author of three novels and works in communications at Mayo Clinic in Rochester. She enjoys writing, reading, and sharing all she's learned about being creative with students young and old.

Dan Debates

Dan DeBates is a communications professional, educator, and lifelong craftsman with a passion for mentorship, media, and hands-on learning. He currently serves as a Youth Employment and Career Specialist with the Southwest Minnesota PIC and as a part-time On-Air Talent with Marshall Radio. He earned his bachelor's degree in communications (Radio and Television Broadcasting) from SMSU. He is currently pursuing a master's degree in mass communications from SDSU and is preparing to begin Ph.D. studies. His professional background spans a wide range of fields. Dan's work and life are guided by the values of curiosity, craftsmanship, and community. Whether he's mentoring youth, broadcasting on the radio, teaching martial arts, or working under the hood of a car, he is always driven by a passion to learn, create, and make a positive impact on those around him. Connect with Dan on [LinkedIn](#)

Jessica Hennen

I direct the Creative Writing and Literature programs at SMSU. By training, I'm a fiction writer, but I also practice improv, write and perform sketch comedy, and produce two weekly columns for the Granite Falls Advocate Tribune. I live on a farm with my husband and too many pets (cats, chickens, and a needy dog). I was also a child illustrator for Stone Soup Magazine, my first publication. Now, with my friends, I write and produce the live and filmed parody sketch show A Granite Falls Home Companion.

<https://jessiehennen.wordpress.com/>

John Lauritsen

My name is John Lauritsen, I am a reporter with WCCO-TV (CBS) in Minneapolis. I report on general news, fill-in anchor and I do a segment called Finding Minnesota in which we go across the state and feature unique and historic things to know about in our state. In my spare time, I like hanging out with my family, working out, playing volleyball and pickleball, and watching my kids play sports. I also love spending time on the farm. wcco.com

Erin Makela

Erin Makela is the author of “Worthy of Trust”, a young adult historical fiction novel. While she calls Worthington, MN home, Erin is always looking for her next travel adventure with her stuffed alligator, Swampy. When choosing music to write to, Erin's go-to playlists are Broadway show tunes and sea shanties.

<https://erinmakela.com>

The Zoo Man

I'm known across the US as The Zoo Man. I travel with my animal friends educating and entertaining the young and the young at heart. Performing Zoo Man programs is my favorite part of life. I'm also an author of 2 books, The Zoo Man Remembers and True Crimes and Bizarre Stories of Sleepy Eye Minnesota. My book, The Zoo Man Returns is in the works. I am also a Personal trainer for Parkinson's Disease Clients, which keeps me very busy. I keep people active and train them for balance, strength, and flexibility. See more on my Facebook: [Zoo Man's Attractions](#)

Afton Northrup

Afton Northrup is a writer, editor, teacher, and poet who explores everything from fantasy adventures to climate change and even medical mysteries. Her work blends creativity with curiosity, showing how stories and poems can help us understand the world in new ways. She enjoys sharing a love of words with young people and believes anyone can be a writer. When she is not teaching or writing, Afton can often be found reading, exploring nature, or imagining new worlds where science and storytelling meet.

www.reachafton.com



MEET YOUR PRESENTERS

Nicholas Northrup

Hi! My name is Nick. Born on the South Side of Minneapolis, I've always known that words were my calling. From spoken word to hip-hop, poetry to prose, I've spent years refining a storytelling style shaped by life experience, raw emotion, and crafted cadences. As Crowfather, I built my name in the underground hip-hop, but I got my start in slam poetry scenes, earning recognition as a Minneapolis All City Slam Finalist (Slam MN, 2015) and After-Hours Slam Champion (AWP, 2012). My work has been published in Perceptions Literary Journal and The Spur news columns, and for a brief stint, I took my love of storytelling to entertainment journalism as a features writer for Screen Rant. I hold a BFA in Creative Writing, and when I'm not writing or performing, I'm probably painting miniatures, rolling dice in a TTRPG, or losing track of time in a deep sci-fi or fantasy binge. I share life with my incredible wife who makes sure I never miss a deadline, and our two corgis, who ensure that no deadline passes without at least one dramatic interruption. Through all of it, my goal remains the same: to create the kind of art I wish I had when I was younger; art that pulls back the veil on generational trauma, the demons that haunt us, and the resilience that keeps us breathing.

www.crowfathermpls.com and www.nicknorthrupmpls.com

David Pichaske

I am a retired English Professor who taught at Southwest State for forty years. I taught four years in Poland, Latvia, and Mongolia. I am the author of three dozen books and chapbooks, and as (also retired) editor-publisher of Spoon River Poetry Press, Ellis Press, and Plains Press, publisher of 150 books by other authors. My most recent book is titled the THE SECRET PLACES OF SOUTHWEST MINNESOTA. www.ellispress.com

SEE MORE PERSPECTIVE

SEE MORE PERSPECTIVE is an MC, Producer/Composer, Spoken Word Poet, Visual Artist, Filmmaker, and Social Justice Educator. Their work explores identity, culture, social justice, mythology, science fiction, spirituality, and the paranormal. Learn more at www.seemoreperspective.com

Gillian Singler

I am an instructor, a partner, a mother to both people and pets, a writer, and a volunteer. I enjoy reading, writing, hiking, traveling, jogging, playing games, the company of some people, and watching what I suspect may be too much television. Most importantly, I believe writing is a powerful instrument for expression and change.

Thomas Kingsley Troupe

Thomas Kingsley Troupe likes writin'. He is the author of the fiction series HAUNTIQUES, FURRY & FLO and the upcoming STAR BELCHERS. Other than that, he's written a whole bunch of titles for kids from non-fiction picture books to a few installments in the JAKE MADDOX sports series. Thomas has been writing books and stories in one form or another ever since he can remember. When asked, he'll tell you about the time he entered a book into his school's book fair in 2nd grade.

Hi, I'm a published children's author with over 300 books published. I enjoy reading (obviously!) and writing. When I'm not doing one of those things, I enjoy spending time with my kids, watching movies, playing video games, or taking a nap. I also like chocolate chip cookies, orange Popsicles, and turtles.

www.thomaskingsleytroupe.com

Julie Walker

Julie Walker is a professor at SMSU by day, creator and troublemaker by night. When she's not chasing after her herd of children, she's enjoying the wildlife in her bee garden. Sit down for a chat with this storyteller to hear some wild tales.

Scott Welvaert

Scott Welvaert is a writer of middle grade, young adult, and adult fiction. He has written numerous books, including The Curse of the Wendigo, The Mosquito King, The Alabaster Ring, Grotesque, The 13th Floor, The Ghost of the Wicked Crow, Escape from Atlantis City, and the forthcoming, The Traveler's Kiss. An avid outdoorsman, movie buff, nerdy sci-fi and fantasy reader, and a joyful comic book nerd, his real jam is writing stories that bend the fabric of reality and offer a different perspective than most. He lives in Chaska, Minnesota with his wife, and a deaf husky named Rocket.

<https://scottwelvaert.com/>



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SWWC SERVICE COOPERATIVE



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inspire
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Changes Needed?

Please notify us of any changes in your contact info or if you need to be removed from our contact list.

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