

# Tips for Successful Writing Groups

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Writing groups are a powerful tool for peer mentoring, particularly for students in the later stages of their doctoral work. In general, groups meet weekly. One or two group members present their work for discussion at each meeting. In many cases group members are presenting and discussing written work, and the person who is "on" gives a copy of the text to group members 2-3 days in advance. By structuring the group thoughtfully, it can be a useful educational experience. These tips emerged from participation in and discussion with several such groups when I was a graduate student. These are offered as suggestions; each group should use what seems relevant in an effort to meet the needs of its members.

Now that I am moving on in my career, these groups have continued to be important to me: we are beginning to co-author papers with one another, we use electronic media to keep in touch and provide a variety of forms of support for one another, and we continue to share drafts of written work with each other for feedback.

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## Not Another Meeting!

A clear sense of the goals and mission of the group can focus it and make its value immediately apparent.

- Groups are best organized along different lines and themes: Higher Education Research, Feminist Scholars, The Cohort of 1994, etc. Having a shared bond is an important basis for building intellectual trust.
- Select people with a similar commitment to the group. It is very frustrating to be in a session in which half the group is missing.
- A long-term commitment to the group is important. A semester is minimum, a year is better.
- Limit the number of participants. The size of the group should be geared to frequency of presentation. If the group meets weekly, and one person presents their work, and everyone wants to be "on" monthly, a group of 4-7 is best. More people mean less frequent presentation, but less personal pressure. A smaller group can meet every other week.

- A group convener helps: someone to reserve a space, remind people who is "on" and convene the group at the start of terms or after holiday breaks.
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## The Benefits

The benefits of a group usually far outweigh the cost of time and energy. However, at the initiation phase of every group there is a waiting period, as each person determines the usefulness of the group for themselves.

- By meeting as students, without faculty involvement, students develop skills developing an intellectual community, in giving feedback, and developing original research.
  - Peer mentors are often harder critics than faculty. Practicing a proposal defense or conference presentation in a group can help iron out all of the kinks. A group of students familiar with your work ask harder questions than most faculty! It is confidence building to satisfy your peers.
  - A group is a source of emotional support. Because you are all going through the same process, you can understand, vent, bolster, encourage, sympathize and crack the whip. Fellow students are excellent procrastination detectors.
  - A group can become a community in a what may seem to be an uncaring and anonymous university.
  - A group can open up possibilities for research collaboration.
  - A writing group can supplement input from faculty in important ways: Students are also able to give each other time in ways that faculty members are unable to. There are not power imbalances between students as there are between faculty and students.
  - If a group does not meet the needs of a participant, either through content or style, it is OK for that person to leave the group.
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## Nuts and Bolts

By clearly setting the logistical ground rules in advance, the group will be more productive.

- Set specific goals as a group, and discuss these goals and expectations early on. Each member should set specific goals for themselves, as well.
- Select a meeting space conducive to working. A seminar table, a white board and a quiet location are helpful.
- Set a clear schedule 2-3 months in advance. Who will present on which week? What day will the work be available in advance? On occasion of vacations, conferences, finals, it may be better to skip a week or two.
- Determine a convenient location to pick up papers being distributed for feedback.
- Be honest about your ability to commit time at various points in the year.

- Set up an e-mail list to facilitate sending out reminders, requests, updates etc.
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### **The Importance of Having a Watch**

Time is a precious resource for graduate students, so it is important that the group be an efficient and constructive use of everyone's time.

- Be on time.
  - Write regularly. Writing bi-weekly, or monthly can be a good prod to making progress.
  - Produce work when it is your turn. Hand it out in a timely manner, for most thoughtful feedback.
  - Be strict about time keeping within the group. If you only have an hour, agree how the time will be spent, and be firm about moving on to the next topic.
  - Agree on the amount of time each person will spend reading and preparing feedback in advance. Establishing these norms can also help the "on" person focus their requests and the amount of text they provide.
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### **Great Expectations: Building Trust**

A good group has a high level of trust between members. This has to grow and develop; it is earned. There is a difference between a group of colleagues and a good writing group. You can trust it and count on a good writing group, which allows room for other kinds of shared experiences.

