THE UNIVERSITY OF
NEWCASTLE
AUSTRALIA

Peer Writing Groups

A guide

Learning
Development
CENTRE FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

WELCOME to PEER WRITING GROUPS

A writing group can be a great source of practical and effective support for your work as a research writer. It can help you feel that you belong to a community of practice, which motivates and inspires you to keep going, and helps you realise that you are not alone in the problems and anxieties you might encounter as a PhD candidate.

However, joining a writing group requires commitment, and like most good things, what you gain from the experience is equal to how much you are able to give to it. This guide outlines some strategies and advice, based on our experience, for establishing a successful writing group.

The overall purpose of your writing group is to learn together by providing collegial support to each other as you make your way safely through the valley of research writing. In groups led by writing teachers, there is a dimension of writing expertise present, but in peer-led groups, there is no expectation that anyone has particular writing expertise. You will all learn as you go, but there is no pressure for anyone to assume a 'teaching' role.

WRITING GROUP MODELS

The basic model is a 2 hour meeting, once a fortnight. That seems to be the right amount to keep people focussed and committed.

Model A: focus on feedback
The 2 hours can be focussed solely on giving feedback on writing from 2-3 group members. These writers send their work to other group members well in advance of the meeting, so that everyone has time to read it and think about it. Each piece of writing is not more than 5 pages (unless the group is happy to read more than that.)

Meeting time is not the time for a first reading of work; readers need time to think about it, and the whole group benefits from a solid 2 hr discussion.

2 pieces of work is ideal, but 3 is possible. However, any more than 3 becomes too rushed, and is a bit superficial. Also, more than 3 pieces for a meeting places extra demand on readers. Two is good because you will spend 45-50 mins on each piece, and that allows for other incidental chat.

Don't dismiss the importance of incidental chat. It helps develop group cohesion as members get to know each other, and it is also invaluable for sharing many aspects of the RHD experience. You can pick up a lot of extra 'know-how' this way.

Model B: mix writing and feedback

Some groups like to spend an hour in a "Shut-up & write" mode. This means, quite literally, that you sit around the table writing in silence. Academics and students alike have found this a useful way to get themselves writing if writing time really is scarce.

The 2nd hour (or perhaps the next 2 hours) in such a group is spent giving feedback, as described above. Again, any less than 40 mins on a piece of writing may be too rushed.

Model C: just writing

Some groups might meet 1 x week to simply write. It's a bit like physical exercise: if you have some writing/exercise partners at a regular time, you are more likely to do it. This has been known as 'writing boot-camp'. You are permitted 10 mins to say hello, then the timer is on and you write for the agreed time. No talking, no interruptions.

You can agree on any writing time, from 30 mins to 2 hours, whatever the group wants to do. It's usually good to then have some kind of debrief about writing process, either generally, or each meeting could focus on different group members to help them nut out some sticking points they are experiencing in writing.

THE FEEDBACK PRINCIPLE

Writing groups are based on feedback because this is how everyone learns more about writing. New writers assume that getting feedback is the most valuable process here. However, if you have had any teaching experience, you will know that having to prepare for teaching, i.e. giving, is the most useful learning experience.

Giving feedback is the most effective way to improve your writing because it requires that you really think about what makes a piece of writing work or not. When everyone shares their feedback, everyone benefits, and everyone goes home knowing what to reflect on in their own writing. This has worked time and time again with writing groups.

Receiving feedback, is, naturally, also useful. You can manage the feedback by clarifying what you would like to readers to focus on. Think about what kind of feedback would be most useful to you at this stage of your writing. Having said that, though, most writers want to know if their work is clear, and clarity usually involves everything from sentence level to whole text structure level. However, you might, for example, just want to know if one concept is clear, rather than the whole lot.

Getting and giving feedback can be an emotional business, but one student summed it up by saying: "Detailed feedback, no matter how challenging, is a sign that the reader has taken my work seriously, and I thank them for that."

NB: in giving feedback, you are not expected to be an expert. You comment from the position of an engaged and thoughtful reader, and supportive peer. See the extra handouts on requesting, giving, and receiving feedback.

