

SETTING UP A WRITING GROUP

Strategies for Maximising Your Success
Student Academic Skills
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Student Academic Skills

This booklet is an introduction to some of the skills and strategies that will help you successfully complete your studies at Otago.

Based on an original booklet developed by Associate Professor Clinton Golding for Student Academic skills at the University of Otago.

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Participating in a writing group is a great way to enable you to write your thesis quickly and effectively, to be a prolific writer, and to have a successful thesis experience. Writing a thesis can be a lonely experience, and a writing group provides the support you need to do well. But you may not find a group you can join, so it is most likely you will have to set up your own writing group. This short guide will help you to decide what sort of group you might want, and how to set one up.

A community of writers

The social aspect of a writing group is the foundation for setting up such a group. It is essential to create a trusting and safe community of writers. Take the time to get to know each other and meet in a place where everyone is comfortable—a café perhaps. However, you can also set up distance writing groups where the group meets via web conferencing.

There are three major types of writing groups. Your group might write together, offer peer support for writing, or share feedback about writing.

1. Shut up and write

In one kind of writing group, the group schedules regular times when they meet and write together. For example, 25 minutes writing, then five minutes to chat and then 25 minutes writing. It's very motivating to write in the presence of other writers, and very hard to procrastinate.

Members of the writing group will be more productive when they 'shut up and write' if they understand the three different purposes of writing, and if they do only one kind of writing at a time.

Many writers struggle because they are trying to figure out what they want to say *and at the same time* they try to make their writing clear and interesting for an academic audience *and at the same time* they try to polish and edit their writing. This is an almost impossible task, and writers are more productive when they do only one kind of writing at a time.

1. Writing for yourself: Writing your ideas so they become clearer and you know what you want to say. Writing through a problem, writing

your questions and hypothesising answers. You don't worry about spelling, grammar, what language you use, or even whether you're writing proper sentences.

2. Writing for an audience: Once you have figured out what you want to say by writing for yourself, you then *rewrite* so that it will be clear, interesting and convincing for a reader. Draft chapters, applications and papers so the reader will understand.
3. Editing and reviewing: Revising your drafts for style and grace. When you're writing for yourself or for an audience, don't get distracted trying to find references or the right word, or the best way to structure the sentence. When you're tired and bored with writing, you can edit what you've written.

If you separate these writing tasks, and tackle them one at a time, you'll produce good quality writing faster than if you try to do them all at once. You have to throw away a lot of 'rubbish' from the early stages, but you'll produce polished writing more quickly.

In a 'shut up and write' session ask those in the group to do only one type of writing at a time. In the early stages of a writing project, they might write for themselves most of the time. In the later stages they may mostly be editing.

2. Motivation and support for writing

Writing groups provide the members with the support they need to be more productive with their writing. Your group might provide peer support to deal with the difficulties of writing, and motivational support to keep you in the habit of writing.

Productive writers don't *find* time to write, they *schedule* time and then stick to this schedule. So, at a writing group meeting, have all the members publically schedule the writing they'll do over the next week and record this schedule. For example, "I'll write for 2 hours on Wednesday and Thursday morning from 9-11, and one hour from 9-10 on the other week days". For some people, scheduling the amount of time to write per day is enough, and they fit it in when they can. However, if a

writer often does not meet their writing targets, then they need to schedule the *exact* times they will write and put these in their time-table – for example write for 30 minutes per day from 9-9.30.

Keep your scheduled writing times short and achievable. To build up the habit of writing, start with small blocks of time that are easy to achieve – for example 30 minutes, or one hour, or even 15 minutes if time is short. A lot can be achieved in small focussed blocks of writing. Avoid scheduling unrealistically large blocks of time for writing, unless you're sure you will stick to this schedule. It's difficult to keep writing for large blocks of time, and if you don't manage to you'll lose motivation and may write less than if you scheduled shorter blocks of time.

