

# “FINDING the ESSENCE”

A Social Emotional Writing Workshop  
for Tumultuous Times

Created and led by Crystal Chan

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# A Social Emotional Writing Workshop for Tumultuous Times: “FINDING the ESSENCE”

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**T**hrough Crystal's virtual, 90-minute writing workshop, students will use their own words in a clear, methodical, and tender way to describe their anxiety, grief, frustration, and even strange joy in these exceptionally complex times. Bilingual optional (Spanish), trauma-informed approach.



## **Illinois Social/Emotional Learning Standards**

- Identify and Manage One's Emotions and Behavior (1A)
- Recognize the Feelings and Perspectives of Others (2A)
- Use Communication and Social Skills to Interact Effectively with Others (2C)

## **Illinois Common Core Writing Standards**

- Narrative Writing (W.8.3)
- Production and Distribution of Writing (W.8.4, 8.5)
- Range of Writing: Reflection and Revision (W.8.10)

## **American School Counselors Association Standards**

- ASCA Student Standards Mindset Standards (M1, 2, 4, 5)
- ASCA Student Standards Self-Management Skills (B-SMS 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10)
- ASCA Student Standards Social Skills (B-SS 1, 2, 4, 6)

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## Program Overview

Crystal opens the workshop by reading a selection from her novel, *Bird*, and inviting students to share if they feel that adults are deeply listening to them in these tumultuous times. As students share their opinions and experiences, Crystal models the skills involved for deep listening, gently preparing the students for the listening skills they will be practicing. From there, the students progress to the writing component.



The writing process involves three rounds that integrate independent and group work. First, Crystal walks the students through the process of “freewriting” — that is, free-form, stream of consciousness writing that allows the students to get down all the words that are within, whether the thoughts are coherent or not. The freewriting questions prompt students to name their losses, ways that they have grown, and strange joys that they may have encountered.

After this, Crystal gently leads the students through a process of whittling their freewriting; they engage in multiple rounds of reflection, paring down, and sharing until they have a piece of writing that is haiku-esque in nature, with their experiences and feelings clarified. She also introduces the concept of deep listening — that is, listening without judgment or planned response for another’s experience — and models how to practice it with each other. The students then divide into breakout groups, alternating between listening deeply to their classmates’ experiences and speaking the truths of their own experiences that might have surfaced in their freewriting. At each stage, Crystal uses her own writing as an example and utilizes a trauma-informed approach throughout.

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## Why this Workshop is Important

This workshop helps students understand and unpack their world in a time when mental distress among youth is rampant. As students find their emotions revealed, they discover a new sense of empowerment and agency. Reluctant writers experience the felt sense of the power of words, the relevance of the writing process, and the need for rounds of edits, not as a form of tedium but as the necessary step to reveal clarity and even self-discovery. In small groups, students are guided into and practice the strategies needed for deep listening, and in doing so they expand their own capacity to connect to another person or group.

As students are invited to name their anxiety, struggle, and strange joy, the workshop gives them space to recognize their experiences and validate them in a time when youths’ mental health needs can be overlooked — or if recognized, there can be an uncertainty of how to address their needs. This process underscores to students the value of their mental health and their intrinsic worth, no matter the tumultuous state of the world around them.