WRITING GROUP PROCEDURES

Facilitator

It's advisable that each meeting has a nominated facilitator. Each group member can take a turn at this.

The facilitator is responsible for the usual things, like ensuring that everyone gets a say, moving the discussion on if necessary, and ensuring that each piece of writing gets an equal amount of time spent on it.

Most importantly, the facilitator 'rounds up' the meeting by encouraging everyone to reflect on what has been learned in that session. This is important because the purpose of the feedback process is to help everyone learn something about writing and go home to think about how it applies to their own work.

The facilitator is also the administrator for that meeting, responsible for:

- Updating the calendar if necessary (see below)
- Being the point of contact for other group members
- Attending to any admin matters, e.g. finding a new room if necessary and notifying everyone
- Most importantly: sending out the summary email after the meeting (see below).

The calendar

At the first meeting, set up a calendar to allocate:

- Meeting dates
- The facilitator for each meeting
- Who will be submitting work for each meeting; it's important that everyone gets a turn as far as possible.

The post-meeting email

The overall benefit of this email is that is builds group cohesion. Group members have generally valued the email. One person wrote: *Thanks for the great summary. I often go back to review them to jog my memory.* It is recommended that the summary email:

- is not too long; up to half a page is enough
- contains positive comments about the meeting
- summarises how the group worked and what was covered

- acknowledges those who couldn't be there – create a sense of inclusion
- shares news and support, e.g. congratulations for circle members who are 3 minute thesis entrants
- has the updated calendar attached
- includes other relevant attachments if available (resources, links)

See sample emails at the end of this guide.

Ideas for the first session

This session sets the tone, and starts the process of building group cohesion. Important things to do are:

- Get to know each other: spend time hearing about everyone's research projects; you can also discuss the writing process – what you enjoy and what you find difficult
- Clarify everyone's expectations of the writing circle – talk through concept, how it works etc (refer to this guide)
- Agree on logistics: sharing email/other addresses; how often to meet; the calendar etc
- Agree on the format of meetings: model A or model B (see above), or something else?
- Discuss groupwork communication issues: respectful and tactful feedback; confidentiality

Alternative activities for some meetings

Sometimes, the scheduled writer can't attend, or the writing supply may have "dried up", or you just might want to do something different, e.g.:

- have a "positive" critique session: everyone brings in a small sample of academic writing they have found a pleasure to read. You each prepare for the meeting by analysing what makes this writing easy to read. Is it sentence structure, word choice, paragraph structure? Make copies for everyone, and lead the discussion on it. This activity gets everyone thinking about what makes writing succeed.
- Gain focus on your research project by summarising it in 1 page:
    o WHAT are you doing
    o WHY are you doing it
    o HOW are you doing it
    o SO WHAT will be the ultimate significance of doing it?

  You can do this in pairs: each partner listens/reads the other's summary and comments on how clear it is.

READING THE WORK OF OTHERS

Most of us feel a bit anxious about reading the draft work of peers, especially if that work is concerned with a topic or discipline very different from our own. To help you, we advise a tried and true reading strategy:

1. Read it all the way through once, without marking anything. Don't expect to understand on the first reading. Don't spend time trying to work out the meaning of anything, or evaluating anything. Just read right through. The purpose is simply to get orientated to the text, so this reading shouldn't take too long.

2. Read the text again, pencil in hand. This time thinking about what the text means. You will have a much better idea now, having read it once already.

3. Mark the text where the meaning is not clear to you. Think about why that may be so. You may have some ideas about how to clarify it, or you may not. Your priority is to identify for the writer where their message is not getting through, and let them know what it is you are not understanding. Don't worry – you are not expected to 'fix' or correct work. The group discussion is where solutions are often found.

4. Think about what kind of feedback the writer has specifically asked for. Try to give them specific suggestions about this. Again, if you can't think of any, don't worry. You might be surprised what occurs to you in the group discussion.

5. In discussion, always check with the writer about their *intended* purpose; your role is to help them understand how successfully that intention has been achieved.

