



A concise guide to establishing a writing group

A CONCISE GUIDE TO ESTABLISHING A WRITING GROUP

Introduction

There is an 'extensive body of literature on writing circles or groups in higher education for doctoral students, and increasingly early career researchers, [that] focuses on supporting emerging scholars to develop research capability' (Bosanquet, Cahir, Huber, Jacenyik-Trawoger, McNeill, in press); however, guides base on 'tried and tested' ways of establishing a writing group are limited.



We wrote this guide with the intention of providing a 'map' for anyone who is thinking of starting a writing group and wants to find out more. This guide is not meant to be prescriptive, different approaches will work with different groups. It is suggested that your group 'cherry picks' from this guide when discussing what will work in your context.

The guide is divided into the following sections:

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We have also had feedback from other groups that have used draft versions of this guide that it helped in establishing the boundaries of their group and what they wanted to achieve as a group.

As a first step, we suggest that you ask some peers if they would like to start a writing group, as we have seen and read how this 'organic' approach works and use any information in this guide that is useful and relevant to your group.

Before you start a Writing Group

There are many different reasons for establishing a writing group or joining an existing writing group. These include a need to:

- increase your scholarly output
- create a support network for your scholarly writing
- make dedicated time for your writing
- expose your writing to a diverse range of feedback

Potential benefits

The literature on writing groups documents a range of potential benefits, including:

- Practical and emotional support for the writing endeavours of its members
- Development of writing skills
- Improving writing output by creating deadlines
- Quantitative and qualitative increases to group members' research output and publication rates
- Development of know-how regarding identifying appropriate journals, the publication process or targeting conferences
- Professional and research development

Whatever your reason is, a writing group can be a dynamic learning space providing plenty of opportunities for mutual learning within a supportive environment. In an attempt to ensure that the writing group is a positive experience for all members it is recommended that members participate in reflection exercise before they begin.

Reflection Exercise

This reflection exercise can help you and the group to pin-point your reasons for starting or joining a writing group; they can also help the group define the boundaries and ensure that everyone's intentions are aligned.

Below are some suggested reflection questions. The exercise involves each member answering these questions before the first meeting and then the responses are discussed during the first meeting.

- What are your goals as a writer?
- Why do you want to join a writing group?
- What kinds of things do you think a writing group will help you with?
- How do you think you can help others in your writing group?
- What, for you, would be the best possible outcome of your involvement in this writing group?

Individual responses and the overall group responses to these reflection questions can also be revisited after a period of time because more often than not some of the answers change, which will assist with defining the future parameters of the individual's as well as the group's needs.



Inviting writing group members

The composition of the group is likely to change over time thus there are a few considerations when inviting new members.

Who you invite to your writing group and how you invite them will have an impact on the composition of the group and the feedback each group member receives.



- Writing group members could be recruited through an open invitation, e.g. via e-mail. In this case you have to decide how wide you would like to cast your net – everybody in your department?, faculty?, research group?, etc.
- Alternatively, you could approach potential group members individually. In this scenario you have to decide what your criteria are, e.g. level of experience and number of previous publications, research interests, personality, etc.
- If group members come from the same or a similar discipline background, feedback is likely to be specific to this discipline, e.g. discipline specific methodologies and writing conventions. Inviting group members from a variety of discipline backgrounds will widen the scope of feedback and introduce less familiar approaches to research and writing.
- The level of experience each group member has could influence the level of expertise within the group as well as group dynamics. Experienced writers have a wealth of knowledge to share and this will benefit the group. However, novice writers could feel intimidated by this and might prefer to exchange ideas with writers of a similar level of experience.

During the First Writing Group Meeting

Defining the writing group: purpose and structure

Size matters

- A bigger group will provide more diverse feedback.
- Natural attrition will occur, which means that a bigger group will be viable for longer.
- Consider where you want to meet and how many group member this room can accommodate.
- It can be difficult to find a time that is suitable to all group members. The bigger the group, the more difficult this will be.
- If you decide on a rotational schedule, how frequently can members have a piece of writing ready to present to the group. In a smaller group, members will need to produce writing more frequently.

Writing group activities

Writing groups can fulfil a number of different functions. The group needs to agree on core activities that best meet the needs of its group members, such as:

- Reviewing and critiquing group members' work.
- Inviting guest presenters to talk about writing.
- Conducting writing exercises.
- Are there any other activities the group would be interested in?

What pieces of writing can be brought along

It is important that the group reaches consensus on what pieces of writing it will accept. This could be defined by:

- The type of writing: Will the group focus on scholarly writing such as journal articles, conference

presentations or thesis chapters? Or will it also accept related genres, such as reports, ethics applications, grant applications, etc.?

- The degree of completeness: Can drafts be submitted? Will the group accept outlines or preliminary conceptual ideas?
- Authorship: The group may insist that it will only consider writing that is sole authored or co-authored by members of the group. Alternatively, it could accept pieces of writing that have been co-authored by a group member together with authors from outside the group.

Rules of Engagement

For the writing group to be effective and sustainable, it will be necessary to negotiate and agree upon a basic set of conditions and rules.

