

## CHATting About NaNoWriMo

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Writing a novel is a daunting task, and National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) tries to condense all of the work into thirty days. Through CHAT analysis and surveys, Matt Del Fiacco learns that NaNoWriMo as a genre changes the way writing practices take place, and these practices do nothing short of demand work from writers.

The first full-length novel I ever read was *White Fang* by Jack London. It is a story told primarily from the perspective of a wolf-dog hybrid named White Fang, and revolves around his struggles. Ever since I read that story, I wanted to write a novel. It wasn't really the prose that captured me or the significance of the book as "literature." It was the idea that I had just lived, if only for a second, as a wolf. Something about my perception had been altered, and something in my world had changed. That's what good books do to you. And so, with this idea of the gift of perception came the desire to create, to write something myself, because if reading could alter my perceptions, then what could writing do?

Like most aspiring novelists, I've tried all the tricks. I've gone to writing workshops to listen to experienced authors talk about what it takes to be a great writer. I've read books by Stephen King, Orson Scott Card, Anne Lamott, Steven Pressfield, Ray Bradbury, and many others, all of whom talk about how to be successful. I can't even count how many creative writing courses I have taken in my academic career, hoping that there was some formula that everyone else knew and I was missing. If there was a get-rich-quick-type

equivalent for completing a novel, I gave it a shot. I never made it past the first few chapters before struggling with my ideas and being discouraged by the scope of what I was attempting. As Steven Pressfield puts it, I was “corrupted by resistance” (67), struggling to find a way to churn out those hundred or so pages of the next great novel.

It wasn’t until my sophomore year of college that I completed my goal, and it wasn’t quite what I expected it to be. It wasn’t a lucid, manic episode of typing for days at a time, inspired by some astute observation of the human condition. The opposite, really. It was a struggle. A forced process. And it was no great novel. But it was mine. After all those years of waiting to be struck by inspiration, it wasn’t a muse or unseen force that finally got the work done. It was NaNoWriMo.

National Novel Writing Month, dubbed NaNoWriMo, calls for participants to write 50,000 words in the thirty days of November, which is about 1,667 words a day. This does not include an outline or any other “outside” work, only the main novel itself. There are no prizes or awards, not much recognition, and no other rules. Only the struggle. Despite this, in 2010, out of 200,530 registered participants, 37,479 individuals reached 50,000 words, which is an 18.6 percent completion rate (Grant). That is 37,479 people who wrote 50,000 words each, roughly the length of John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* or Douglas Adams’s *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*.

With statistics like that, one can’t help but wonder what goes into writing a novel. The purpose of this article is two-fold: to examine the sort of practices and activities that National Novel Writing Month participants engage in, and to relate those practices to **cultural-historical activity theory** (CHAT), a theory that aims to explore the ways in which activities are complex, connected, and socially situated.

## What is NaNoWriMo?

NaNoWriMo has grown over the years, from humble origins with 140 participants in 2000 to 310,095 participants in 2013 (Baty, NaNoWriMo.org).

The contest is largely unregulated, although NaNoWriMo operates as a nonprofit organization that assists aspiring writers participating in the contest and also sponsors programs such as the Young Writers Program, which promotes fluency and creativity in classrooms around the world.

Traditionally, participation in NaNoWriMo lends itself to prose writers, although one can write poetry as well. Other than the word count, however, there are no rules in NaNoWriMo. There is no page count, no need to write daily, and no worksheet to complete. There is only the 50,000 word limit. There is no official need to register, and *NaNoWriMo.org* is the online hub of activity during this month. The site has three primary uses for participants. First, it is a source of information for individuals who may be looking for help on their novel. This includes informal seminars and web-writing workshops, which are free. Second, the site allows users to track the progress of their novels using a word-count function, which updates a graph tracking a user's daily word count. Finally, the site also has forums that allow users to discuss their work and the experience of the contest with one another.

For me, completing NaNoWriMo successfully for the first time was a sign that writing a novel was possible. Reactions to NaNoWriMo are varied, with people like Deana Anker noting that NaNoWriMo “was the single most transformative and enlightening experience of my life. November 2010 was when I became a writer,” whereas others adamantly refuse to participate ever again. The labors of NaNoWriMo do not go unrecognized, however, and many notable published works were born in the contest, including James Strickland's *Looking Glass*, Hugh Howey's *Wool*, and Sara Gruen's *Water for Elephants* (Published Wrimos, NaNoWriMo.org).