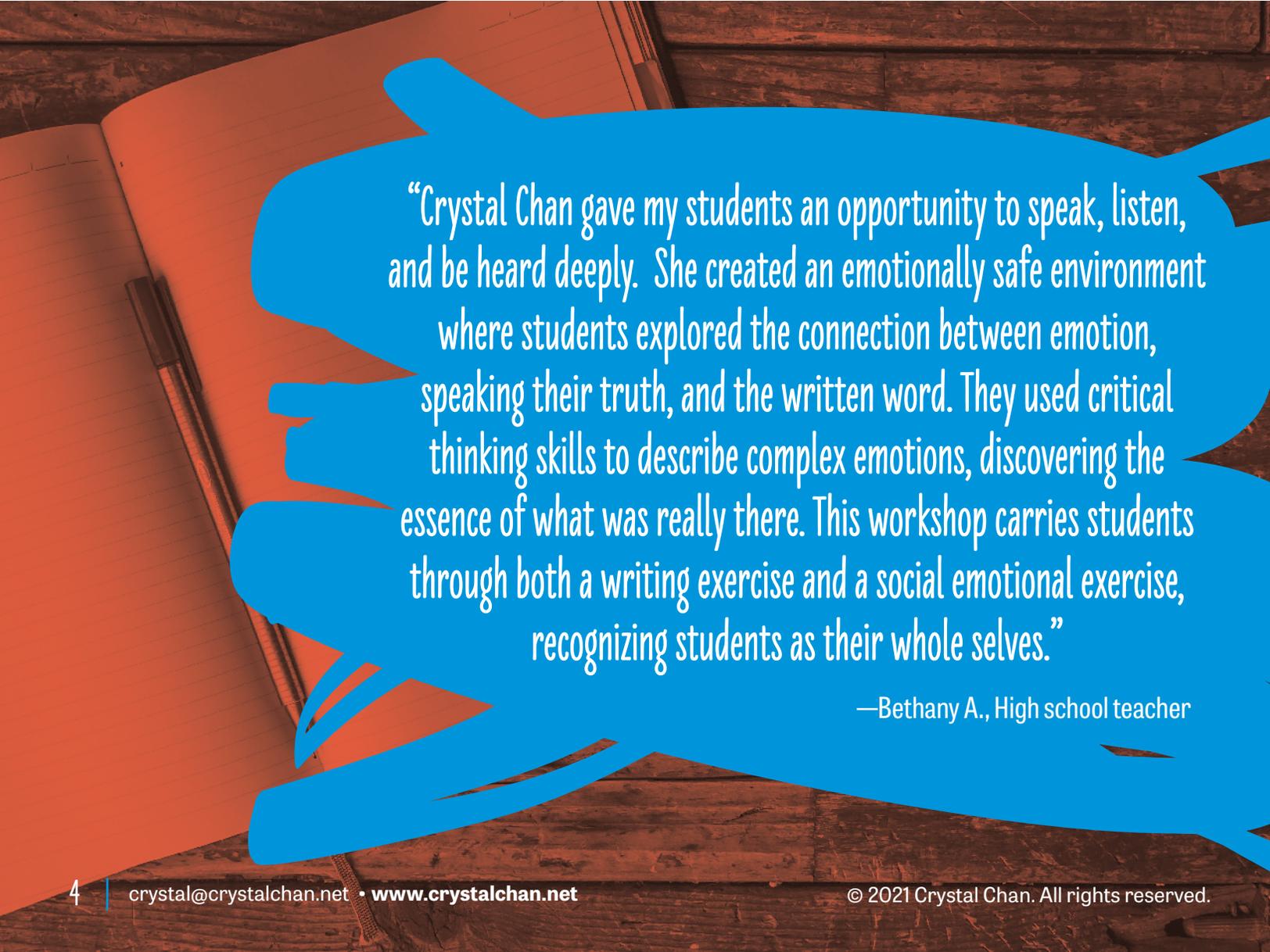
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## A Trauma-Informed Approach

These times have brought considerable hardship to some students more than others, and it is possible that students will surface painful emotions when naming their experiences in this workshop. Therefore, a trauma-informed approach is integrated throughout. First, students will have the option to take a break for any reason, and if they do take a break, an adult will check in with them. Second, they can skip any writing prompts that are too uncomfortable or freewrite on a topic of their choosing altogether. Alternative writing prompts will also be offered. Third, students will be encouraged but not forced to share anything of their writing in their small groups. Finally, if there is any need for additional mental health support in the workshop, it would be necessary for the student to have access to a school counselor or equivalent during

the workshop and/or afterward. It is encouraged for teachers to send home permission slips and/or to notify sensitive students about the workshop and let them know that it is their full choice to opt in or out of the workshop prior to the event.

This social emotional writing workshop underscores the centrality of the school as an essential place of integrated support for students to share their experiences in a safe, supported, and educational setting. In doing so, students may also realize that they have some things in common after such a prolonged and difficult period of disconnection, which may encourage them to connect and re-connect deeply with others, their teachers, and their educational environment.



“Crystal Chan gave my students an opportunity to speak, listen, and be heard deeply. She created an emotionally safe environment where students explored the connection between emotion, speaking their truth, and the written word. They used critical thinking skills to describe complex emotions, discovering the essence of what was really there. This workshop carries students through both a writing exercise and a social emotional exercise, recognizing students as their whole selves.”

