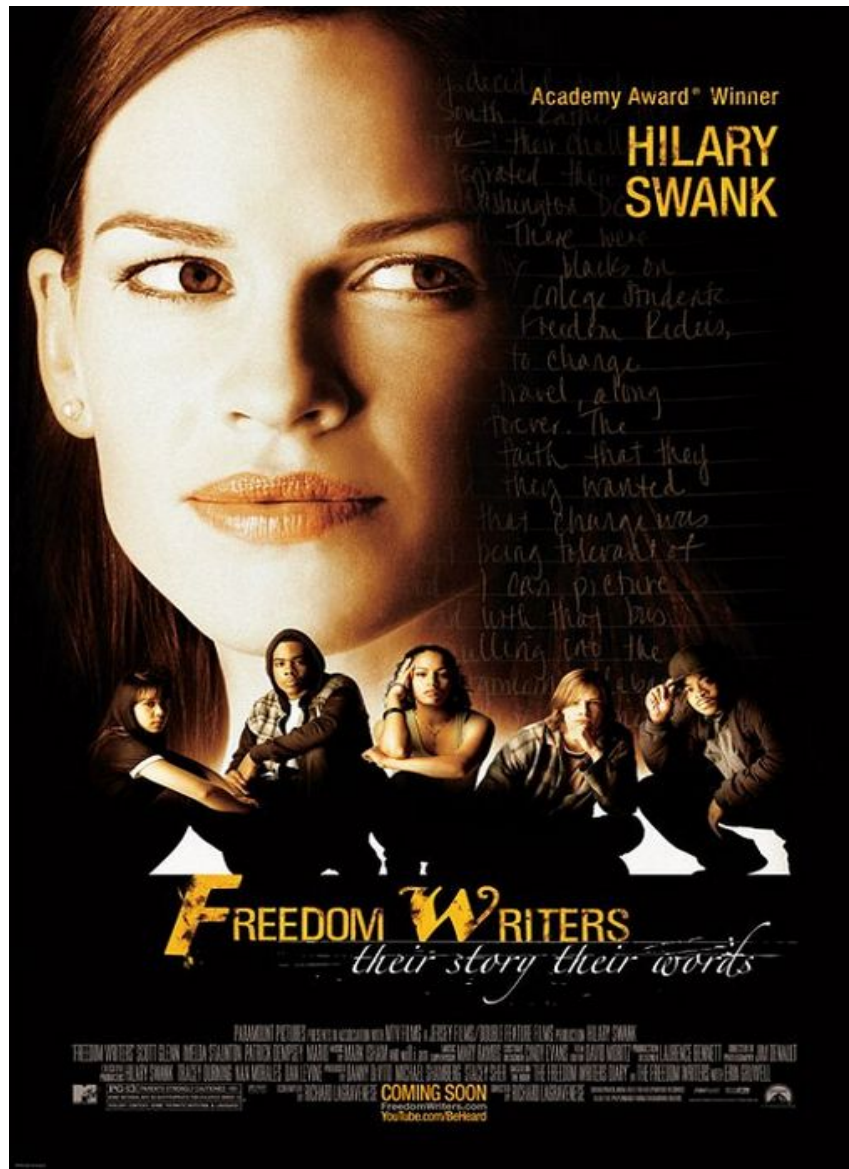


Freedom Writers: Express Yourself Discussion Guide



A facilitator's discussion guide for youth leaders, educators and families to accompany the book and movie, *Freedom Writers*

Ages 13 – 18

www.freedomwriters.com

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Freedom Writers: Express Yourself



Dear Group Facilitator:

Set in Los Angeles during the years following the 1992 Rodney King riots, *Freedom Writers* tells the true story of a young English teacher and her influence in the classroom. Erin Gruwell begins the school year as an English teacher for the “at-risk” freshmen students at Wilson High School in Long Beach, California. She soon realizes that her diverse group of students is embroiled in the racial gang war culture of the time. Without the positive support of family members or teachers, these students have no expectations of academic success. Each day is a struggle to survive on the streets.