## The Activity of NaNoWriMo

If it isn't obvious by now, NaNoWriMo demands a certain kind of commitment. That commitment demands a certain kind of activity. In my exploration of the contest, I decided to examine the writing practices of individuals who participate in NaNoWriMo and learn what sort of activities those individuals engage in, both in and out of November. Specifically, I surveyed six individuals who had varying levels of experience with writing and with National Novel Writing Month.

Rather than examine the responses of each individual, I will focus on some key points of the survey and the responses to those questions. In the next section, I will provide the questions and answers of the survey and discuss those answers. By doing so, I hope to paint a picture of what writing looks like for writers in the contest of NaNoWriMo, both during November and throughout the year.

## Writing Outside of November

These questions were meant to serve as a way to understand how writers acted outside of the contest—in other words, what their writing practices were like during the other eleven months of the year.

*What are your writing practices like throughout the year?*

**Subject One:** I typically write when I have the motivation or inspiration to do so. When I'm in school, I rarely write because of time constraints but I'm always thinking of what I want to write next.

**Subject Two:** I write sporadically. I may not write for over a year, then inspiration strikes and I binge for a couple months, unable to think of anything else.

**Subject Three:** I try to write at least once a week, for about twenty-five minutes I go over past writing and edit more than I write new things.

**Subject Four:** Very rarely, if at all. Typically, I spend time journaling or toying with ideas, but actually engaging those ideas is rare.

**Subject Five:** I write when I have free time, which is rare as a graduate student. I usually write short stories, but don't spend a lot of time thinking about writing outside of actually writing.

**Subject Six:** I write very often, mainly poetry but occasionally short fiction. I think about writing quite a bit!

*Does writing typically get in the way of, or take priority over, other parts of your life?*

**Subject One:** Writing eats into my sleep but that's the extent of my priorities. Everything else comes before writing unless I'm truly inspired.

**Subject Two:** Not usually. If my life, as well as my room/apartment, is cluttered, I cannot focus, let alone flow creative thoughts.

**Subject Three:** No, not typically.

**Subject Four:** Nope.

**Subject Five:** Not really, it is just a way I spend free time.

**Subject Six:** Not really, but I do try to set aside time for it. It is a priority after school and sleep, really.

The group I surveyed is made up of people who consider themselves to be writers. They spend at least a little time thinking about their writing, although some of these individuals write more than others, with varying levels of dedication. The only individuals who believe writing throughout the year takes priority over other parts of their lives are Subjects One and Six. I can relate to many of the responses, as I am an incredibly inconsistent writer throughout the year. My academic and professional work takes precedence, and I typically only write when I have no other plans (including recreational).

It is interesting to note the NaNoWriMo experience levels of these individuals. Subjects One, Three, and Five have all participated in NaNoWriMo once, in 2013. Of the three, only Subject One met the 50,000-word goal by the end of the month. Subjects Two and Four have both participated in NaNoWriMo twice, with Subject Two having completed it once and Subject Five completing it both times. Finally, Subject Six participated in NaNoWriMo three times and completed it once, in 2013.

## Writing During November

Now that we have established what the activities of our subjects are like outside of the month of November, let's see what it is like for them during the contest.

*What are your writing practices like during NaNoWriMo?*

**Subject One:** I had to actually schedule time to write. It became part of my homework.

**Subject Two:** I write almost every day for a while, until I fall behind and end up writing 5k+ every couple days to try to catch up until I give up because of other class or work obligations.

**Subject Three:** I try to write an hour a day during NaNoWriMo. While I'm working on my writing during this time, I tend to think about my story in nearly all my free time.

**Subject Four:** Pretty stressful, I have to dedicate time to it.

**Subject Five:** Intensive, almost like a ritual. I would intentionally get up an hour earlier just so I could have the time to write for a while. I would always be thinking about the story, because I knew it wasn't much longer and I would have to write a whole new part of the story.

*(continued)*

**Subject Six:** Much more regimented than when I normally write. I have to make sure I really get my word count for the day; I have a tendency to fall behind and then spend an entire Saturday just writing so I can catch up.

*Does NaNoWriMo get in the way of other priorities in your life?*

**Subject One:** Absolutely. I would put off some homework in order to fill my writing quota.

**Subject Two:** No, unfortunately I don't have anything that is able to be sacrificed to a novel that I probably will never finish or get published, so it is the first to go.

