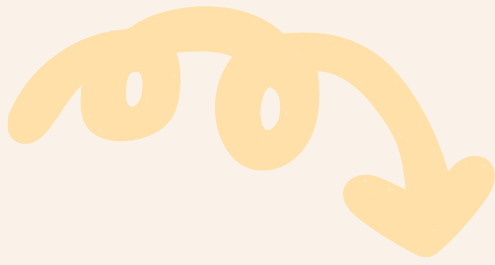


VOLUNTEER HANDBOOK





MISSION STATEMENT

Mighty Writers (MW) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. Our mission is to teach kids 3 to 17 to think and write with clarity so they can achieve success at school, at work and in life. Through our core values of **resilience, respect and optimism**, kids develop their superpower — **the power of the pen.**



We help kids achieve success by:

- improving students' literacy proficiency scores
- increasing self-esteem through literacy and mindfulness
- raising high school graduation and college acceptance rates

We also support our communities with food distribution and other essential resources. **We know that kids can't think and write with clarity when they're hungry.**



Mighty Writers was founded in 2009 by longtime writer and editor **Tim Whitaker**. It started out in a humble South Philadelphia storefront and has since expanded to eight sites — and counting — along with virtual offerings (MW At Home) and classes held in conjunction with partner schools and organizations.

Mighty Writers focuses on **amplifying and empowering the voices** of our students while providing free high-quality, community-oriented writing programs. As a result, **grades improve, self-esteem soars and futures come into view.**

Our approach is focused on the whole child. We utilize mindfulness and Social-Emotional Learning to teach kids to be emotionally resilient, cultivate their inner strength, and foster their overall sense of well-being.



WELCOME ABOARD!



Hello, volunteers! We sure are happy to see you.

We know there are many ways you could be spending your time — working, being with family, binge-watching “90 Day Fiancé” to see which of these bizarre couplings will end in disaster. The point is, you don’t have to be here with us. And yet you are. We’re so grateful.

The truth is: We need you. We can’t do this work without you. And lest you think we say that to everyone (which, um, we do, obviously), the reason we need you, in all your glorious particularity, is because each unique individual who volunteers with us brings something new. The kids learn from you, of course, but the organization as a whole grows exponentially because you’re here, adding your singular talents and quirks, and **helping us broaden the vision of what we do.**

Thing is, the Mighty Writers mission is an urgent one. You might have noticed that the neighborhoods we serve — like many communities in the U.S. — face real challenges: **underfunded schools, gun violence, food insecurity.** That doesn’t mean it’s all doom and gloom — the kids we work with are wonderfully resilient and fun. But it does mean that our presence in their lives is important, and what we offer makes a serious difference in their lives.

Good writing and clear communication are a pathway to success, and we are committed to doing whatever is needed to pave that path for our students. Sometimes that means writing workshops. Other times that means meeting basic needs. Whether you’re helping kids improve their reading and writing skills or keeping them fed and in diapers, you are a paving stone along that pathway to a brighter future.

Volunteering with Mighty Writers is fun and rewarding — and sometimes tough. It’s never boring, that’s for sure. But, speaking of boring, you are reading a volunteer handbook right now — and yeah, those are usually just deadly. Eyes glazing over, head bonking the computer screen because you’re falling asleep. We’ve tried to make this handbook engaging, even with its rather important nuts-and-bolts content. **We know it’s a long read, but hey, we’re a reading and writing organization!** So sit back, get a comfy blanket and a cheering drink, and settle in for the journey. It’s just the beginning of a beautiful relationship.

With love,
The Volunteer Team



P.S. This handbook contains only general information and guidelines. It is not intended to address all the possible applications of, or exceptions to, the general policies and procedures described. Such policies and procedures are subject to change in the future. We will communicate changes as they occur.



A quick note before we proceed: Kids and families depend on our volunteers, which is why we ask that you take this seriously and commit to it. There's more below about opportunity requirements, but here's our bottom line: Disappointing kids and families by not keeping promises is, well, very un-Mighty.