In a daring move that counters her superiors at Wilson High, Ms. Gruwell sacrifices her own time and money to inspire and educate her struggling students. Using books such as *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* and *Zlata’s Diary: A Child’s Life in Sarajevo*, Gruwell leads her class in a life-changing journey against intolerance. As the students read these books, they begin to recognize parallels in their own lives and record personal accounts of their experiences and emotions in diaries. Calling themselves the “Freedom Writers,” the students gain national recognition for their efforts and begin to make positive changes in their own lives.

Freedom Writers, in both book and movie form, touches on powerful themes such as self-reflection, tolerance, facing adversity, striving for success and trust.

This discussion guide, *Freedom Writers: Express Yourself*, is structured for use after viewing the movie and/or reading the book. It offers discussion topics for youth ages 13 - 18. It is provided by the National Collaboration for Youth, an organization which provides a unified voice for its coalition of more than 50 national, nonprofit, youth development organizations. The 30-year-old organization concentrates on improving the conditions of youth in the United States and enabling youth to realize their full capabilities. As a result, youth empowerment and development play a central role in the discussion guide for *Freedom Writers*.

NATIONAL
COLLABORATION
FOR YOUTH



Freedom Writers: Express Yourself



OBJECTIVES

- Youth will engage in thought-provoking group discussions that allow them to think and learn about tolerance, respect and trust, overcoming adversity, family relationships, anti-violence and anti-gangs, steps to finding success and the inequalities that exist in education.
- Youth will be able to make comparisons between the *Freedom Writers* book and movie
- Youth will have the opportunity to extend their learning through interactive activities that address the discussion themes
- Youth will design and implement a related service project
- Youth will use provided tools to advocate for their schools

Steps for Youth to Take with the *Freedom Writers: Express Yourself* Program

Step 1) SEE THE FILM AND READ THE BOOK

THE MOVIE: *Freedom Writers*, a Paramount Pictures and MTV Movies film, opens in theaters on January 5, 2007. Youth may also see the movie when it becomes available on DVD.

THE BOOK: *The Freedom Writers Diary* by The Freedom Writers with Erin Gruwell is widely available in libraries and book stores. It contains real journal entries from Ms. Gruwell's students as they advance through high school.

Step 2) PARTICIPATE

Take part in powerful discussions that address themes such as:

- Tolerance
- Trust
- Family relationships
- Anti-violence
- Striving for success

Step 3) TAKE THE LEAD TO HELP OTHERS

Using the example of Erin Gruwell's determination to make positive changes in her classroom, young people are urged to learn to take on responsibility by designing and conducting a service project. Youth are also encouraged to advocate for educational changes that could make a difference in their community's schools.

Use the free, downloadable service-learning supplement to assist in the planning and managing of *Freedom Writers* service projects. Please visit www.youthfilmproject.org to download the supplement and to gain more information on the film and the book.

Freedom Writers: Express Yourself



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Freedom Writers: Express Yourself



Notes for the Facilitator:

The discussion questions in this guide are designed to encourage youth to think deeply about the themes and messages that arise in *Freedom Writers*. The discussion questions and activity ideas are arranged according to theme and provide youth with an open forum to express their emotions and engage in constructive dialogue with their peers.

Importantly, please tailor the discussion questions to the life circumstances of the youth in your group. Many of us have endured relationships or life experiences that may be similar to the challenging circumstances faced by Ms. Gruwell's students. Yet, many youth, like the main characters of *Freedom Writers*, will reach into their own hearts and into a close circle of support (parents, grandparents, family members, peers, teachers and others) to develop lasting, positive relationships.



Tolerance

- At the beginning of the school year, Erin is deeply disturbed by a racial caricature of one of her students that she finds being passed around the room. Why does Erin compare this drawing of an African-American student to the drawings of Jewish men during the Holocaust?
- Why do you think Erin refers to the Nazis as the most famous gang in history? Why does this comparison make the students begin to listen to her?
- Why are the students so unwilling to associate with anyone outside their ethnic/racial groups? Where does this intolerance come from?
- Despite their very different backgrounds, the majority of Ms. Gruwell's students go through similar daily struggles. What makes them realize these similarities? How do the students use their collective strength as a source of healing?
- Could Ms. Gruwell's pro-tolerance teaching methods be extended to the entire school and beyond? How could this be achieved?
- What would you do to break the ethnic and racial barriers in Ms. Gruwell's classroom?
- Think about your own school or out-of-school activities. Are youth respectful of each other's differences? Are there problems similar to those in Wilson High? If so, what steps can you take to initiate change?