**Subject Three:** Sometimes this is true, especially depending on how many classes I'm taking at the time.

**Subject Four:** Yes, absolutely.

**Subject Five:** It did, like sleep. I just really had to make time for it. I fell behind pretty early on, and I ended up with about 30,000 words. It really needs some dedication to complete.

**Subject Six:** Absolutely, but I like it that way. It makes the writing better, more of your life.

*What technology do you use during NaNoWriMo that you don't use during the rest of the year? For example, the website.*

**Subject One:** I didn't use the website at all, and I didn't use anything different than the rest of the year. I used Microsoft Word to write everything and a journal to plan it out, but nothing out of the ordinary.

**Subject Two:** The only thing I did differently was try programs like Scrivener to keep track of my writing. I ended up liking it a lot, but it isn't really necessary and I still fell behind.

**Subject Three:** I kept up with tracking on the website, but that was really it as far as other technology goes.

**Subject Four:** I used this word processor that blacks out your whole screen except for text and your word count, which was really just to keep me off the Internet.

**Subject Five:** Nothing new really, I was introduced to NaNoWriMo through a class so we kind of worked in a group there. I didn't think the website was necessary.

**Subject Six:** On Reddit there is a subreddit called /r/NaNoWriMo, and I went there a lot to talk about my story and see what other people were doing. I usually don't go online for writing community, so that was pretty new.

*Is there anything else you would like to add about how NaNoWriMo affected your activity?*

**Subject One:** It was constantly on my mind. Even more so than my homework for that night, I kept thinking about what I had to write and sometimes I'd want to put it off, before remembering I'd just have to double up on it later.

**Subject Two:** Not that I can think of!

**Subject Three:** NaNoWriMo is a goal-oriented program. It helps you focus on your writing so you can accomplish your writing goals. For those lazy writers like me, it gives us something to achieve.

**Subject Four:** Nope.

**Subject Five:** NaNoWriMo made me feel like a writer, it made me make time for writing and it actually made the writing itself more engaging. It just seemed like I was a writer, rather than someone who spent time writing.

**Subject Six:** Everyone should try it once!

The drastic shift in the mindset and activities of these writers is fairly obvious. Each of them noted how much work writing became during NaNoWriMo. I personally believe Subject Five expressed it best when they said that the writing was almost like a ritual and became a part of casual thought because of how quickly they would need to continue the story or risk falling behind. If you weren't thinking about NaNoWriMo throughout the day, you weren't going to be ready to continue your story. All of the writers except Subject Two noted that NaNoWriMo made writing a priority in their lives, and that this shifted their schedules and thoughts around the writing. Subject Three's comment that "NaNoWriMo is a goal-oriented program" may express the reason for this, since it turns the process into something quantifiable and achievable rather than "the novel" that must be written.

However, the writers of NaNoWriMo don't just write more often; their writing practices change as a result of this activity. Obviously, their cognitive

processes change, as most subjects noted that they think about NaNoWriMo more often during the month of November. Another practice is the obsession with word count. I only check my word count during the month of November, because the genre of NanoWriMo writing demands it. This practice is widespread, which is evident from the tools provided by NaNoWriMo.org to track word count (see Figure 1 below). During NaNoWriMo, I also found myself searching for a community, for a group of people who followed the practices NaNoWriMo demanded. This led me to explore new technologies. I accessed the Reddit community to discuss writing, while others used writing programs such as Scrivener to organize their activity. Some even tried sites such as Scribophile, an online writing workshop and writer's community, to get quick feedback on their work.

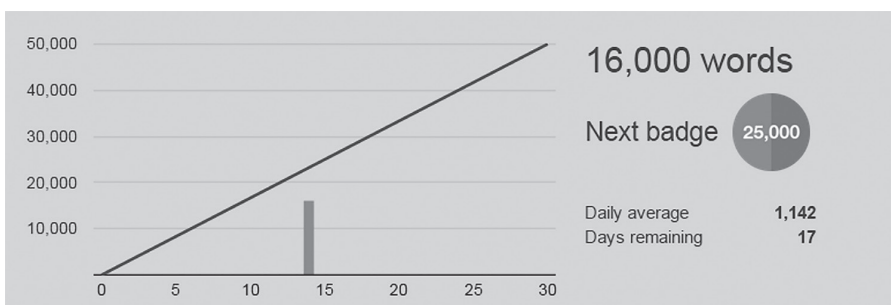


Figure 1: A measure of word count over a 30-day period. Retrieved from NaNoWriMo.org.