GROUPWORK PRINCIPLES

Writing groups work when members are committed to the success of the group. To inspire commitment, you can ensure that the suggestions in this guide are at least considered. The key to group commitment is to follow basic groupwork principles:

- Be courteous and sensitive in giving feedback
- Keep communication channels open, e.g. let the facilitator know if you can't make it (in other groups, some members sent feedback by email if they missed the meeting)
- Respect: everyone shares genuine *drafts* of their work (i.e., imperfect work), and all work is treated with respect; group discussions are confidential, and no-one will rewrite your work.
- Consider your reader: don't ask them to read more than 5 pages of writing (unless the group agrees on an exception); if you need to contextualise those 5 pages, then do so briefly
- Send work early enough for readers to have time to read and think about it, ideally one week before the meeting.
- Be specific in requesting and giving feedback; this is more helpful than being vague or general

Here are top reasons students missed meetings. Many reasons could have been avoided with time management that treated the writing circle as a priority:

REASON for missing meetings (2012, UoN)	FREQUENCY
Travel overseas	27
Other PhD work: in the lab, seminar / course, confirmation, article deadline	24
Supervisor called a meeting / requested work to be done	19
Personal / family / domestic matters	19
Away at a Conference	16
Medical / illness	13
Paid Work (some if it casual, no notice)	9
'circumstances beyond my control' / 'too busy' / 'behind' / stressed out	7
Had no work to bring / not prepared	5
Didn't think it was on – no group communication	2

As a group you might like to reflect on how to manage these reasons.

WRITING KNOWLEDGE

While the main purpose of your writing circle is to provide a supportive sounding board for each other, it may also be helpful to develop your technical knowledge of writing. There are 3 levels to consider, and you can think about these when reviewing your own work too.

Whole text: Conventions of structure

- Appreciate the writer's purpose. This might require a knowledge of the genre or text type; for example, the purpose and structure of a literature review in engineering or science can work differently to a literature review in management; a literature review section has conventions and aims that are quite different from a discussion section; a confirmation paper has a particular structure, and each section has a particular purpose.
- How has the writer's organisation of ideas fulfilled their purpose or intention?
- Describe what you think the writer has done, and check with writer to clarify.

Paragraphs: coherent ideas

- What is the main idea/purpose of the paragraph? There should only be one. Sometimes it's difficult to draw the line because all ideas seem linked. It's about 'slowing down' to consider one idea at a time, fully before moving on to the next idea. A big idea may be made up of sub-ideas (in paragraph size.)
- When each paragraph idea is clarified, do the ideas then progress in a logical way? This organisation of ideas, as paragraphs, is what forms a 'line of argument' – is it a clear line?
- Ideally, the topic sentence should express the idea of the paragraph, and everything in the paragraph is relevant to that topic sentence. (This is not a 'rule', but is a good guideline.)
- Are points from various sources synthesised, rather than described separately?

Sentences: clarity

- Do sentences flow? Even if you don't understand the content, is there a feeling that it's 'easy' to read anyway? Reflect on why that might be (and let the writer know!)
- Look for "signpost" language, i.e. the words and phrases that tell you where you are in a text, e.g.: 'A survey of recent literature found that….' or 'The purpose of this study is…"
- Identify sentences with 'speed bumps', i.e. the reader has to slow down because the sentence structure might be too complex, awkward or confusing.
- Do sentences and paragraphs have one focus, rather than trying to pack too much in?
- Is there a need for sentence variety?
- Identify the use of active and passive voice; is it appropriate?

WRITING 'KNOW-HOW'

The writing process involves so much before you actually reach that final product. People new to writing don't always appreciate that writing is a messy process because it's a thinking process in itself. Good writing does not come out of our heads fully and perfectly formed.

Good writing habits & routine

To get writing done, the most effective tool is routine. Set aside a regular time in your busy schedule for writing production, even if it's just one hour a day. Put barbed wire around that hour – it has top priority and is not to be trespassed by any other activity.

Some people like to write first thing. If you get out of bed early, have the mandatory cup of tea/coffee, and start writing, you'll actually get words on paper. If you write, say, from 6.30am-8am, it's done, and you can get on with being 'busy' for the day. Or you might find that 'official' writing time is most productive in an office environment, 9am-11am. Lots of people find writing in the morning is best, but just as many like to write regularly in the stillness of night when the day's busy-ness is over. Find out what works best for you, and then stick to a writing habit.