VOLUNTEER VOICES



"I've really enjoyed working with my students over the past year and a half and look forward to continuing. The MW education and community-building sessions I've attended have all been extremely well-planned and very useful."

"When I began mentoring Sharon, she was 10. Now a newly minted teen, she's a shining example of academic growth through diligence. Academics do not come easily to Sharon, but she's incredibly committed to showing up (to school and to our mentorship) and doing the work. I've seen improvements in her writing, comprehension and communication and hope she'll continue working with me through her teen years."



"I enjoy volunteering. Great group of people that I work with. Impressive organization that does a lot of great things in the community."

THE SKINNY ON MIGHTY VOLUNTEERING

Though Mighty Writers started out purely as a writing organization, over the years we've learned that **if we don't address the larger problems in a community, the kids in our workshops won't thrive.**

This was especially obvious to us when the pandemic started. We went online at first, like everyone, but we quickly realized that it wasn't just doing things through a screen that was causing kids not to be less engaged. In fact, many of the kids were simply hungry, since their school lunches had been discontinued. And with everyone under increased economic pressure, the parents of our Mighty kids were struggling to afford groceries and necessities, like diapers. **How could we ask families to focus on writing if their children's basic needs weren't being met?**



So we pivoted. We began giving away groceries for free. And then, in partnership with the Greater Philadelphia Diaper Bank, now a part of Mighty Writers, we started distributing diapers and period products too. And books. **Always books.**

Volunteers like you made this happen, and continue to make it work. Now we've got two facets to our operations: **educational programming and food/diaper distribution.**

So are you saying, “Put me in, Coach!” yet? Of course you are. So let’s find your team.

Each of our eight locations is unique and rooted in the community around it.

When you start, you become a part of that site and that community, but it takes some time. At first, it can be intimidating going into an unfamiliar space as the new kid. Also, it’s hard to know what you’re going to enjoy doing, right? I mean, haven’t all of us thought that we were going to LOVE being at that New Year’s Eve party at our friend’s house only to get there and realize it was a nightmarish bacchanal out of a Fellini film? Well, maybe not all of us, but the point is that **we want to help you find the best fit so you’ll stick with us.**



We do ask you to commit to a certain period of time serving as a volunteer; **longevity helps you get more involved in the community** and makes your bright smile familiar to kids and caretakers.

Finally, Mighty Writers strives to host inclusive, accessible training and events that enable all individuals to engage fully. To request an accommodation or for inquiries about accessibility, please contact **volunteers@mightywriters.org**.



GETTING STARTED



WHAT YOU NEED TO DO FIRST:

- Complete Mighty Writers' [online volunteer application](#)

PA VOLUNTEERS

- Complete PA state criminal background clearance
- Complete PA state child abuse history clearance

-- These two clearances can be done online and you'll receive e-copies. Please download and email to volunteer manager.

- Complete PA FBI Fingerprinting clearance

-- If you have not lived in PA for 10+ consecutive years, email volunteer manager and ask for fingerprinting coupon code and instructions.

-- you have lived in PA for 10+ consecutive years, email volunteer manager the two waivers below and you will not have to do your physical fingerprints:

- [Waiver with initials](#)
- Waiver with signature (a witness can be anyone 18 years or older)

-- FBI clearances will be mailed to your address. Please scan or take picture and email to volunteer manager.

- Submit proof of COVID-19 vaccination (if eligible) to volunteer manager via a photo of your COVID-19 vaccination card. We do not require boosters at this time.

NJ VOLUNTEERS

- Complete Accuratenow state background check and National Sex Offender Registry (NSOR). You will receive an email from Accuratenow and volunteer manager. Please submit as soon as possible as the link will expire.