Clearly, during the month of November, writing practices of these writers were shaped by the contest, and the idea of writing changed with it. The activity of writing and the cognitive engagement of the narrative shaped both writers' writing and the amount of time dedicated to it.

## CHATting about NaNoWriMo

To contextualize this change in activity, I intend to observe and interpret this activity through the lens of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). CHAT is a means of looking at activities and understanding the social conventions that went into shaping those activities. In order to understand what goes into making NaNoWriMo what it is, I will analyze NaNoWriMo in relation to the seven aspects of CHAT. These aspects are:

**Production:** What people, places, and technologies shaped the text?

**Representation:** How do people think about and plan this text?



**Distribution:** How was this text produced and distributed?

**Reception:** What are the reactions and responses to the text?

**Socialization:** How is this text related to the social and cultural norms of particular groups?

**Activity:** What are the practices and actions that create the text?

**Ecology:** How does the environment impact the production and distribution of the text? (Sharp-Hoskins and Frost 2012)

NaNoWriMo is certainly related to **production**, specifically to the ways in which we construct a text. Wonderful examples of this are the survey responses of Subjects One and Five. Subject One notes that during November, writing is always on their mind, and Subject Five shares a similar sentiment when they say that they are always thinking about the story because they know they will have to write more. Personally, I share the experience of Subject One. During NaNoWriMo, the writing is always a clause in your day. You wake up and NaNoWriMo. You go to class and NaNoWriMo. You write for NaNoWriMo and right around the corner is NaNoWriMo. NaNoWriMo demands a schedule and a certain form of production in order to complete the task.



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Tom Between Ideas (or Which One Should I Write this November?)	1018	3 months ago by larelmian	7 days ago by zoemills22
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Nano Survival Kit Anyone?	614	2 months ago by Living In Dreams	1 day ago by glowing moon beams

Tjshome.com/!

Figure 2: NaNo Prep page. Retrieved from *NaNoWriMo.org*

NaNoWriMo doesn't require you to do anything outside of writing for the contest. It's not that people don't spend time doing things for NaNoWriMo that don't involve writing, it's just that it isn't necessarily acknowledged or needed. However, in terms of **representation**, the organization's website is a clear example of how the contest is prepared for and discussed. One example of this is the "NaNo Prep" web page (see Figure 2), which encourages participants to make a commitment to participating in NaNoWriMo and to use site resources to plan in advance for November (NaNo Prep, NaNoWriMo.org). These resources also reflect the ways in which the perception of NaNoWriMo is constructed. The resources, written by previous NaNoWriMo participants, provide information on everything from starting and researching the novel to creating conflict and building a NaNo "survival" kit. Personally, I was cocky going into NaNoWriMo. I thought it would be easy. I considered myself a great writer and thought I would be able to breeze through, despite my previous failures with regard to writing a novel. There is more to NaNoWriMo than the intimidating word count or time frame; the idea of the contest itself is a behemoth, an Everest, and yet this doesn't seem to stop writers from attempting the challenge. Even though there is no specified rule to prepare for and engage in the contest or the community outside of the writing itself, participants and organizers obviously understand the representation of NaNoWriMo and the activity that it demands.

Thanks to the Internet, writing niche groups are becoming increasingly widespread. This is evident from sales of subgenres in indie publishing and the prevalence of fan fiction. The sharing of material is encouraged by the NaNoWriMo community and is facilitated by the organization's website via forums. This **distribution** is made possible by the fact that NaNoWriMo texts are often written on the computer; however, I make this assumption based on NaNoWriMo writers I am familiar with. Certainly, NaNoWriMo does not demand the use of a computer; however the current material circumstances of participating in the contest, which is based online, seem to favor communities with online participation. Even the local writing groups that I have participated in often share documents over the Internet. These methods of distribution shape the way NaNoWriMo is both performed and constructed, specifically, the ease of writing and maintaining word count and the writing communities that participants have access to.