—Bethany A., High school teacher

# Writing Workshop Enhancement Options

- There could be additional assigned questions to deepen the students' communication, listening, and reflection: *How did the writing workshop surprise you? What did you learn about yourself? How did it feel to deeply listen to your classmates, and how did that challenge you? What verbal or nonverbal communication styles did you observe of your small group members? What did you learn about the editing process as you whittled your writing?*
- Teachers can invite students to answer the three original question prompts using an artistic medium (e.g., painting, drawing, sculpture, music, theater). Students can then identify elements of their artwork that struck them or were challenging, and they can whittle down their artistic work in a similar way as their writing. Small groups could also be utilized for feedback.
- The workshop can be offered to after school events for support groups, interest clubs, students of color, LGBTQ+ groups, etc.
- The workshop can be offered as an evening, community event: a) with their parents, in a parent-child teams; b) with their parents; in parent-parent and child-child teams, with devoted time at the middle and end for parent-child sharing.
- Schools could arrange for post-workshop reflections of the original small groups or of intentional affinity groups, thereby strengthening interpersonal connections among students.



## Virtual Workshop Parameters

The following parameters are necessary for smooth usage of technology, communication, and overall experience:

- Age Level: High School
- Workshop Duration: 90 minutes
- Maximum Capacity for Workshop: 35 students (to facilitate more intimate group sharing)
- Teacher/faculty must be present and moving microphone around the classroom when students respond to the presenter
- Technology Requirements: Internet Connection/Computer, Projector, Wireless Microphone
- Pre-Workshop Requirements: One 15-minute equipment check and to confirm presenter's digital access to virtual presentation platform (Zoom, etc.)
- A teacher/faculty info packet will be sent two weeks prior to the workshop, which will include general guidelines and tips, a technology checklist, and best practices for cultivating a comprehensive, trauma-informed workshop environment before, during, and after the program
- If school arranges for multiple presentations, there must be a 60-minute break in between presentations to minimize presenter's screen fatigue

# 2021-2022 Workshop Presentation Rates and Bulk Discounts

\$599.00/each session of max. 35 students (0-40% of school's students on free/reduced lunches)

\$499.00/each session of max. 35 students (41%-85% of school's students on free/reduced lunches)

\$399.00/each session of max. 35 students (86%-100% of school's students on free/reduced lunches)

\*Rates are subject to change. Please visit [www.crystalchan.net](http://www.crystalchan.net) for current rates.

*There is an additional 15% discount when two or more sessions are purchased.*

## What Workshop Participants Have Said:

*"We moved seamlessly from this workshop into a class exercise where the students applied the same writing process to their assignment. This workshop has obvious applications in English classes and Language classes, as well as connections to History and Social Studies in which historical perspective, historical narrative, or reporting on current events might be the focus."*

—Bethany A., High School Teacher

*"My favorite part was the end [of the workshop], where we understood what our original writing really meant. **How did it feel to speak my truth and be heard by others? [It felt] relieving.**"*

—Justin, High School Senior

*"I wasn't sure what to expect and tend to think writing isn't for me. This process allowed me to create without worrying or critique or who was witnessing my work and write just for me. I leaned into my grief on my path toward healing. Thank you for offering a space where **I was able to allow myself to be vulnerable and develop intimacy with other participants** through our shared grief and humanity."*

—Jennifer

## About the Author and Facilitator

**Crystal Chan** offers social, emotional, and embodied workshops for those who are processing how these tumultuous times have affected them and how to reconnect with themselves and each other. Crystal facilitates self-care and writing retreats both virtually and in person for people of all ages; she also runs virtual monthly healing sessions for the Asian American Pacific Islander community. She has authored two novels for youth: *ALL THAT I CAN FIX* and *BIRD*. She has received numerous writing recognitions both domestically and abroad, and she has presented to audiences ranging from 30 to 2,000 people. Her debut novel, *BIRD*, has been published in 10 countries and is out on audiobook in the US. In 2019, she created and taught a course called *Writing Compassion* at Benedictine University as their Artist in Residence. She is a regular storyteller on Wisconsin Public Radio. Crystal lives at the intersection of writing, embodiment, and emotional health.

**Contact Crystal for questions or bookings:**

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