GET INVOLVED: OPPORTUNITIES

After-School Academy & Workshops

Volunteers for the After-School Academy & Workshops support our Mighty students with homework, reading and writing projects, and small group work. Other duties may include distributing snacks, supervising indoor or outdoor play, and assisting in topical workshops. The Mighty Writer After-School Academy runs Monday-Friday from 3-6 p.m. while school is in session. Non-Academy workshops take place during the week in the early evening and on Saturdays. In the summer, schedules are adjusted for camps. Volunteers hoping to work directly with young people start here.

Required commitment: Four months for at least one hour, once a week during the school year and/or one hour or more once a week for the summer

Internships & Fellowships

Internships are available at MW for high school and college students. Interns are able to assist with food distribution and after-school academy while practicing leadership skills. During the summer, they're able to participate in our summer camp programs for the duration of the day.

- **Required commitment:** MW asks for 10-12 hours/week.
- Clearances required for volunteers 18+. Proof of vaccination required for all interns.
- Unpaid/credit earning
- HS leadership program from Camden is available



One-on-One Mentoring

One-on-one mentoring is open to experienced After-School Academy volunteers who have been exposed to a range of reading and writing strategies with a number of students. They then bring this expertise to the one-on-one setting as a supportive adult who can offer guidance to an individual child looking to meet academic and personal goals. Volunteers report on their mentorship through a monthly form that will be shared with them via email. Mentorship pairs also get perks! They can request books and materials for their sessions and participate in mentorship outings for free.

Most mentorships are built from connections made in the Academy. When you start at a site, let the volunteer team and your site director know you are interested in working one-on-one with a student.

Required commitment: Weekly sessions for a minimum of six months. Many kids can be shy at first and this gives time for your relationship to develop.

GET INVOLVED: OPPORTUNITIES



MW Site Food & Diaper Distribution

Food & Diaper Distribution volunteers help MW site staff unload and organize deliveries and set up tables so that community members can come and grab what they need, farmer's market-style. They also help distribute goods, manage the lines, give away books, break things down after and move empty boxes to the curb. This is a rain-or-shine role with comfy clothes and closed-toed shoes a must. Times vary by location (see site schedules here).

Required commitment: Three months, one day/week, from setup until breakdown

Street Team

Have a hectic schedule? Work with the Street Team! It's the perfect solution for volunteers who have less available time but still want to help out. A Street Team volunteer might go with a Mighty staffer on the Bookmobile, traveling around the city and handing out free books. Or you might join us at community events, conferences and anywhere else we can put up a table and give away books. The Street Team spreads the good word about Mighty Writers, serving as ambassadors for our programs and volunteer opportunities. Street Team members also get to count and organize books at our HQ in Germantown, which is a serious high for a book nerd. It's all worth it when you see the kids' smiles.

Required commitment: One time per month



Greater Philadelphia Diaper Bank

The Greater Philadelphia Diaper Bank provides the perfect opportunity for corporate, church or school groups to do a day of service. We always need extra hands as we pack period products, baby diapers, adult incontinence products and other essentials for distribution. Connect with your friends, co-workers or family members through a day of meaningful activity on a Monday, Wednesday or Friday, 11 a.m.-1 p.m.

Individuals can also support the Diaper Bank by hosting diaper collection drives or helping us fulfill partner orders.

(Prescheduled drop-offs and donations are accepted Tuesday and Thursday, 10 a.m.-noon.)



OUR MIGHTY SITES

PHILADELPHIA

Germantown

West

North

El Futuro

CHESTER COUNTY

El Futuro Kennett

NEW JERSEY

Camden

Newark

Atlantic City



VOLUNTEER VOICES

"I appreciate MW's outreach to volunteers. There is the sense the staff truly cares and is there to help in any way."



"Volunteering is soul-satisfying. The community at Kennett is an amazing array of volunteers who serve a huge community of farmworkers in Southern Chester County. The staff at MW Kennett are just wonderful people."



THEIR WHOLE WORLD IS IN YOUR HANDS: KEEPING KIDS SAFE

It should go without saying — except that it doesn't, obviously, since we're saying it here! — **that the safety of the children who attend Mighty Writers is of paramount importance.** Parents and caregivers trust us to create an emotionally and physically safe environment for their children, so it's no surprise that this section of the handbook is the longest and most detailed. Read on, below, and let us know if there's anything you think we should add. This is a living document with input from all our volunteers.