Sometimes in that writing time it's easy to know what to go on with, e.g. you're aim is to complete the first draft of a chapter, you'll get as much done each hour as possible. Some people set a word goal for each writing session. Other times, you don't know what to write, or you're exploring ideas. That's OK – always identify what your purpose is in the writing hour, and don't be too anxious about it.

If you know what your purpose is, but you just find it daunting to start, we recommend a bit of 'free writing' to get going (see below).

Free writing

Free writing is fast, "automatic" writing, i.e. it's writing you don't think about. You just do it. Here's how:

Set aside 10-30 mins every day. Make it the same time every day so it becomes part of a routine. You might like to buy an A4 cardboard/paper covered exercise book for the purpose.

The 'rules' always apply:
- Write as fast as you can without stopping.
- Keep the pen moving forward, with absolutely NO stopping to think or correct, no going back, no crossing out.
- Don't bother about punctuation or spelling, just keep writing forward.
- You literally write anything that comes into your head, even it's the words 'blah blah blah' – something else will turn up soon because your mind has evolved to churn out words. All you're doing is getting them down paper, no matter what they are.

This writing is often about nothing important. It serves as a kind of 'detox' of things that are cluttering up your mind. You will often write about anxieties and small everyday concerns, but you might occasionally write a good idea you didn't know you were thinking!

This writing is not intended for keeping. You are meant to throw it into the recycling bin. However, some people recommend keeping a month's worth and then reading over it to identify the issues that are bothering you. This can be a useful tool for self-reflection. (Bear in mind that reading it can be tedious. But don't be alarmed that you have written what is often tedious or whining drivel. At some subconscious level this is cluttering your mind, so it's great to get it out onto paper and throw it away!)

The benefits of free writing are:
- You develop a writing habit. Ten minutes daily writing practice like this develops the 'writing muscle', so you know you can start writing anywhere, any time.
- You learn to NOT be precious about your writing because you throw this writing away. This writing is not meant to be 'good', nor is it meant to be kept. Good writers are willing to let go of a lot of what they write because they know that the poor writing is a necessary stage to pass through in order to reach the 'good' writing.
- Daily practice also builds your resistance to that internal writing censor, the voice that tells you it's too hard, that you'll never do it, or that you must write perfectly every time. By developing the writing habit, you start to ignore that little voice.
- And at some subconscious level, writing like this first thing in the morning somehow works to make you more productive and focussed with all your other work.

The practice of free writing can be adapted for use when you sit down for your daily writing hour/session. If you are having difficulty starting, you can free-write about why you are *not* writing what you want to. Eventually, you'll find yourself writing about the ideas you have, so you end up writing your way *into* writing what you should be writing.

Free writing helps you become comfortable with the idea that the first draft is *necessarily* a mess. The real pleasure of writing is in revising and rewriting, i.e. in cleaning up the mess. You can't really see what you are thinking until it's on the page, and then you can see how to clarify the thought. Again and again!

So free writing helps you begin writing, and you can begin anywhere in the middle of things.

OTHER RESOURCES

A few useful resources are posted on the attached to this guide:

Sample calendar & feedback request form (Learning Development)

Summary email samples (Learning Development)

Requesting, giving & receiving feedback: RMIT Research Writing Group Kit
This is a set of guidelines and resources for students to use in running their own writing groups. It includes a video and downloadable pdf documents.
https://emedia.rmit.edu.au/learninglab/content/research-writing-group-kit
NB: the pdf about 'SLC resources' is specific to RMIT. For SLC substitute Learning Development

Useful things to start writing from the start: Punch, K. (2006). *Developing effective research proposals.* Los Angeles: Sage.

Embracing messy first drafts: Lamott, A. (1994). *Bird by bird: some instructions on writing and life.* New York: Anchor Books

Synthesising Literature (extract) (Learning Development)

We also recommend that you look at the **Learning Development Blackboard.**
Log on to Blackboard > my other sites > Learning Development > Research students.
We continually add resources, so explore. Some menu items, like Assignment Writing Steps, include useful material on reading & note-making strategies, referencing and so on.