REGIONAL REPORT
NANOWRIMO 2022
USA :: MICHIGAN :: OTTAWA COUNTY-GRAND RAPIDS

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This report evaluates the long-term trajectory and short-term goals of the region considering the results of pre- and post-event surveys for the November 2022 NaNoWriMo season. We will summarize 2022 activities, explore current regional statistics and participation rates, assess the two 2022 surveys, develop a high-level SWOT analysis, and suggest a roadmap for the 2023 and 2024 seasons.

<u>November 2022 High-Level Activity Summary</u>

The MLs met throughout the summer to set high-level goals for November programming. As a result of that planning, the region enjoyed the following 2022 activities:

- Three "PrepTober" events (two virtual, one in-person) in mid-to-late October. These two-hour sessions allowed participants to share their ideas and obtain help from their peers about particularly vexing planning challenges.
- Kickoff was held at Hagar Park in eastern Ottawa County on October 29. This two-hour event featured a mix of writing games and discussion of writing projects, as well as ML-supplied pizza and the delivery of "goodie bags." The MLs privately bore the costs of this event — roughly $200 for Melanie for pizza and goodie bags, and roughly $300 for Jason for the rental of the room from Ottawa County Parks & Recreation. About a dozen writers attended.
- The Day of Knockout Noveling was held Nov. 19 from 10a to 6p at The L&G Center in Wyoming, Mich. This event was a potluck-style activity. The L&G Center is co-owned by Jason Gillikin and the space was offered at no charge. A silent auction raised $220, which was split evenly between the MLs to partially offset the cost of Kickoff. More than two dozen writers attended at some point throughout the day, despite a looming blizzard.
- The End Is Nigh was held on Nov. 30, on Discord. This virtual write-in ran from 6p until midnight.
- During a typical November week, write-ins were held on Sunday (6p to 10p, on Discord, hosted by AluraDeVries), Monday (6p to 8p, at Schuler Books & Music, hosted by RCKtheWriter), Tuesday (6p to 8p, at Loutit Library, hosted by Kessalia; 6p to 8p, at Hastings Public Library, hosted by fairyFriend), Wednesday (6p to 9p, at Panera Bread in Grandville, hosted by KingGramJohnson), Friday (7p to 10p, the all-region write-in on Discord hosted by Kessalia), and Saturday (10a to noon, at The L&G Center, hosted by JEGillikin; 3p to 5p on Discord, hosted by HufflepuffWrites).

The MLs sent nine substantive emails to the region using the NaNoMail system in the September-to-December period. These messages offered encouragement as well as highlights of upcoming activities. They were mostly cross-posted to the regional Discord server.

Current Regional Demographics

Michigan's NaNoWriMo region named *Ottawa County-Grand Rapids* — usually abbreviated as OCGR — encapsulates Kent and Ottawa counties along the central western edge of the lower peninsula.[1] The Grand Rapids-Kentwood metropolitan statistical area covers all of Kent as well as parts of Ionia, Montcalm, and Ottawa counties. The MSA and the OCGR region overlap cleanly and therefore offer a reasonable basis of population comparison.

In the 2020 census, the MSA was estimated at 1.09 million people. The MSA experienced annual population growth in the previous decade of 0.91 percent annually. As of the 2010 census, the MSA is 50.6 percent female, with 62.5 percent of residents in the 18-to-64 age bracket. White Americans are 78 percent of the MSA, followed by multiracial people at 7.0 percent, blacks at 6.9 percent, and "other" at 4.9 percent. Hispanic/Latino people were 10.2 percent of the community.[2]

Compared to the population, regional participants appear to match age and income levels for the MSA, although OCGR is noticeably whiter than the MSA. In addition, the pandemic introduced greater variability into the active OCGR participant pool; online-only activities drew younger, more tech-savvy, and less affluent participants. The proportion of active participants who expressed LGBT status, or who claimed a rarer gender-identity marker, exceeded national population estimates by almost an order of magnitude. Similarly, the rate of people claiming an anxiety, depression, attention-deficit, or autism-spectrum disorder significantly outpaced national population-prevalence estimates.

We believe that the active OCGR membership materially differs from the MSA population in being more white, more queer, and more likely to claim a psychosocial diagnosis. This finding is broadly consistent with NaNoWriMo HQ's own survey research.