CAUSE FOR CONCERN PROTOCOL

If you are concerned about a student (due to changes in mood, behaviors, physical appearance, etc.), please privately inform your site supervisor. The site supervisor will be able to guide you through the most appropriate course of action(s).

KEEPING KIDS SAFE: MANDATED REPORTING



Mandated reporting can sound intimidating, but it's actually pretty straightforward, as you'll see below. Remember, our staff is here to help you.

Who is mandated to report abuse?

Anyone may report suspected abuse; mandated reporters are those people who are required by law to report suspected child abuse. Mandated reporters are held to a higher standard of responsibility and may receive serious consequences for not reporting suspected abuse.

In Pennsylvania, an individual who, as an integral part of a regularly scheduled program, activity or service, accepts responsibility for a child is mandated to report child abuse. In New Jersey, everyone is a mandated reporter.

How do I report suspected abuse?

In Pennsylvania, you may report online here or call ChildLine at 1-800-932-0313. In New Jersey, you must call the State Central Registry at 1-877 NJ ABUSE (1-877-652-2873). If a child is in immediate danger, call 911.

Can't I just tell my site director about the abuse and they can take it from there?

No. You personally must make the report. Your site director may assist you in making the report (for example, sit with you for support if you are uncomfortable in the process) as long as they do not interfere in any way with the making of the report. Afterward, you should inform your site director about the report.

Where can I find more information?

[Pennsylvania](#)

[New Jersey](#)

If you're interested in acquiring a free mandated reporting certificate, visit the following links: [Pennsylvania](#) / [New Jersey](#)

MIGHTY WRITERS' ANTI-RACISM POLICY



Mighty Writers is committed to cultivating an anti-racist environment for its students, families, volunteers, visitors and staff. At Mighty Writers we take action to reduce the impact of systemic racism, especially as it relates to the youth we serve.

Racism deeply affects our Mighty kids, but it's not an easy subject to talk about — for anyone. To help unlock our students' Mightiness, however, it's essential that volunteers have an understanding of what these young people grapple with and do everything we can to help. Here are some things we do to approach this issue.

We let kids be kids!

There is a history of Black, brown, indigenous and other children of color having bodily autonomy impeded, often for racist reasons. We don't overpolice the movement of children. Rather, we encourage safe movement and bodily comfort.

We honor childhood innocence. Studies show that Black children over the age of 10 are typically viewed as 4.5 years older than they are, and can consequently be denied the presumption of innocence. In our actions and speech, we strive to honor the innocence of Black youth and all the students we work with.

We educate ourselves.

As always, knowledge is power, so we teach ourselves about our students' backgrounds and the issue of racism so we can act as informed educators. We study definitions of racism and white privilege, the history of racism in the United States, the difference between systemic/institutional racism and individual/interpersonal racism, and the process of implicit bias.

This last one is key:

We must examine our own actions and subconscious responses. Of course, none of us intend to be racist or fatphobic or ageist or homophobic or hold any other biases. We all think we're doing our best! But take a few minutes to take one of these tests on implicit bias. You may learn something new about yourself.

We know this is a heavy topic, but being aware of our own biases, and the societal biases our students confront every day, makes us better able to celebrate the differences among our students and give them affirming language to describe their identities. We teach children to be comfortable with and appreciative of the diversity around them.