Break writing tasks into manageable milestones, and you can also share your intended milestones in the writing group. It's difficult to see any progress if your goal is to 'finish the thesis' or 'finish the chapter'. Nothing you write will feel like you have achieved anything because there is so much more still to do. It's better to have smaller goals that are milestones towards the main goal. For example, 'complete a draft of the abstract', 'write about this theme for 30 minutes', or 'edit 3 pages'. When you complete these shorter goals you will have a sense of achievement and this will motivate you to write more.

In the writing group, publicly report back how well you did with your writing schedule. Refer back to what you said you would do and discuss whether you did this, and what challenges you faced. Then, get support from the writing group to overcome any challenges for the next week.

Celebrate success at the writing group and share tips about how to meet scheduled writing goals. Celebrate when someone meets their writing schedule, as well as any other writing achievements such as finishing a task or getting published. Share suggestions about how someone might better meet their goals.

3. Swapping feedback to improve your writing

When you're comfortable talking about your writing and offering writing suggestions in your group, you can then start swapping your writing and giving each other feedback.

There are a variety of ways you can give and receive feedback in a writing group, depending on whether you read a sample of writing before the group meeting or during, how much writing you read, and how many people receive feedback per session. For example, you might all read a sample of writing from one member of the writing group before you meet, and then all give feedback in the meeting. If it's a short sample, you might be able to give feedback to two people per session. Alternatively, you might all bring a short sample, go into pairs during your meeting, swap writing and then give feedback to your partner.

The members of some writing groups read guidebooks about writing, and this gives them a shared vocabulary for talking about writing and offering feedback. They can also practice the writing exercises together. See the reading list for some examples of guidebooks.

You'll improve your writing by *getting* feedback. Your writing has to convince your reader (and for a thesis, your reader is your examiner). It's not enough for *you* to think that your writing is clear, interesting and important. How do you know that your writing will convince your readers? The only way is to give it to a reader. So, in the writing group you can test your writing with readers. Do they consider your writing to be a clear, interesting, good read? Their feedback will be invaluable for you to judge how to refine your writing so it works for a reader.

It's important to be clear about the kind of feedback you want, and ask for this feedback. For example, if the writing is an early draft you might ask for feedback about the structure and not about the spelling and grammar. For example, when you share your writing for feedback you might write: "I am after feedback about the structure – please ignore the details of the sentences" OR "Can you give me feedback on whether my

argument is clear, and whether it is convincing (I'll fix up the references and sentence construction later).”

You'll also improve your writing by *giving* feedback. You'll get better at noticing the difference between clear and unclear writing, and between reader-friendly and difficult writing, and this new discernment will help you improve your own writing.

Giving and receiving feedback

Giving and receiving feedback can be difficult, so here are a few pointers:

Give feedback about the reaction you had to the writing. The writer needs to know how a reader reacts to their writing. What did the reader struggle with, what confused them, and what did they find clear and interesting? So, instead of making a judgement about the quality of the writing, give feedback about the reaction you had to the writing.

“I was confused by this.”

“I found that really clear.”

“I couldn't tell what you meant here.”

“I couldn't follow this sentence.”

“I could see that you were making five important points here.”

You might also give feedback in the form of the questions you had about the writing:

“What was the main point of this paragraph?”

“What do you mean by ...?”

“Why did you write this here?”

Using feedback to improve is a normal and necessary step in any academic writing, regardless of how good the writer is. Use any feedback to figure out how you can make your writing more reader-friendly.

When you receive feedback, treat it as a valuable insight into whether your writing works for an intelligent reader. You might get annoyed at the feedback at first (“That sentence was perfectly clear! Can't they read?”), or you might get disheartened (“My writing must be terrible! They can't understand what I'm saying!”). Both of these reactions are normal. Let

the initial reaction pass over you, and then look at the feedback as an opportunity to hone, refine and improve your writing.