Earning Respect and Trust

- Why do the students initially only trust peers from their own ethnic/racial groups?
- Ms. Gruwell is the first teacher to show trust and respect for the “at risk” students at Wilson High. How does Erin Gruwell demonstrate this? Why are some students more resistant to trusting her?
- Why is trust such an important component of a teacher-student relationship?
- Why do the students feel betrayed when they initially learn that Ms. Gruwell will not continue teaching them in their junior and senior years?
- How do the classmates learn to trust one another? How does reading and writing initiate this change?
- Imagine you are Ms. Gruwell. What would you have done in her situation? How would you have earned the trust of the students?
- Respect and trust issues are not only problems among the students. The teachers and administrators at Wilson High do not support Ms. Gruwell’s teaching methods. Why do they refuse to trust her?
- How are relationships healthier when the individuals involved have mutual respect?





Overcoming Adversity

- Miep Gies, the woman who hid Anne Frank, is a hero to Ms. Gruwell's students. What does Miep Gies mean when she tells Ms. Gruwell's students, "You are heroes everyday."?
- Describe the transition in Ms. Gruwell's classroom from the first day of freshman year through senior year – how have the students changed? How has Ms. Gruwell changed?
- Ms. Gruwell's students endure a number of hardships in their personal lives. Many of the students come from broken families, in which they have endured physical and/or emotional abuse, substance abuse, poverty, homelessness, gang violence, and deaths of close relatives and friends. How do the assigned class books relate to the students' lives? What are some common themes that run throughout the literature?
- Why is Eva so affected by the ending of Anne Frank's diary?
- Have you ever had to overcome a significant problem? Who did you turn to for support?
- Have you read a book or seen a movie in which a main character goes through a challenging situation? Describe this book/ movie and how the character overcomes his/her obstacle





Family Relationships

- What makes Eva choose to “go against her people” in the courtroom? Do you think this was a good decision? How do her family and friends react?
- Do you think it’s more important to “protect your own” or do what’s right?
- Put yourself in Eva’s shoes. Would you tell the truth in the witness stand or protect your friend?
- In the book, the students write openly in their diary entries about sensitive family issues such as drug use and sexual abuse. How does Ms. Gruwell’s class become a safe zone for the youth to express their sufferings?
- In the movie, how does Erin Gruwell’s obsession with work conflict with her personal relationships? Describe the changing relationships with her father and husband.
- How does Erin’s father view her choice to teach at the beginning of the movie? How does this change towards the end?
- In what ways does Ms. Gruwell’s classroom become a family for the students? Do you have a “family” outside your actual family?
- What are some of the qualities of a strong family? How do the students and Ms. Gruwell provide these traits to one another?
- What are some of the difficulties of balancing your academic or professional life with your personal life?



Anti-violence and Anti-gangs

- Why are the students filled with such anger at the beginning of the book/movie? Do you think their anger is reasonable?
- Why aren't Ms. Gruwell's students motivated to succeed in school? What outside factors affect their ability to learn?
- Conduct some research. What caused the increased gang activity in the mid-1990s in Los Angeles? Why do you think the students of Wilson High School are so heavily involved in gangs and violence? Do the students achieve anything by participating in gangs?
- Are the youth of Long Beach justified in retaliating against other gangs or ethnic groups if they have been attacked? Why or why not?
- Why do so many of Ms. Gruwell's students believe they won't live past age 18?
- How do teachers and students deal with bullying, violence and/or gang activity in your school?