As a movement, NaNoWriMo has been met with varying levels of approval. For many, the "game" style of NaNoWriMo facilitates this writing, as Subject Three points out when they mention that NaNoWriMo is a goal-oriented program. For others, this goal-driven nature is problematic. These individuals note that the program does not facilitate "serious" writers, who

write consistently throughout the year. I always feel NaNoWriMo is rushed. Because of the time and word count constraints, re-writing and editing is often discouraged by the community. While it is not explicitly frowned upon, the task of rethinking the words you have written for the day can lead to frustration given the demanding timeline. For me, NaNoWriMo is about knowing that you can write a novel and learning that not every first draft will be perfect. November is about word count. Editing is reserved for December. During the contest, I'd wake up in the morning and there would be 1,500 unwritten words hanging over my head. On a limited time schedule, your first idea is typically the idea you go with. These constraints can obviously lead to some friction among members of the writing community. The writing community is typically divided into two groups, what I call the "Muses" and the "Cartographers." The Muses are driven by inspiration, the divine spark that tells them to meet their word count for the day and to write whatever their heart tells them, regardless of whether or not it makes sense. The Cartographers follow their charts, maps, and outlines, writing what they had planned even if other inspiration strikes. Really, the process ends up being somewhere in the middle for most writers, but NaNoWriMo forces that identity out of you and teaches you how to get to work.

NaNoWriMo is a highly social activity. During my second time participating in the contest, my writing group worked like a support group. As indicated by our survey participants, NaNoWriMo is stressful. It encourages stressful thoughts and activity, and being able to relate to others through those practices adds to the experience. In many ways, the **socialization** that takes place in the genre helps shape it. I would argue that the increased socialization of NaNoWriMo results in the same phenomena of running or diet groups, the warrior mentality that comes with mutual suffering. Group communication is a well-documented success technique, most recently by Dr. Gail Matthews, who notes that individuals who set goals and discuss the progress of these goals with peers are bound to be far more successful than members of other groups (Matthews). This social activity is not required. Individuals can participate in NaNoWriMo on their own, and they don't need the support of other NaNo'ers to be successful. However, it is incredibly prevalent. NaNoWriMo, as a practice, stems from group activity, and its roots in community-oriented writing have led to social activity being encouraged in the contest.

NaNoWriMo is defined by its **activity**. The parameters and conditions of the activity are what make it NaNoWriMo, as opposed to other acts of writing. As made clear from the surveys, NaNoWriMo encourages the activity of writing—and thinking about writing—often. These practices, as noted specifically by Subjects One, Four, Five, and Six, demand the time typically

dedicated to other activities, making the genre even more invasive than other “writing” genres. During my first attempt, I was studying abroad in England. Outside my window was the Canterbury Cathedral, this great, almost mythic thing. Someone had designed it, and people had built it. And there I was, sitting at a desk, unable to even churn out enough words to begin a chapter. I also had coursework that involved writing and reading in an entirely different way, which often left me with little energy or desire to write creatively. Needless to say, I wasn’t exactly feeling inspired. The figure of the cathedral, along with my coursework, served as a roadblock to my writing. But NaNoWriMo cares less for the conditions of your writing than the writing itself, a side effect of the game-like nature of the contest. Not feeling inspired? Intimidated by the work being done? Too bad. Your muse isn’t going to write those 50,000 words for you, so churn out some nonsense because you need to get moving. Once I started writing because I needed to, it got easier. I still wasn’t inspired, I was still intimidated, but even though the game-like “win or lose” nature of NaNoWriMo has its problems, it teaches you to write when you don’t feel like writing. That was a huge step forward for me as a writer.

NaNoWriMo is simple, it has no **ecology** besides the words it involves. It does not demand that its participants write with certain materials. Writing can be done via any medium, from a phone to a computer to a notepad. The word count is what matters. For those participating in NaNoWriMo via the website, or those who wish to be active in the NaNoWriMo online community, an Internet connection is required to complete certain activities. The material circumstances of the distribution of the text itself are varied in NaNoWriMo, since the genre does not dictate a particular production method. Many writers use services to produce a physical edition of their text, while others submit their texts to publishers. Some others, like myself, let their text gather metaphorical dust on their hard drive.

NaNoWriMo is a brutal genre that not only encourages but also demands certain activities from its participants. Looking into the practices of NaNoWriMo through CHAT and the survey changed the way I see the contest. In the midst of the struggle, the writing process becomes second nature. The planning, the thinking, the waking up early to write all seem to make sense. Yet in the midst of studying NaNoWriMo for this project, I realized it doesn’t make sense at all. Subject One’s planning and Subject Five’s ritualistic approach aren’t “standard” writing practices; they were NaNoWriMo, and they were genre-specific for these writers. For me, NaNoWriMo is all about the chaos of writing, the scramble to finish. The contest forces you to be a writer, to write when you don’t feel like, and just the idea of the contest seems to guide you along the path to finishing. I find that pretty amazing.

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