Regardless of how good you think your writing is, if your readers think it is unclear and unconvincing, your examiners will likely have the same reaction unless you rewrite and clarify. This is the gift of feedback—it gives you ways to improve your writing. If an intelligent reader had a problem with your writing, then there is something that can be improved. You have to figure out what was unclear or confusing and then rewrite to make it better. Sometimes you may have used a word that gave the wrong impression of what you meant, or an ambiguous sentence structure, or you hid the main point in the paragraph so the reader can't find it.

When you have received feedback you might try explaining out-loud what you really meant. For example, “Oh, you couldn't understand why I wrote that there? Well, I needed to show that there were three main points about x, and this was the first one.” Pay careful attention to whatever you had to explain out-loud to your reader because this should be included in your writing. For example, you may have to add to your writing: “There are three main uses of x which I discuss in the next three paragraphs.” If the reader could not follow your writing without the explanation out-loud, then that explanation should be written for the reader.

Getting started

You may be lucky enough to know of a writing group which you can join. Chances are though, you'll have to set up a writing group yourself. You might start small with 2-4 people. Perhaps people from your own department, or others with the same supervisor, or people you have met at a postgraduate workshop. Talk with the postgraduate co-ordinator in your department, or the postgraduate representative (if there is one). They may be able to provide some support for you or they might be able to get an email list of people you can invite to join. Alternatively, the Graduate Research School may be able to send out an email to thesis students on your behalf. Members of the writing group need not be from the same department or even from the same division. You just need

someone else who is writing their thesis and willing to join the kind of group you want to set up. When you contact someone who might be interested in joining, tell them the kind of group you want to set up, and the amount of time involved.

Here is a draft version of an invitation to join a writing group:

Do you want to write your thesis quickly and effectively? Do you want to be a prolific writer? Do you want a successful thesis experience?

To write a thesis you need to write often and you need to write well, but for most of us this is not easy. I would be delighted if you would join myself and a small group of writers so we can tackle the challenge of writing in a supportive but rigorous community of writers. Together we can better enable each other to enhance the quantity and the quality of our writing.

We will meet regularly at and during our meetings we will ...

The experience of one writing group

Writing is often a solo experience, particularly for doctoral students. But a writing group allows you to feel less alone: It allows you to connect with your peers; it encourages you to prioritise writing over other commitments; and it provides a platform for supportive feedback. And, the change of scenery, be it a café or seminar room, is sometimes all you need to get the words flowing on the page.

Setting up a writing group is actually a very simple task. All you need is a quiet space, your laptop, and your fellow writers. The difficulty is gaining commitment from members in your group, and settling on a structure that best suits your group's writing aims. Our group of postgrads has tried a number of types of writing group over the last year. We had occasional writing sessions where we wrote together and sometimes we gathered to share our writing. Whilst these approaches were all moderately successful, they did not suit the needs of our group. What we needed was a regular dedicated timeslot with enough flexibility to accommodate our different commitments during the year.

The latest structure for our writing group is a weekly three-hour session, every Monday from 9am to 12 noon, where members can join or leave at any time during the session. This flexible approach and the frequency of the sessions allows for everyone to participate when it suits them. The three-hour session provides an environment entirely dedicated to writing and this is what most appeals to us. The simple presence of your peers writing quietly seems to stimulate a focused approach to your own writing (and writing on Monday morning is a great way to kick-start your writing routine for the rest of the week). The supportive environment also allows us to share any concerns regarding our research/writing; and we are able to gather feedback on pieces of written work when required. This collegial approach to the task of writing is “one of the best motives” for attending a group writing session, according to Hamid, one of our group’s regular attendees. And we all agree that our writing experience is a little less lonely now.

Higher Education Development Centre thesis writing group 2016: Tracy Rogers, Hamidreza Mahroeian, Farah Shawkat, Raewyn Lesa, and Farhana Abu Bakar

Some further reading about writing and writing groups

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