Regional Performance Trends Since 2004

Table 1 that follows breaks down the number of regional NaNoWriMo participants and the win rate by year.

Table 1: Annual Participation and Win-Rate Summary

YEAR	PARTICIPANTS	WINNERS	WIN RATE
2022	267	74	27.7
2021	270	82	30.1
2020	299	94	31.4
2019	325	112	34.5
2018	437	126	28.8

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[1] For 2023, the current MLs have requested that the region's name be changed to just "Grand Rapids" to better align with Michigan's regional naming conventions. The MLs also recommend merging the mostly defunct, but adjacent, Muskegon County region into the Grand Rapids region.

[2] These statistics source from various tabular reports available at census.gov.

YEAR	PARTICIPANTS	WINNERS	WIN RATE
2017	451	148	32.8
2016	485	142	29.3
2015	509	178	35.0
2014	508	167	32.9
2013	583	194	33.3
2012	560	196	35.0
2011	509	181	35.6
2010	79	57	72.2
2009	62	46	74.2
2008	47	31	66.0
2007	31	21	67.7
2006	20	14	70.0
2005	14	8	57.1
2004	6	4	66.7

The early years of the region (2004 to 2010) witnessed stable growth as NaNoWriMo as a program captured more writers' mindshare. In 2011, the region coalesced under new leadership and expanded to college campuses while adding innovative programs (e.g., the "Day of Knockout Noveling") we still celebrate. However, by 2018-2019, that leadership team began winding down. The 2019 year was a pivot point, followed in 2020 by the hollowing-out of *everything* because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The region survived 2020 quite well thanks to a robust *esprit d'corps* and the novelty of an online-only year during pre-vaccine pandemic lockdowns. However, 2021 proved more of a challenge. Although HQ mandated virtual-only programming, the West Michigan community acted in the aggregate as if it had "moved on" from the pandemic. This discrepancy between participants' normal daily life and the expectations of HQ led to a further erosion of engagement. It also — relatedly — led to a material re-composition of the region, in favor of people whose life situation placed a premium on virtual participation. Many of the newly active members proved younger, less mobile, more anxious, or more time-constrained thanks to multiple jobs or difficult family commitments. However, many of our stalwart *in-person* participants — seasoned, professional, mid-career adults for the most part — declined to engage in virtual-only writing, thus eliminating the example they set for an emerging generation of aspiring novelists.

It's difficult to over-state the significant cultural change that occurred within the community with two years' loss of "old reliable" in-person participants.

Furthermore, the functional problems in 2021 and 2022 with the Winnie_Bot tool for Discord removed a significant source of writing gamification (in the form of raptors) and thus de-incentivized participation by writers who otherwise had limited reason to join a virtual writing activity.

The ML team decided to focus on 2022 as being a year where we "return to normal" with programs and activities, and as a springboard for future growth in 2023 and beyond.

<u>2022 Regional Survey Results</u>

The region's participants voluntarily completed two surveys for the November 2022 NaNoWriMo writing season. Both surveys were designed and administered by co-ML Jason Gillikin and used the LimeSurvey software installed at lakeshoreliterary.com.[3, 4]

The first survey was individually identifiable because it solicited mailing information for the regional kickoff care package and volunteer opportunities for hosting write-ins. As such, it focused on basic demographic information (e.g., ZIP code) and high-level sentiment about the 2022 NaNoWriMo season. It didn't solicit "tough" evaluation questions or deeply personal information. Most sentiment questions fell on a six-point Likert scale.

Highlights from the pre-season survey:
- Response count of 72 completed surveys.
- 17 percent of respondents were aged 21 to 26, 82 percent aged 27 to 64, and the rest were 65 or older. No participants self-identified as being younger than age 21.
- Roughly equal breakdowns in the tenure-of-participation question; 15 people were first-year participants, 21 were in the two-to-five-year category, 18 were in the six-to-10-year category, and 18 claimed 11 or more years of participation.
- In response to the question, "What accommodations will help you thrive at in-person events this year," 12 people expressed unique dietary or allergy concerns, six people identified a physical or emotional disability requiring accommodation, and two people requested mask usage in indoor settings.
- Although most participants expressed a high amount of enthusiasm for NaNoWriMo 2022 in general, 43 percent were excited for in-person events, 28 percent were neutral, 19 percent were negative, and 10 percent declined to answer.
- However, regarding preferences for virtual activities, only 28 percent were positive on the question, 17 percent neutral, and 53 percent were negative. Two percent declined to answer.
- Most people expressed a desire to "make new writing friends this year" and to "connect with writers like me."
- Respondents were evenly split on the question of being "more comfortable interacting by screens than in person."
- Only 38 percent expressed some degree of positivity to the question, "I remain concerned about Covid-19." This question was unusually polarizing for the survey; 17 percent of respondents scored 6 (very concerned) and 22 percent scored 1 (not concerned at all).
- In October, most participants had already decided (more than 90 percent) that they didn't intend to attend either in-person or virtual events. This score tracks with actual attendance throughout November. However, 42 people expressed a desire for October prep events, although fewer than 15 attended at least one of three PrepTober sessions.

