

quicktips

GETTING THE MOST FROM A WRITING GROUP

Writing groups can provide motivation, social support, productive feedback, and positive peer pressure for all writers, but especially for writers who are working on long projects like dissertations, theses, or senior papers. Key to the success of any writing group is communication and shared goals among members.

DEVELOPING GOALS AND PROCEDURES FOR YOUR GROUP

A writing group is not a one-size-fits-all phenomenon. Consider your needs as a writer, and how a writing group can best meet those needs. Some people may want a group to give them **accountability** for progress; others may need a set of readers who can give meaningful **feedback**; and still others may need the silent support of a **community** of fellow-sufferers who write together. A writing group can be designed to meet one or more of those needs. You may want to organize your group around just one of these goals, or mix and match. Here are some considerations to help your group run smoothly:

If your group is designed for *accountability*...

- Consider setting public deadlines, perhaps in a Facebook group or in a shared Google doc. Update the Facebook group or shared document with your progress; acknowledge each other's successes, and encourage each other through setbacks.
- Another online spot for accountability is available at Phinished.org, where writers can make pacts about how much they will finish. Or, if you want to show off your accomplishments for each other, try 750words.com, where you earn points for daily writing and can display on Facebook the badges you've achieved.

If your group is designed for *feedback*...

- As a group, set expectations and norms for the amount of time any one person will spend on feedback, and for when writers need to share with the group. The Writing Center at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill offers a thorough list of questions to help feedback-based groups set expectations and norms: see <http://z.umn.edu/unfeedbackgroup>
- When seeking feedback, be clear about what kinds of feedback you want. The more you can direct your readers to specific concerns, the better they can give you what you need. When providing feedback, respect the writer's wishes and priorities for that particular set of feedback.

If your group is designed for *community*...

- As a group, develop community norms (consider noise, conversation, internet use, food, timing, attendance, etc.).
- Determine what kind of structure the group needs (breaks, start time, end time?)
- Consider building in some writing exercises.
 - *Warming up*: Freewriting, a now-widely-used technique developed by composition scholar Peter Elbow in his groundbreaking book, *Writing Without Teachers* (1973/1998), enables writers to turn off their internal critics and simply produce:

The idea is simply to write for ten minutes (later on, perhaps fifteen or twenty). Don't stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what you are doing. If you can't think of a word or

a spelling, just use a squiggle or else write, “I can’t think of it.” Just put down something. The easiest thing is to just put down whatever is in your mind. If you get stuck it’s fine to write “I can’t think what to say, I can’t think what to say” as many times as you want; or repeat the last word you wrote over and over again; or anything else. The only requirement is that you *never* stop. (p. 3)

In a writing group, a warmup can enable people to get loose and comfortable rather than plunging immediately into the icy water of the formal writing project. Consider freewriting on something related to your writing process, or on something entirely unrelated. You can find writing prompts at <http://oneminutewriter.blogspot.com> and <http://www.thewriteprompts.com>, as well as in Natalie Goldberg’s classic book, *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within* (1986).

- *Stopping*: “Parking downhill,” or leaving the project in a place where it’s easy to get it rolling again, is a technique that sustains many writers over the course of a long project, helping them acknowledge their successes as well as prepare to write again. Here’s one version of parking downhill (as developed for the Center for Writing’s annual Dissertation Writing Retreat):

In the last 15 minutes of your writing time...

- Summarize what you did today.
 - Optional, if you have time: Where does what you’ve done fit within the larger context of the current section, or the project as a whole?
- What’s left to do or answer in this task/section?
- What’s the first thing you’re going to do when you sit down again to write?

RESOURCES FOR STARTING AND MAINTAINING A WRITING GROUP

The University of Michigan’s Rackham Graduate School provides a comprehensive guide for starting and maintaining a writing group:

rackham.umich.edu/downloads/publications/DissSuppGrp.pdf

The Writing Center at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill provides several excellent ideas for things to do in a writing group:

writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/writing-groups/activities-for-writing-groups/

DISSERTATION AND THESIS SUPPORT GROUPS

At the University of Minnesota, graduate students can join free Dissertation and Thesis Support Groups facilitated by experienced staff from University Counseling and Consulting Services. Participants in these groups have found them helpful for many things, including learning to set reasonable goals and talking with fellow graduate students from other departments who are at a similar place in the process. Visit <http://www.uccs.umn.edu/group.htm> to learn more.

References:

Elbow, P. (1998). *Writing without teachers* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.