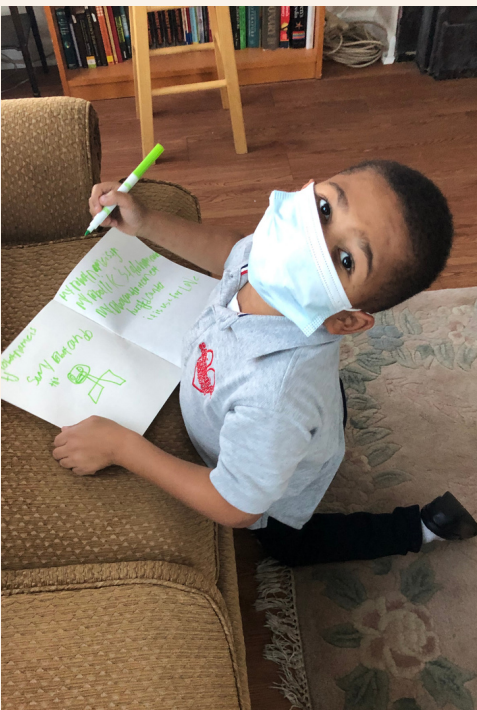
KEEPING KIDS SAFE: TRAUMA



“These are the best years of your life.” That’s the kind of thing adults often say to kids while they gaze wistfully into the distance, remembering a rose-colored vision of youth. But if a genie popped out of a bottle and gave these adults the chance to be transported back to grade school, most would probably say, “Um, can I have some different wishes instead?”

Childhood is tough — full of uncertainty, anxiety and constant change. In the communities we serve, the kids are dealing with all kinds of trauma-inducing challenges every day: gun violence, food scarcity, racism. **That’s why every Mighty Writers center must be a safe place.**

You can help create a safe place for our Mighty kids by being well-informed, compassionate and open-minded. **It’s also important to understand something about trauma and how it works.**

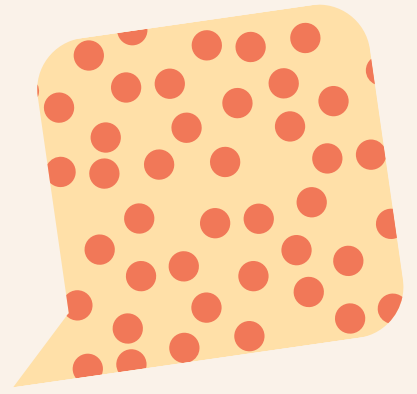


Trauma is a lasting emotional response to certain adverse circumstances. Traumatic events often overwhelm the nervous system, leaving the individual unable to fully process the experience in the moment. Trauma can prevent a person from feeling safe and whole for years after the precipitating event, leading to ongoing issues with feelings of fear, shame and helplessness.

Trauma has mental, behavioral, spiritual, emotional, biological and physiological after-effects. In recent years, the approach to trauma has changed from “What’s wrong with you?” to “What happened to you?” A compassionate and understanding reaction to kids with trauma will allow you to show up for them in the ways that they need.

Trauma manifests in kids and adults in different ways, so ask us for more materials on this subject.

KEEPING KIDS SAFE: INTERNET RULES



As adults, we know the good — and bad — that social media can do. Studies have shown that social media access can be deleterious to young minds, compromising self-esteem and increasing depression. At the same time, it can also be a wonderful tool for kids from discrete communities to connect, share and find acceptance. Our cultural marriage to social media really is for better or worse.

Here are our rules of the road for volunteers:

Respect privacy

Respect people's right to privacy and, unless given permission by them, do NOT:

- take/post photos or videos of MW participants and their families
- identify or discuss MW participants and their families on social media
- mention classified/confidential goals, test results, grades, income or other information about MW participants and their families on social media

Maintain boundaries

Do not communicate with or “friend” participants online without parental permission. We’d be thrilled, however, if you “liked” and shared content from the official Mighty Writers social media pages. We’d also love to have your contributions to post on social media. To send us content or for questions and comments about social media, please contact MW Director of Communications Liz Spikol: lspikol@mightywriters.org

Be a good digital role model

Resist the temptation to pull out your phone to check your email during your volunteer hours. Don’t send a quick text while talking to a participant.