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[3] LimeSurvey PDFs summarizing responses by question are available for further review by NaNoWriMo HQ staff, upon request.

[4] Gillikin is the owner of Lakeshore Literary, a traditional independent small press. Although the region kept the press separate from programming, some services (like office space or the survey tool) proved too valuable to bypass.

- Only 19 percent expressed a degree of negative sentiment on the question "I would love for the region to be active year-round." However, as of Jan. 21, only a dozen or so members of the regional Discord server have made any posts in 2023.
- Most respondents look at NaNoMails from the MLs and announcements from the MLs on the #Announcements channel on Discord as their primary/preferred modes of communication. Social media was their least-preferred approach.
- The survey asked a trio of start/stop/continue questions. These responses were free-text only. Most respondents had no material suggestions, but a few themes included year-round programming, racial diversification, communications outside of Discord, and monthly writing groups. They wanted us to stop participation in the Global Write-In Crawl (which we did) and ensure that our major events like DOKN and Kickoff would continue to occur. One person wanted us to "Allow Bob to sing during Write-Ins," a nod to one veteran write-in host and his penchant for making up songs on the fly.

The second survey, released in the final week of November 2022, was anonymous. It solicited more sensitive and more evaluative information than the preceding instrument. Highlights:
- Only 14 people completed the survey despite repeated requests to complete it.
- Nine of the respondents were based in Kent County, three were in Ottawa County, and one was in Muskegon County.
- Six respondents expressed "significant anxiety, depression, ADHD, or autism spectrum" as a demographic attribute. Two each noted a lack of reliable transportation or the lack of financial means to participate at events where purchases might be expected of them.
- All respondents were white. Six had been doing NaNoWriMo for five to 10 years, and eight had been participants for 11 or more years. Nine self-identified as 50K winners. *This crosstab suggests that the respondents did not adequately match the OCGR population.*
- On a five-point Likert scale, nine respondents said their 2022 year was "great" (5) and five said it was "good" (4).
- Ten respondents participated in both in-person regional events as well as at least one in-person write-in. Four respondents did not join events or write-ins.
- Respondents overwhelmingly liked the in-person events, with DOKN earning a 100 percent "5" score.
- Most respondents liked Discord and found the MLs 2022 introduction of "social" and "writing only" roles to be helpful. That said, some people left comments critical of non-ML users policing Discord conversations.
- Eleven respondents gave the highest rating for the effectiveness of the ML team, one person gave the second-highest rating, and two people declined to answer.
- Twelve respondents thought regional communications was "perfect."
- No respondent opposed the proposed name change from OCGR to just "Grand Rapids."
- Over the summer and autumn of 2022, the MLs worked with several focus groups of dedicated regional writers to solicit feedback about what did and didn't work relative to the decline in long-term regional participation and win rates. Those conversations led to 16 separate assertions. The survey asked whether respondents agreed with each of those 16 propositions, and they had the opportunity to offer free-text responses for each of the 16 items. Of note (in no particular order):
  - Respondents are turned off by the tone and content of messages from NaNoWriMo HQ. The email to the region regarding the leaked draft of the *Dobbs*

decision proved particularly offensive and led several members to delete their accounts with HQ but still participate in regional activities.

o Respondents believe that recent participation declines are a function of recruiting and cyclical and can be overcome with marketing and recruiting, post-pandemic.

o Participants seem to think that virtual-only directives for 2021 proved counterproductive. There was less concern about the 2020 and 2022 rules.