Finding Success

- Describe how writing in journals helps transform the lives of the students. How does writing “free” the students from their pain?
- Do you or have you ever kept a diary? If so, why do/did you write? Do/did you write about events, or emotions or both?
- Why do you think Ms. Gruwell makes the effort to take her students on field trips to museums and treats them to fancy dinners, new books and computers? How do these “luxuries” impact the students?
- Have you ever been treated to something special or out of the ordinary? How did it make you feel?
- Describe a school trip or after-school outing that had a significant impact on you. How did it make you feel? Compare this experience to traditional learning within the boundaries of the classroom.
- Ms. Gruwell gives her students the opportunity to find success and graduate. Do you think the students continued along the path of success without Ms. Gruwell by their side? Why or why not?
- Ms. Gruwell is a shining role model and source of encouragement for her students. Who is your role-model or biggest motivator in life? Who pushes you to succeed? If this person does not exist, what would you want this person to tell you?
- Erin Gruwell is determined to create a positive learning environment in which her students learn about tolerance and are able to succeed. She endures many obstacles on her path to achieving this goal. Do you have a goal that you wish to attain? What steps are you taking or want to take in order to meet this goal? What adversity have you encountered or anticipate on encountering towards this path?
- Visit the Erin Gruwell Education Project website at [www. gruwellproject.org](http://www.gruwellproject.org) to learn more about how Erin Gruwell’s impact has continued.



Inequality of Education

- Why do Ms. Gruwell's students hate and resent her at first?
- How does Ms. Gruwell's upbringing, appearance and attitude contrast with those of her students?
- Most of the teachers at Wilson High do not dress in formal attire. Why do you think Ms. Gruwell chooses to wear business suits and pearls to class? What impression does this make? How do clothes, accessories and make-up affect how others perceive you?
- What obstacles does Ms. Gruwell face in ensuring that her students receive adequate supplies and an innovative education?
- Why aren't Ms. Gruwell's students provided with new books from the school?
- Why do you think Ms. Gruwell takes on the challenge of teaching remedial English in a gang-ridden community? Why didn't she become a lawyer like her father suggested?
- What are some of the inequalities among students and classrooms in Wilson High School?
- Describe how the honors English students are treated differently from the "at risk" students. Why?
- Why do you think Ms. Gruwell faces such harsh criticism from her peers and the administrators at Wilson High? Describe some of the challenges Ms. Gruwell faces in dealing with the authority of the school.
- Think about your own school. Are there inequities that exist? How can you document these injustices and urge school officials to make positive changes?
- To learn more about an innovative organization that allows students to document aspects of their public schools through photography, visit Critical Exposure at www.criticalexposure.org



Comparing the Book and Movie

- How did *The Freedom Writers Diary* change when it was adapted to the screen? Describe these alterations.
- Why do you think these changes were made?
- In the movie version, why do you think the screenplay writers added in a side story about Erin Gruwell and her husband?
- After seeing the movie, were the characters as you had pictured them in the book?
- In the book version, a large number of Ms. Gruwell's students' lives are depicted and the entries are all anonymous. In the movie, the focus is on a few students and they are all given clear identities and names. Which version of the story do you prefer? What do you gain from each version?





Extend the Learning – Activity Ideas



- Do some research and create a timeline of ethnic/racial/religious persecutions that have occurred in the 20th and 21st centuries throughout the world. Display it in a community center, library or school to show that intolerance is a continuous problem and needs to end.
- Make a visual storyboard that depicts the progression of Ms. Gruwell's students
- Plan and implement your own "Toast for Change" in which each person in your group can speak about a difficult situation and make a resolution for change
- Organize a community/school exhibit of student artwork and writing that sends a message about tolerance and respect
- Start your own daily diary, in which you chronicle important experiences and emotions. After a few weeks or months, make a collective, anonymous book of your group's entries, just like *The Freedom Writers Diary*.



Take the Lead to Help Others

This section allows youth to explore actions they can take as individuals and in groups to reach out to others in need of academic or personal support. The activities are designed to heighten youth awareness of how they can have immediate as well as a lasting positive impact on the recipients of their generosity.

As young people develop throughout the teenage years of 13-18, they benefit greatly from experiencing their own personal power, capabilities and talents. Parents, educators, youth leaders and child development specialists know that the best way for youth to learn responsibility is to take on responsibility. This process is captured in both the book and the movie, *Freedom Writers*, through the personal development of Ms. Gruwell's students. With time, the students learn to overcome their personal hardships and form a support system for one another. The students take on many responsibilities, including the organization of their diary entries into a book and fundraising events such as the "Concert for Change."



