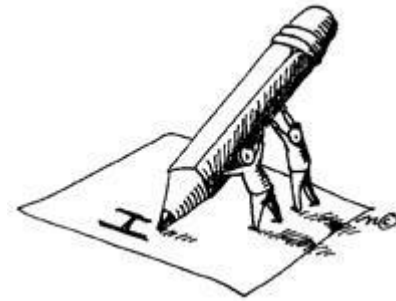


# Writing for Life

*Arts Outreach Series*

*By Riki Saltzman, Accessibility Coordinator*

Writing duo Laura Sweeney and Jason Arbogast use their talents to assist people of all ages and abilities develop their inner writer. Their innovative writing enterprise, [Writers for Life](#) (on the Iowa Arts Council's Teaching Artist Roster), has worked with the Iowa Department for the Blind, the Patient Voice Project (University of Iowa Arts Share Program), the Central Iowa Center for Independent Living, and a host of others to produce fiction, non-fiction, and poetry in a supportive workshop setting.



Sweeney and Arbogast start the creative juices flowing by tempting workshop participants with short readings and narrative prompts that provide inspiration, spark ideas, and combat dreaded "blocks." Although attendance at any one session can vary, those who feel comfortable reading aloud their work-in-progress do so; participants also share comments and suggestions. Bit by bit, the works grow and develop into completed stories and poems.

One workshop I attended involved a couple of writers who collaborate with the Department for the Blind. Since Writers for Life had already worked with Iowa State University students as well as University of Iowa students on writing around topics related to healthcare, they were particularly intrigued by how people with visual impairments might respond to their methods. The writers I heard read pieces that involved the challenges that others faced in adapting to and accepting the writers' blindness. This was not the take I expected at all, and the conversation that resulted touched on all kinds of interesting stories about how those with sight treat those without. Take away lesson: do NOT offer help to people with disabilities unless you are asked!

What further interested me was the Jaws® screen reader, an adaptive technology the writers used. Jaws®, which "reads" the writers' words as they are typed, and then the completed pieces (in an oddly accented male voice that reminded me of Andrei Codrescu of National Public Radio and [Exquisite Corpse](#) fame). Hearing Codrescu (in my mind's ear) "read" a first-person story written by a woman definitely made for a different spin. But the technology also provided an interestingly objective way for writers to hear their words aloud.

Sweeney's and Arbogast's techniques have possibilities for a variety of learning environments, from ELL (English language learners) to people with disabilities, to seniors, and students, grades 6-16. Writing, listening, and reading, combined with thoughtful feedback, rewriting, and polishing - it sounds simple but requires skill and patience. The results are worth it, though, and can be seen in the proud faces of newly-minted writers - and in the pieces that find their way into public readings or publications.

*For more information on writing workshops, contact Writers for Life at (704) 995-0569 or [writersforlife@hotmail.com](mailto:writersforlife@hotmail.com) - and check out their [blog](#) as well.*