



SAINT LOUIS
UNIVERSITY

Writing Group Starter Kit

STUDENT  **SUCCESS**CENTER

University Writing Services

Writing Group Starter Kit

Getting Your Writing Group Started	2
Twelve Questions to Answer Before You Start	3
Personal Goals Worksheet: Where are you? Where do you want to go?	4
Writing Inventory: What Type of Writer are You? How can a group help?	5
Group Work Inventory: What Does “Group” Mean to You?	6
Finding Time (A Google “Doodle” or other scheduling software works just as well.)	7-8
Activities: Ways to Establish, or Shake-up, a Routine	9-11
Feedback: Getting What you Want and Giving (at least as good) as you Get	12-15
Writing Group Bibliography: A Few Good Resources	16-17

Getting Your Writing Group Started

Writing Groups help writers complete their work by providing a supportive environment for the exchange of critical feedback.

Benefits:

- A group is a source of emotional and professional support. Evidence supports Writing Groups as one of the only ways to improve time-to-degree.
- A group helps keep you accountable.
- A group is a community within a practice (writing) that can be isolating.
- Group members can be sources of new resources, perspectives, and ideas.
- A writing group can help you better understand your own writing process

Difficulties:

- Occasionally conflicts of personality or expectations arise. Participants may have different levels of commitment to the group. Some members may demand more from others than they give back. Remember, if the group does not meet the needs of a participant, for whatever reason, it is OK for that person to leave the group.
- Adding new members can be difficult.
- Writing delays can be frustrating for both the individual and the group

Before the First Meeting:

- Send out a copy of the Starter Kit to all members.

During the First Meeting:

- Introduce Yourself and Your Goals. Give a clear picture of what each member expects from the group.
- Establish the goals and procedures for your group. Use the Twelve Questions to start your conversation on procedures.
- Set the Schedule for the next meeting, and possibly for the foreseeable future.

12 Questions to Answer before You Start a Writing Group

Successful writing groups negotiate a shared understanding of the answers to these questions. Agreement at the outset is a key factor of group longevity.

1. How often (and where) will you meet?
2. How will the members communicate between meetings?
3. Will one person be in charge of facilitating the meetings and the overall structure of the group? What will be the responsibilities of this facilitator? Does this position rotate? How?
4. What system will members use to decide who will submit writing for any particular meeting? (For example, a group of four might meet twice a week, with two people submitting writing for each meeting.)
5. Will members submit writing ahead of time? If so, how will this exchange work?
6. What happens when members who are scheduled to submit writing are unprepared or can't attend the meeting?
7. How short or long should submissions be?
8. What will you do during the meeting? (Will you update goals? Will you take time to write? Will you give feedback one at a time?)
9. At what stage in the writing process may drafts be submitted to the group?
10. What kind of feedback are members most interested in, and how will members specify these needs at any particular point?
11. How will members respond to each other's writing?
12. How will members of the group know that the group is working for everyone?

Personal Goals Worksheet: Where are you? Where do you want to go?

What are your goals as a writer? (What type of writing do you want to complete? What kind of audience do you want to reach? What skills do you need to improve?)

Why are you joining a writing group? (Do you want better (or more regular) feedback? Is this more about making better progress on your writing project? Are you looking to build certain skills?)

How do you think members of the group can best help each other?

Writing Inventory: What Type of Writer are You?

What is your biggest challenge as a writer?

What kinds of critiques about your writing have you received from your readers?

What is your greatest strength as a writer?

What do you do before you write? (What is your routine and what does it mean to “pre-write”?)

How might you improve your preparation?

What does it look like while you are writing? For instance, where do you write? Do you take frequent breaks?

How might you improve your writing process?

Group Work Inventory: What Does “Group” Mean to You?

Share your answers after you are done writing and then create a plan to meet individual needs in this group setting.

Describe a successful experience working in a group that you had in the past. What made it successful?

List three things that could make you want to leave this writing group.

List three things that describe the ideal writing group.

Finding Time

“X out” any times that you would not want to meet regularly.

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
8 AM							
9 AM							
10 AM							
11 AM							
12 PM							
1 PM							
2 PM							
3 PM							
4 PM							
5 PM							
6 PM							
7 PM							
8 PM							
9 PM							

How often would you like to meet with a writing group? Weekly? Every other week?