KEEPING KIDS SAFE: CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

Culture is like an iceberg. It has some aspects that are visible, but most aspects of culture are hidden beneath the surface. We can easily see how someone speaks, dresses or celebrates a holiday, but there are also many deeply rooted ideas that we can only understand by analyzing values, studying institutions and reflecting upon our own core values. Although different cultural groups may share similar core values, these are often interpreted differently — a core value like “respect” may be expressed differently in different cultures! Let’s not make assumptions.

[Novelist Chimamanda Adichie – Dangers of a Single Story](#)



Source: 1976, Edward T. Hall said: 10% of culture is visible, 90% hidden below the surface.

IDENTITY

All kids and adults are accepted at Mighty Writers, no matter their race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation or gender identification. Some of our Mighty kids, community members and staff may use pronouns you’re not entirely familiar with.



Here are some resources to help you understand gender diversity and inclusive language:

[GenderBread person](#)

[Inclusive Practices in the Classroom](#)

[Why Pronouns Matter](#)

KEEPING KIDS SAFE: GENERAL HEALTH & SAFETY



Youth Engagement

At Mighty Writers, we don't use food, shelter or access to programming as an incentive to participate. We also do not make promises to our students we can't keep. Mighty Writers should be a safe space where basic needs are met and where kids feel cared for and at ease. For that reason, volunteers are not responsible for disciplining participants, and are prohibited from reprimanding participants through physical punishment or verbal shaming or threats. Volunteers are expected to actively supervise youth and/or support programming while serving. We ask that you refrain from being on your phone or other electronic devices. When in rooms where participants are using electronic devices, ensure all websites, apps, etc., being used are educational, age appropriate and productive. Volunteers are not permitted to transport minors without a signed waiver on file for each student.

Emergencies

Volunteers must be prepared for exigent circumstances. Procedures for emergencies related to weather, fire, lost participants/adults and site security will be provided. In case of an accident or emergency, notify the site supervisor immediately. Mighty Writers staff are trained in first aid and CPR. If you are interested in CPR Red Cross Training, visit [this link](#).

Comportment

Mighty Writers is a drug- and alcohol-free environment. Being under the influence of alcohol, illegal drugs or other impairing substances while serving at a site or community event may pose a serious health and safety risk to others, and will not be tolerated. Mighty Writers does sometimes hold social or agency-related events where alcohol is served. This policy does not prohibit the consumption of alcohol at these events. However, if you choose to consume alcohol at such events, you must do so responsibly and maintain your obligation to conduct yourself professionally at all times. Inappropriate, offensive and/or foul language is not permitted at Mighty Writers sites or events.

The health and safety of our students is a priority.

Volunteers who violate Mighty Writers' Keeping Kids Safe rules will no longer be able to volunteer.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND RECEIPT

The volunteer handbook describes important information about MW, and I understand that I am responsible for reading this document. If I have any questions that remain unanswered, I understand that I should consult the program director of my site or the volunteer department directly.

I understand that any and all policies and practices may be changed at any time by Mighty Writers. All such changes will be communicated, and I understand that revised information may supersede, modify or eliminate existing policies.

Mandated Reporter Statement As a mandated reporter, I understand that I am responsible to make a report when I suspect a child is a victim of abuse. I will follow the Mighty Writers protocol for reporting as listed in the Volunteer Handbook.

Permission to use writing, photo, video and voice recording I hereby grant Mighty Writers and their partner organizations the irrevocable right and permission to photograph and/or record me and use the photographs and/or recording for promotional purposes. I understand that quotes, texts, images, recordings are hereby approved to be released to the media without future permission. I waive the right to inspect or approve the use of the photograph and/or recording, and acknowledge and agree that the rights granted to this release are without compensation of any kind.

I understand and agree that nothing in the Volunteer Handbook creates, or is intended to create, a promise or representation of a compulsory relationship, and that volunteering at Mighty Writer is at-will, and that my service may be terminated at any time by Mighty Writers or me.

I have received the handbook, and I understand that it is my responsibility to read and comply with the policies contained in this handbook and any revisions made to it.



**MIGHTY
WRITERS**

Signature

Print Name

Email

Phone Number

Date