What You Need to Know About Writing Groups

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Agenda/Topics to be Discussed

▶ General information on writing groups (what they are and what they do)

▶ Writing group rationale: why have them?

▶ Creating a writing group

▶ Types of writing groups

▶ Setting group expectations

▶ The art of giving (and receiving) feedback on writing

General Information on Writing Groups

- What is a writing group?
  - Very generally, a writing group is a group of people who gather together to discuss the writing that they are working. Writing groups can take many shapes and sizes, but tonight, we'll keep our discussion to academic peer writing groups.
  - Academic peer writing groups are composed of classmates or academic peers who are working on group or individual writing projects. Group meetings happen regularly or per the group's established rules.
  - During a writing group meeting, group members' writing:
    - Can be discussed and workshopped by other group members
    - Can happen during the meeting time
    - Doesn't have to be shared

Why Join a Writing Group?

- Get valuable feedback on your writing.

- Be accountable to your own writing project(s).

- Receive encouragement from group members and engage in community-building.

- Brainstorm or overcome "writer's block" by seeking input from the group.

- Get to know and/or refine your writing process.

- **Bottom line: Writing groups can improve or enhance your writing.**

Creating a Writing Group Step 1: Intentional Recruitment

► For an academic writing group, the easiest way to create a writing group is to form one with your classmates. This is even easier to accomplish if your professor embeds them as an activity or part of the course curriculum.

► At this stage in your academic journey, you should look to form a group with members coming from the same academic discipline because the language/discourse and content are specialized/disciplinary. In other words, you want members who understand the concepts you are discussing and have a shared discourse for how to talk and write about those concepts/results/findings.

► If you need help creating a writing group, contact me.

Creating a Writing Group Step 1: Intentional Recruitment & Joining Considerations

- Questions to consider as you recruit:
  - What do I want out of the writing group? What are my personal and professional reasons for wanting to participate in a writing group?
  - What do I want the group to help me with?
  - What can I contribute to the group?
  - Do I want members from the same academic discipline as me? Why or why not?
  - How will having members from the same (or different) discipline enhance my writing? How could this disrupt my writing goals?
  - How often can I afford to meet?
  - When can I meet and for how long?
  - Where can I meet? Where will we meet?
  - How long do I anticipate this group lasting?

Creating a Writing Group Step 1: Intentional Recruitment

- Once you've recruited potential members, you have to decide on the group's size. Group size is important because it affects the functionality of the group, which ultimately impacts its success. Factors to consider include:

    - The length of writing group meetings

    - The frequency of writing group meetings

    - The style of writing group meetings

credit: Getty

Creating a Writing Group Step 2: Determine Your Writing Group Style

- Now that you have potential members, you need to decide on the style of your writing group (this can be a group conversation with potential members or you can plan for this from the start). There are many types of writing groups, but the ones I'll be discussing today are as follows:

  - *Writing Practice Groups*, aka *Shut Up & Write Groups*

  - *Writing Workshop/Feedback Groups*

  - *Social or Support Writing Groups*

  - *Accountability Writing Groups*

  - *Hybrid Writing Groups*

Writing Group Styles

▶ *Writing Practice Groups,* aka *Shut Up & Write Groups*: these are just regularly scheduled times to write where group members show up at the same time and place and simply spend that time writing

Writing Group Styles

- *Writing Workshop/Feedback Groups*: members share their work and give and receive feedback

Writing Group Styles

- *Social or Support Writing Groups*: members share their writing challenges and successes, but drafts aren't exchanged and feedback specific to the writing isn't given, if facilitated by a writing expert, writing instruction and exercises may be given
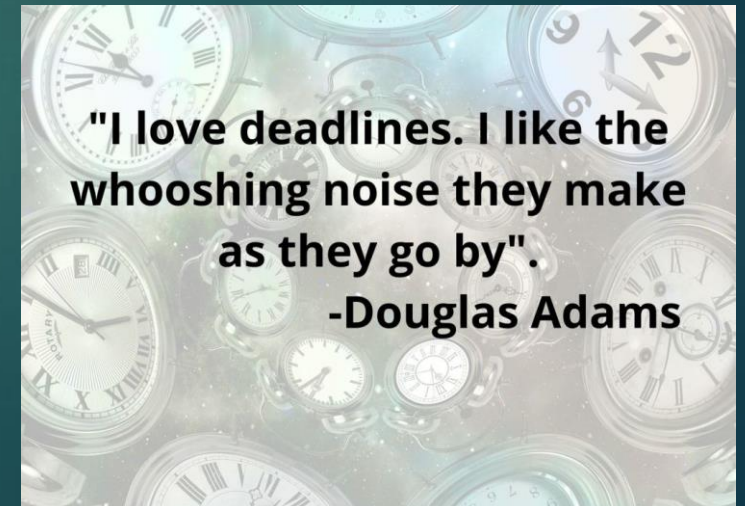
Writing Group Styles

▶ *Accountability Writing Groups*: members use meetings to function as deadlines. They report on their progress to group members, ask for encouragement, discuss challenges and successes, might discuss writing specifically

Writing Group Styles

- *Hybrid Writing Groups*: a combination of any of the above styles of writing groups

"I love deadlines. I like the whooshing noise they make as they go by".
-Douglas Adams

# Creating a Writing Group Step 3: Make Rules and Set Expectations

▶ In order for the writing group to function effectively, you need to set some ground rules for all members. These rules can be as loose or strict as you want them to be, but they need to be written and agreed upon by the whole group.