In general, would you prefer to meet in the morning, the afternoon, or the evening?

Where would you like to meet?

Would you like to meet in the same place every time or to rotate places?

Would you prefer to meet on campus? If so, where?

Activities: Ways to Establish, or Shake-up, a Routine

Accountability and Goal Driven Activities

Mutual support can be one of the most important functions of a writing group. Sometimes encouragement and the knowledge that others are interested in your progress as a writer can be just as helpful as feedback. Some groups may even chose to simply act in this capacity, without giving feedback on writing. In order to facilitate accountability and goal driven meetings, you can do a number of activities:

- Discuss your writing activities since the last meeting. You can do this in terms of pages written, parts of a project completed, or hurdles overcome.
- If you haven't written much since the last meeting, you could talk about the kinds of pre-writing activities you have undertaken (research, reading, editing previous work, meeting with a professor or advisor, etc.). Or you could talk about the obstacles to writing that have hindered your progress. If this is the case, it is especially important to discuss you plan for overcoming these obstacles in the future.
- If your group does feedback, you might use the next session to talk about goals. Each member could explain how work that was discussed during the last meeting is now evolving in response to group comments. You might explain which comments you chose to act on, or tell how a section of the piece has been reorganized or rethought in response to the group's feedback.
- Share your writing plans for the coming week or two so that you can help one another stick to your goals.

Feedback Activities

You can always use group time to read text and give feedback if the text is short, but most writing groups that are focused on giving feedback ask members to distribute their work in advance of the group meeting. Readers can offer the most helpful feedback when the writer has provided a list of questions, trouble spots, or issues for them to consider in their responses.

- Individuals can be responsible for preparing their own list of questions for each submission and submitting those to the group along with the writing.
- The group may decide to create a standard list of questions for each submission.

- Group members could write comments and suggest editorial changes on their copies of the paper and give those to the writer during the group meeting.
- Group members can email a short paragraph of feedback prior to the meeting so that the group has a starting point for discussion.
- Group members can prepare a written response to the paper in the form of a letter to the writer, or on a form developed by the group.
- Group members could respond verbally to the piece, each offering a personal, overall reaction to writing before opening the discussion to a broader give-and-take.
- You could go through the piece paragraph-by-paragraph or section-by-section, with each reader offering comments and suggestions for improvement.
- The author could come prepared with a list of questions for the group and lead a discussion based on those questions.
- Read the paper aloud to the group before launching discussion. The author could read, or another member of the group could read while the author notes things that sound like they might need revision. You could either read the entire text or break it into chunks, discussing each after it is read.
- Group members could also read silently, making notes to themselves, before launching the discussion.
- Read the first paragraph or first section aloud and have everyone in the group briefly write down what he or she thinks the paper will be about or what he or she thinks the thesis of the paper is. Share those responses in discussion.

Brainstorming Activities

Writing groups can also help you problem-solve your writing troubles. Your group might try some of these brainstorming ideas:

- Identify a writing problem that one group member is having. Ask each group member to free-write possible solutions.
- Cut up a copy of a paper that needs organizational changes so that each section, main idea, or paragraph is on its own slip of paper. As a group, move the pieces of paper around and discuss possible options for reorganizing the work.
- After reading a piece, generate a list of items that the group might like to know more about. Organize these questions into categories for the author to consider.

Writing Activities

Your writing group may choose to write during some of its meetings. Here are some ideas for what to write:

- If everyone in the group has a major deadline approaching, use one session as a working meeting. Meet in a computer lab or other location in which everyone can write and work independently, taking breaks periodically to assess your progress or ask questions.
- Use some writing group time to free-write about your writing project—new ideas, to-do lists, organizational strategies, problems, or sentences for your drafts would all be appropriate topics for free-writing.
- Free-write about the writing process (you could all write about "How I start to write" or "The writing environment that works for me" or "When I sit down to edit ...") and share your responses with one another.
- Write about the dynamics of the writing group as a way of getting everyone's ideas out on paper. You could free-write about the kinds of feedback that help you, what you like about each other's writing, your frustrations with the group, and your suggestions for improving the way the group works.
- Spend a few minutes of each meeting practicing a new writing or editing technique you would like to explore.

