

# Northridge Review Questionnaire

1. Do you have certain habits which help you write or methods of communication which you find more effective than others?

No.

**Denise Levertov**  
Poet, author of *Candles in Babylon*.

Court Despair.

**Wallace Graves**  
Fiction writer, author of *Trixie*.

The consistent habit of writing every morning, as a first thing — before brushing teeth, before breakfast — wherever I am, is one I wish I had — I *recommend* it to myself. "Method of Communication" belongs to the advertizing industry.

**May Swenson**  
Poet, author of *Iconographs*.

In common with other poets, I prefer to write in my own "space," a little upstairs room that looks out over the winding dirt road below. I like to warm up to write by answering a couple of letters from friends. But I *can* write elsewhere; I have begun many a poem on the back of a boarding pass en route to a reading or workshop, & I always pack work along to pick at in the empty hours in motel rooms. I prefer a typewriter & now have a very small electronic one that will run on batteries!

**Maxine Kumin**  
Poet, author of  
*Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief*.

Writing a poem or two warms me up/gets me started when I'm reluctant to work at other forms. Music to suit my mood provides a conduit. And if I am particularly "uptight," a hot cup of coffee and a couple of "hits off a joint" really stoke the old coals.

**Wanda Coleman**  
Poet, author of *Mad Dog Black Lady*.

The most important factor in writing, given some liter-

acy, is discipline. You have to shut yourself away from family and friends and things you'd rather be doing and do it.

**Jack Smith**

Columnist, author of *Cats, Dogs, and Other Strangers at My Door*.

**2. Do you think writing can be taught? How have you learned what you know as a writer?**

I think writing can be taught, but only to other writers. Students come into my writing workshop without a clue and I can't teach them squat. Other writers, though, might just need a little nudge or another point of view so in that way I can teach them. I've learned what I know as a writer by making mistakes in my writing; if I were a carpenter, I wouldn't have a finger left.

**Ron Koertge**

Poet, author of *Life on the Edge of the Continent: Selected Poems*.

a) To talented people certain things about writing can be taught. b) By reading and writing.

**Denise Levertov**

Workshops were important when I started writing. I took several poetry workshops with Ann Stanford when I was a student at CSUN, as well as Independent Study sessions. This was a great help: an opportunity to show my work to a "real" writer, one I admired. I think it's important to have idols and to read a lot of poetry. Cultivating friendships with other writers is important too, or has been for me.

**David Trinidad**

Poet, author of *Monday, Monday*.

The craft/function/execution of writing can be taught. The art of writing (like the art of anything) seems to be a gift/habitation/compulsion/obsession.

**Wanda Coleman**

Writing can't be "taught" but a workshop, seminar or classroom can provide a nurturing environment for beginning writers. Ciardi once said that the teacher is "a hired sympathy" and I agree. My own beginnings in workshops have convinced me of the worth of group criticism and response.

**Maxine Kumin**

**3. Who do you consider to be your audience? Are you reaching most of the people who would be interested in your work?**

My audience is anyone who believes he can learn about himself by watching a trained dog perform at a circus. As for reaching the people interested, I would say, "When the writer is ready, the people will appear."

**Wallace Graves**

Too much concern for the demands of a general audience leads to popular art forms, popular culture, and fads low in content. On the other hand, a lack of audience awareness often leads to work that is self-serving, murky and self-involved, to work that often excludes even a sophisticated audience because it is grounded in personal rather than universal symbols. Many very good poets and writers seem obsessed with the craft of writing, as if this provided a real alternative to writing for everyone or just for oneself. So we have lots of poets and writers writing for other poets and writers. The great writers know the trick: they take the same stale sit-com gag, change it enough to make it seem original — but not so much that the audience no longer recognizes in it something universal — and present the old dud wrapped in wonderful, artful language. Shakespeare knew how. I don't. So I write for myself, or rather the part of myself that's beyond fooling.

**Greg Boyd**

Poet and editor of  
*Asylum* magazine.

- a) Anybody who reads my work or comes to hear me.
- b) No writer can know that — besides, there is the possibility of posterity, always an unknown.

**Denise Levertov**

I'm my best audience. As far as reaching people, since poetry attracts a very small minority of the people who read, how can "most of the people" be reached? Anyway, my poetry is so simple and easy to read that anybody I reach is pretty much interested. Who ever "figured out" a Ron Koertge poem.

**Ron Koertge**

**4. What distinguishes your writing from that of others and makes it valuable?**

I've invented some new "forms" — or rather, I've let the poems, in the making, lead me into invention. I don't worry about being valuable. I prize individuality, and hope to avoid being influenced by others.

**May Swenson**

If my writing is valuable it is because I try to make it

clear, and because I write about life as we live it.

**Jack Smith**

My craftspersonship as well as my vision/voice and unique dogged stubbornness.

**Wanda Coleman**

Not for the writer to say.

**Denise Levertov**

I'm always pretty much me; that's distinguishing (in the fingerprint sense) and valuable because I'm gifted in a single area — writing. It's fun to be around (or to read around) someone with talent. I have a fairly light heart and my poems often make people laugh. Surely that's valuable.

**Ron Koertge**

**5. Could you comment on your works-in-progress or anything you have recently finished?**

I have a new collection of poems just published by Viking (I think they are keeping it a secret) called *THE LONG APPROACH*. The jacket says that these poems deal with increasingly public themes, and I guess that is so. My vision seems to be rather more apocalyptic as I grow older; the world seems more troubled, our chances slimmer. But I hope some of the darkness is redeemed by wit. Ripeness may be all, as Lear says, but humor saves us alive. I also have a collection of country essays waiting in the wings, and I hope very much to go back to writing some short stories. There is a balance in moving from genre to genre for me.

**Maxine Kumin**

I am interested in Pop Culture, especially subject matter from the 60's. Girl groups, comic book characters, television and films, etc. I recently wrote a piece in the voice of Barbie (the doll).

**David Trinidad**

I'm writing a long narrative poem in which I leave home to live in a Banyan tree. I become a monkey, and my companion is a cockatoo. It's a playful serious poem which speculates on (and finds) the purpose of life. (Now that I've talked about it, I may not be able to finish it.)

**May Swenson**

I've begun writing short fiction again, attempting to imbue this form with the same sort of intensity found in my poetry. I think I've got it — finally. And this

satisfies me like a sonofabitch.

**Wanda Coleman**

A writer's comments on his own work are fix-it jobs — futile efforts to repair an edifice which didn't come out right the first time. Silence is grandly underestimated in our society.

**Wallace Graves**