- Laugh together.
  - Read each others work in advance. Set aside time to do this thoroughly and thoughtfully, and review it before the meeting.
  - Be honest and thoughtful in your feedback.
  - Hold each other accountable for the commitments you make. Don't accept excuses for not reading work, or for skipping meetings.
  - Don't apologize for your work. Don't be embarrassed by it.
  - A group is a safe place to try out new ideas and present work very much "in progress." Use it to take intellectual risks.
  - Set time to update each other on milestones, triumphs, frustrations, personal lives, etc.
  - Celebrate together.
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### **Specific Techniques**

- Creatively develop and employ the strategies that most effectively motivate you and your group. In one of my groups we mandated that the last person to arrive must bring cookies the following week. This cut tardiness dramatically. We once wrote a timeline for one person's proposal writing, and we all signed it!
- Ask for and give focused feedback. I often attach a cover note to the draft I am handing out explaining what is new, what I am trying to do, and what I would like in the way of specific feedback. I might say: "Please focus on the explanation of and integration of the conceptual framework," or "I really need some positive feedback, so tell me what you particularly like," or "Please be picky about grammar and wording this time." The more clearly you know what you want and can articulate it to others, the more likely you are to get the help you need.
- On some occasions, we have had the "on" person listen and take notes, without responding to the feedback and discussion. This may continue for 30-45 minutes. While it is awkward and frustrating at first to listen to people discuss you as if you weren't there, it can be illuminating to hear the group try to understand and explain your work to each other (rather like discussing a reading in class). This can lead to a nuanced understanding of how you are expressing your ideas which might never emerge if you had been able to respond and explain immediately.
- Have someone else take notes, or tape record the session. This frees the "on" person from having to record the discussion in detail, and allows them to focus on the discussion and their participation.
- Use the group for tasks beyond writing proposals, dissertation chapters and papers. In my groups we have: discussed interview protocol or survey drafts, discussed approaches (which fellowships to apply for), talked about career possibilities, analyzed transcripts, developed timelines, rearranged an outline, practiced presentations for conferences, shared drafts of CVs, discussed how to approach particular faculty members, talked about negotiating the terms of a job offer, etc.
- Alternate bringing snacks to the meeting. This makes the meeting more enjoyable.
- One group took a weekend retreat together. This was a time for team building, and longer discussions of work in progress.
- Maintain a sense of humor. Share funny things when they occur, or when you stumble across them. I frequently spread the odd things that come across my e-mail.

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### **Warning Signs: Possible Pitfalls**

There can be negative aspects to group work. Occasionally conflicts of personality or expectations arise, and must be addressed. Some other pitfalls to be alert for include these.

- The higher education system has its competitive aspects. For example, we compete for the attention of faculty, for fellowships, for plum TA/RA opportunities, for conference presentation slots, and ultimately for jobs. The conundrums of competing with those students with whom we work most closely and cooperatively deserve attention. Clear communication about expectations (Do you tell each other about newly discovered opportunities? Do you share bibliographic information and sources? Do you practice job talks in front of each other or the rest of the group?) and anxieties (acknowledging the presence of competition) is crucial for maintaining

trust.

- Intellectual property rights are increasingly debated on college campuses. If you are studying topics similar to that of other students in your group, it is important to air these issues. How do you acknowledge and cite each other? Who retains the "rights" to ideas developed within the group?
- Conflict may arise, for example, one member may demand more than they give back. Conflict resolution techniques may need to be employed.
- The time of renewal for a group, when considering adding new members, can be a difficult period. Discussions of who to include must be conducted with candor and confidentiality. The integration of new members requires patience.

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