Planning Activities

Your writing group can also help you plan your writing schedule for the week:

- Discuss your writing goals, both broadly and for the immediate future. Ask your group if those goals seem realistic.
- Ask group members to e-mail you with reminders of deadlines and encouragement.
- Your group can have a group calendar that acts as a kind of "promise board" for what each member will get done.

Feedback: Getting What You Want and Giving (at least as good) as You Get

Feedback is the core of what Writing Groups do. It is often cited as one of the main reasons why people join Writing Groups in the first place. Feedback is a way for people to learn how their writing effectively communicates ideas, but feedback itself is a communicative art. When vaguely worded, people who ask for feedback may not get the specific answers they need. When harshly phrased, people who give feedback may not get their message across. When unwilling or unprepared to listen to feedback, people who receive feedback may not experience the benefits of the process. All members should strive to give better feedback than they receive and accept feedback in the moment, even if it is destined to be rejected shortly thereafter.

ASKING FOR FEEDBACK: THE FEEDBACK REQUEST

WHEN SUBMITTING WRITING AHEAD OF TIME, notify your readers in advance what they ought to look for before they read. If you circulate the text via email, send the document with questions in the body of the email and the text attached. The following format can help you frame your questions:

SUMMARY AND GOAL: Provide a brief summary of your argument (one sentence) and what you would like to accomplish in this piece or in this stage of writing.

BIGGEST WEAKNESS: Explain what you think is the biggest weakness in the chapter or section.

PRIORITIZED FEEDBACK LIST: Help your readers prioritize their response by providing a short list of the kind of feedback that would be most helpful at this stage. Identify your “big picture” concerns. Ask readers to address your big concerns first. Then, let them know your smaller concerns. Finally, give them a few things they don’t need to address.

Make sure your requests are realistic. Don’t ask your readers, for instance, to proofread 15 pages of text. You want to ask for feedback that will keep you writing.

GIVING FEEDBACK

How you deliver feedback is as important as how you ask for feedback. In a writing group, the relationship that you build amongst the members should be one of trust, respect, and engagement.

- The worst kind of feedback in the context of a writing group is feedback that is delivered in the form of an attack. Rather than offering aggressive demands that focus on weaknesses, look to provide suggestions and solutions to problems you see in a piece of writing. Even better, if you can say something positive before and after someone delivers a criticism, it is more likely to be received in the spirit you intend. You might start with “To me, the best-written part of this piece was. . .” move on to “I do, however, think that the section on X could have been stronger” and then close with “The most interesting idea in this chapter to me was Y.” If you acknowledge your group members’ goals and intentions while framing your feedback as your personal response (“I think...”), you should be able to stay supportive.
- We have all received feedback that is too general. When you have no idea how to act on a suggestion, it is a good bet that the feedback was too general. If group members can focus on particular, concrete suggestions, it will be easier to keep writing. Taking the time to provide a clear solution can sometimes make all the difference.
- Avoid statements that might suggest a personal weakness: “You do not seem to be able to...” should be replaced with “The section on X might be missing.”
- Too many suggestions can be overwhelming. Offer 3-4 suggestions and allow the writer to go back and spend time revising.
- Remember, when you are giving feedback the writing does not belong to you. You want your advice to be taken, but if your fellow group member decides not to take your advice you should not be offended or even concerned.

TAKING FEEDBACK

While you will not accept or act on all feedback, you should try to be positive and open in the manner you receive feedback. Entertain your groups ideas, even if your first instinct is to reject them.

Listen to the entire feedback first. Write down notes and questions. Listen without frequent interruption or objections. Try to respond or ask follow-up questions only after the speaker has finished. Remember that your Writing Group is trying to help you become a better writer.

Be an active listener. Listen carefully and try to understand the meaning of the feedback.

Be engaged. If anything is unclear, restate your understanding of what you thought the speaker said.

Be respectful. Try not to be too defensive. While one reader's response may be the result of that reader's own misunderstanding, their perspective as a reader deserves attention. If several readers agree that a section is confusing, the problem probably lies in the writing.

You can even keep a feedback log. You can use a log to keep track of the kinds of feedback you get in your writing. Do readers often suggest changes in organization? Do people frequently tell you that they don't understand words that you use? Do readers praise your clarity? You can then start to

Identify patterns of the kinds of feedback you receive again and again so that you can locate problems and strengths in your writing, and

Address the problems with writing guides, your Writing Group, or visiting University Writing Services.