o Respondents question the value proposition of NaNoWriMo as a program, noting that the HQ website has taken several steps backward in functionality, the HQ forums are "useless," and that "no one really needs HQ to tell us how to write a novel in a month." Cross-referencing by deidentified respondent ID suggests that this cohort also finds significantly more value in locally run critique groups.

o People seem to want year-round programming, but there's not an obvious consensus about the scope, frequency, or nature of that programming.

o Respondents lamented the lack of Winnie_Bot in 2022. They viewed Winnie_Bot and the friendly competition it inspired in 2020 as a core reason for engaging virtually. Without that gamification in a virtual space, the incentive to participate seems to have markedly decreased.[5]

<u>Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats</u>

A review of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats facing the region — a classic SWOT analysis — suggests strategies for the future. The SWOT that follows is based on a mix of survey responses and focus-group conversations.

STRENGTHS	**WEAKNESSES**
• Many long-time participants with intense loyalty to the region. • Very low levels of interpersonal conflicts among participants. • Stable ML leadership over time.	• Despite the talk, almost no one participates outside of November. • No real recruiting or advertising for the region in five years. • Disdain for HQ messaging bleeds through into regional participation.
OPPORTUNITIES	**THREATS**
• Gamification of writing, potentially with a re-invigorated Winnie_Bot. • Year-round programming. • Recruitment. • Better infrastructure for all writers. • Support of Lakeshore Lit Foundation.	• Tech has changed since the late 1990s and a website is no longer helpful for mediating novel-writing. • NaNoWriMo and its emphasis on whimsy and stickers and badges is not taken seriously by serious writers.

Although only a handful of participants have raised the issue, the MLs are aware that the racial composition of regional participation is not commensurate with the MSA. Attempts at recruiting black and Hispanic writers will prove challenging given that there are several robust local

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[5] Jason Gillikin is also the project manager and a Core Team member for the Winnie_Bot open-source software initiative. Feedback about bot usage has been shared separately with the two other members of the Core Team.

writers' networks led by, and serving, these communities — and they have little desire to participate in NaNoWriMo.

We think especially of The Diatribe, a collection of young (mostly black male) slam poets and short-fiction writers, and the network of black female fiction writers loosely gathered under the Hook a Sistah Up Collaborative. Although relationships with these groups with the MLs has been respectful and long-running, NaNoWriMo HQ has no meaningful value proposition on offer that would induce them to give up the networks and communities they've built, so they could join primarily white writers engaged in creative work dissimilar to their own.

We continue to evaluate strategies for inclusiveness that respect the real-world networks and constraints that exist in the West Michigan market.

<div align="center">Roadmap for 2023 and 2024</div>

Pending approval and re-appointment by NaNoWriMo HQ, the existing MLs intend to remain at their posts for at least the next two years to effect a renewal of excitement and engagement for a revitalized region.

Specific goals include:

- **Growing new participants.** Our top goal is to arrest our long-running decline in participation. That likely means a mix of marketing approaches intended to introduce NaNoWriMo to a new generation of writers while encouraging fallen-away writers that 2023 will be their year to shine.

- **Building a framework for year-round programming.** Although the region is dependent on our Discord server, Discord alone isn't adequate as an engagement tool. With widespread discontent over the slipshod quality of HQ's technical offerings, the region will invest in a simple website, the Discord server, and re-branded Facebook and Twitter accounts. From there, we can promote activities including periodic writer mixers, different writers' groups, and related events. The lack of coherence among writers and what they want (or need) suggests a multi-pronged strategy instead of a one-size-fits-all programming approach.

- **Adding regional support for Camp.** Historically, the MLs haven't supported Camp and only a small subset of regional writers engage in it. Promoting Camp may prove to be low-hanging fruit.

- **Diversifying the participant base.** A wider mix of writers promotes engagement among networks that, at present, are poorly represented in the region.

- **Promoting a positive ROI for regional engagement.** As interest in HQ's programming and messaging wanes among — a change inherent in the April-and-November push by HQ — the region must supplement and, in a sense, transcend NaNoWriMo to become the premier year-round collaborative of novelists in the West Michigan community, with

programs and institutions that are locally grown and operated. Thus, HQ's marquee programs represent the floor, not the ceiling. What this means for annual ML appointment cycle hasn't yet been resolved.

We believe that 2022 was a positive, albeit "small," year for the region. We look forward to re-energizing the region so that West Michigan writers will be served for many years to come.

— JEG & MLV