Service Projects Designed to Help Others

Dear Young People:

Think about a service project that your group would like to do to reach out to others in need of academic or personal support. Become a mentor like Ms. Gruwell and help others establish and reach their goals. Think about your skills, talents or academic strengths and how you can assist a younger person, peer or older adult.

Look for ways to work in cooperation with adults.

- ✓ **Plan and conduct your project with the guidance and support of an adult partner.**
- ✓ **Read some of the tips for working well with adults below.**
- ✓ **Have your adult partner(s) read the tips for adults.**
- ✓ **Brainstorm your project ideas and plan the steps to carry it out. Use the F.I.L.M. service-learning supplement, available at www.youthfilmproject.org**
- ✓ **Then, get to work!!**

Here are a few ideas—but, it is very important for you to organize your own ways to take the lead!

- Become a reading tutor for recent immigrants to the United States that live in your community. Your assistance will help them become more successful in school or in their careers.
- Visit a local nursing home or retirement community and teach some of the older residents a new skill or activity. Similarly, learn a new skill from them!
- Become a volunteer “guidance counselor” for peers or younger youth that need additional assistance in school or who are struggling with personal problems. Receive training from an adult on how to effectively address specific issues and practice with friends. Remember to respect the privacy and anonymity of the youth you assist.

Visit www.youthfilmproject.org to download the free service-learning supplement!



Advocate for your Schools

Dear Young People:

In addition to service projects (see the Service-Learning Supplement) – you can also be a powerful champion for change.

The Youth Policy Action Center at www.youthpolicyactioncenter.org or **1-866-MOBILIZE**, provides lots of tips and information for youth who have seen something in their community or heard something on the news that they wish to change. The Center gives young people the same “tools” used by professional lobbyists to work to change laws.

In *Freedom Writers*, Erin Gruwell is determined to make an educational impact through her innovative curriculum at Wilson High School. Because Ms. Gruwell is a young teacher, many other teachers and administrators at Wilson High resent her growing success. As a result, she has to put up a fight with her peers, supervisors and school board members in order to continue her non-traditional teaching methods each year.

Receiving a proper education is very important because it is one of the key factors that determine future professional success. Although the public education system in the United States was created to provide all youth with equal opportunities, there are many factors that prevent this from always happening. Many schools struggle to meet the needs of all students because of issues such as lack of funding and resources, and poor teaching quality.

Are there issues in your school that you would like to address? Sometimes these changes can be made through the efforts of students, parents, community members and teachers. Larger, more systematic changes might require education reform on the national level through the passing of legislation. Below is a short list of educational issues that you may wish to advocate for, but it's important to pursue a topic that is of relevance and importance to your school!

- **Creation of more after-school programs and sports**
- **Tutoring programs**
- **More healthy food choices in the cafeteria**
- **Stop bullying in schools**
- **New books and textbooks in the classroom**
- **Save music and arts programs**
- **Make service-learning a part of classroom**



FIVE KEY STEPS FOR BEING A CHAMPION FOR CHANGE

(adapted from the Youth Policy Action Center)

www.youthpolicyactioncenter.org or 1-866-mobilize

- 1) **PICK AN ISSUE.** Maybe like Erin Gruwell in *Freedom Writers*, you will realize that if you don't take a stand, no one will. Be sure you are clear on **WHAT** you want to change.
- 2) **STUDY UP.** Even though studying is not everyone's idea of fun time, putting in a little time to really understand an issue and **WHY** it matters, is important. You want to be able to convince your friends, adults and elected officials that what you say matters.
- 3) **FIND ALLIES.** You don't have to run a campaign by yourself. Chances are there are others who are interested in the same issue – and want to help. Find them.
- 4) **DEVELOP A STRATEGY.** While most of us experience the world broadly (we like or don't like our school, we do or don't feel safe in our neighborhoods), simply saying we want to improve the schools or our neighborhoods is not enough to get an elected official to do what we want. **FOCUS** on what specifically you would like elected officials to do. And, **FOCUS** on the right officials for your cause.
- 5) **LAUNCH A CAMPAIGN.** Send messages. Public officials keep track of how many messages they receive on specific topics. **WRITE, CALL** and **USE THE MEDIA.**