- The group can decide on the roles individual group members play and the tasks they perform. For instance, will the group have a facilitator? If so, who the facilitator will be and what the role of being the facilitator encompasses. Depending on the size and the needs of the writing group the leadership role could be rather informal and nominal or quite formal and structured.
- Similarly, routine administrative tasks, such as maintaining and disseminating a meeting schedule or a roster for submitting writing, need to be assigned either to a designated group member or on a rotational basis (see example writing schedule).
- The structure of meetings will depend on group members' needs and interests. Popular formats include critiquing submitted writing, a presentation by an invited speaker followed by critiquing submitted writing or "shut up and write".
- By submitting writing group members open themselves up to criticism and judgement. To ensure all members are comfortable within the group and feel supported, the group must engender confidentiality, mutual respect and trust. In particular, it is helpful to establish ground rules around giving constructive feedback.
- It is important that all group members agree on what behaviour is regarded as acceptable or unacceptable. This includes operational issues, such as what constitutes regular attendance or what to do if writing cannot be submitted on the agreed day, as well as agreed authorship or acknowledgement protocols and mutually acceptable conduct when communicating with each other face-to-face or in writing.
- Evaluating and reviewing the writing group at regular intervals, e.g. once a year, gives group members the opportunity to reflect, celebrate successes and seek solutions for shortcomings.



Privacy and confidentiality agreement

It is important to be particularly sensitive to privacy and confidentiality in a writing group considering that most of the work shared will be 'new knowledge'. The writing group confidentiality agreement is straightforward. It is simply that all information exchanged during the writing group meetings and all the written work shared, both online and face-to-face, remains between those parties, unless a group member has given permission for that information to be shared with others. This needs to be discussed during the first meeting and agreed to within the group.

Setting the Parameters

Meeting place

Will it be in a colleague's office or at a cafe or in a library?

It is important that the writing group considers the level of formality, availability and any environmental concerns such as noise.

Frequency

How often will the group meet?

It is important that the writing group considers workload and other commitments. For instance, it could be a fortnightly model whereby writing is submitted one week, and the group meets the following week to give feedback. This model gives the group one week to read the piece of writing and reflect.

Length of sessions

Decisions around duration depend on how many pieces of writing per session and what the group as a whole wants to get out of the session, for example, more time for feedback or more time for discussion.

Will there be one piece of writing or more? This is dependent on the length and frequency of the sessions, the length of the writing and the purpose of the sessions, for example, open discussion with several pieces of writing will require more time.

What to write

Will a restriction be placed on article length or topic/genre? This can shape the length of the meetings and the number of writings per session. Also, the writing group time is sponsored by a workplace or set-up by a 'special interest group' there could be restrictions on the topics/genres.

Writing schedule

Will there be a schedule or will it be more organic?

A schedule will attempt to ensure that every group member has equal chance to present their work and receive feedback but this does require extra administrative time and may place prescriptive constraints on the group. If the writing group decided on a schedule see the sample below. Should the group need to report their work to a sponsor a schedule provides useful documentation.

Writing Group Schedule

Member	Title of the piece	Date to submit writing	Date writing group meets
[Name]	[Title]	[Scheduled date]	[Meeting date]
[Name]	[Title]	[Scheduled date]	[Meeting date]

How will submissions be shared?

The writing group needs to consider how they will distribute their writing in a timely and accessible fashion for example, will it be emailed, uploaded to a shared folder or a wiki.

Collecting Feedback

How does the group provide their feedback on the writing?

It is important that the writing group considers how they will provide feedback. In the meetings verbal feedback will be given but it is also possible to share written comments in hard copy or online.

During Writing Group Meetings

Giving and receiving feedback

Giving feedback

It is recommended that the writing group member asks for specific feedback when distributing their work. This eliminates issues like a group member focusing on grammar and punctuation when the person sharing their work really wanted feedback on their argument and structure. Stating this up front is important as it provides a boundary for the desired feedback.

Giving feedback to fellow writing group members requires a balanced approach. How can you achieve this? Here are some tips:

- Always say something positive, if the writing is at the very early draft stage make sure this is acknowledged in your feedback. Even if you believe the writing requires a lot of work, there will be some positives such as a clear structure or an important idea or good understanding of the literature.
- At all times “critique the writing, not the writer”. For example compare these two statements: “I didn’t understand your conclusion” and “The conclusion requires some attention because...” The second statement positions writing at the centre of the critique not the writer.
- Remember that you are in a writing group to help one another improve, so if you do see issues with the writing then say something. In most cases, a writer would rather hear about an issue from supportive members within a writing group rather than a wider audience.
- Whenever possible be specific by saying things like “I didn’t understand this part because...” or “I’d cut this section because...” and try to offer suggestions for improvement. Whether or not the author agrees, they may gain a better understanding of your point view and more importantly how their writing can be interpreted when read by a wider audience.



Receiving feedback

Receiving feedback from your fellow writing group members requires active listening skills and afterwards, critical reflection. While it is a natural reaction to want to defend your work this is not a constructive approach to receiving feedback from the group. It is important to remember that ultimately the writing group is trying to help you become a better writer. When receiving feedback here are a few points to keep in mind:

- Listen to praise with the same intensity that you listen to criticism. Often, writers can obsess over critical comments and fail to hear all of the good things said about their writing.
- It is a good idea not to argue with any point that is raised during the feedback, as it is counterproductive; but it is equally important to ask questions in order to clarify the point being made. This will assist in your critical reflection after the writing group session.
- Always remember you are the author, and therefore you have the final say. This is a useful tip to keep in mind when the group is divided on a particular point. Don’t make any overly hasty judgments about the feedback you receive, it can make more sense when you have time to reflect.
- Keep in mind that every reader is different but in situations where all group members make the same comment then this is the type of feedback that the writer should to consider accepting this guidance.
- Keep track of the type of feedback that you receive particularly if it occurs regularly. Use these observations in your critical reflection to identify patterns of problems and strengths in your writing.



Where to from here?

Once you have established your writing group it a good idea to revisit the original reflection exercise, approximately once a year, to keep on track with the writing goals of the members and of the group. We have done this reflection exercise at the beginning of every year as well as when there were any changes in the group membership; to ensure that everyone's writing needs and goals were met. We hope this guide will help you in establishing and maintaining a writing group.

Happy writing!

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