▶ You also need to decide whether there will be consequences for group members who break the rules, and if so, what the consequences will be.

▶ All of this needs to happen either before the first meeting or during the first meeting.

▶ Establish a meeting schedule and location and stick to it.

▶ Befriend discipline ☺

▶ https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/writing-groups/writing-group-starter-kit/

Experiences with Feedback

▶ Do you like receiving feedback? Why or why not? Or does it vary with the context?

▶ Recall a time when you had a positive experience with feedback. What made it a good experience?

▶ Recall a time when you had a negative experience with feedback. What made it a bad experience?
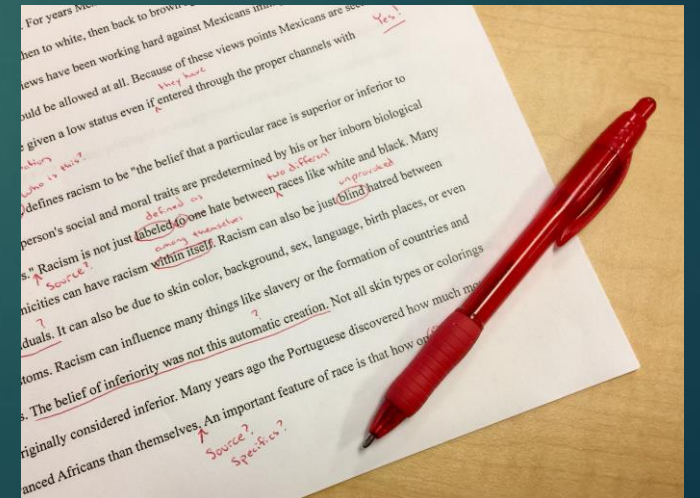
Framing Writing Workshop/Feedback Groups

- "Workshops are like relationships in many respects: they can be healthy or unhealthy, productive or unproductive, a fusing of minds or a battle of egos. A healthy, intimate relationship is one where you feel as much enthusiasm for what your partner brings to the table as for what you yourself bring, right? That's what a good workshop can be."
  -Patrick Ryan

How to Provide Feedback to Peers in Your Writing Group

- Plagiarism needs to be our first concern here. We don't want to plagiarize by intentionally or accidentally writing group members' papers as we review them. To avoid getting in a possible plagiarism situation, here's how we need to review our peers' work:

  - Refrain from using track changes. Instead, use the comment function (Word and Google Docs).

  - After reviewing the work, write a brief letter, or endnote (2 short paragraphs total, more if you feel so inclined). If you don't want to write a letter, then use bullet points. The first paragraph should contain your thoughts about what succeeded in the writing. The more specific you are, the better. The second paragraph should be about what you **suggest** should be improved.

  - Writing this letter/bullet points may seem like an extra step, but it's not. Doing this work will help you have a constructive yet kind conversation about each other's work, and being able to have a good conversation like this is crucial to the writer's success, as well as the group's success.

The Art of Giving & Receiving Feedback

Do

- Realize that we are all in our drafting phase. Be a friendly reader and leave comments that are appropriate for this stage of the paper.

- Be specific about what is working effectively or what could be improved upon.

- Respond as a reader. You can do this by writing, "As a reader, I'm having a hard time seeing the connection between x and y" or "As a reader, I really enjoyed reading about how your feature impacts your writing, but I want to know more about x."

- Make suggestions, but don't tell the writer what to do. Ultimately, it is their paper, not yours.

- Leave positive comments in addition to constructive comments.

- Focus on global concerns (the ideas of the paper). Your role is not that of a line editor.

- Comment in the margins of the paper.

Don't

- Be mean-spirited when reviewing someone's work. It doesn't benefit them or you to have that kind of attitude.

- Leave one-word comments such as "vague", "expand", "awk/awkward" or "revise". These comments are more confusing to a writer than helpful, and honestly, they reflect laziness on the part of the reviewer.

- Use signs, symbols, or other markings as feedback. It's never clear what is meant by circling something, underlining, leaving a ? or a !

- Use didactic language such as "you should do this" or "don't do that", or "If I was writing this, I wouldn't have done x, y, z". There are other ways to leave feedback that isn't so pushy or controlling. It's not your paper after all.

- Fixate on local concerns (grammar, spelling, mechanics) unless the paper is nearly unreadable because of these things.

- Overly comment. Too much feedback can be overwhelming and demotivating for a writer.

- Take feedback too personally.

Sample In-text Feedback

In the various homes/families, we equally had activities which included: fetching water and firewood for our homes, hygiene and sanitation, storytelling in the evenings, singing and dancing, and assisting our mothers in the kitchen. Informal education was an important part of our home activities after our evening meals. We learned the Mankon language, Mankon heroes, Mankon tales, traditional dances, Mankon tradition with respect to marriages, death celebrations, annual traditional festivals, preparation of special traditional dishes, courtship, how to take care of babies, succession in event of death, how to preserve harvested crops, First Aid for minor injuries, medicinal plants, and their uses, moral values, ethics, respect for the elder, love for the fatherland, community spirit, traditional institutions, wine tapping, leadership skills, etc. The informal education acquired played an important role in the western education we had in school.

In addition to informal education, we had other activities such as monetary contributions and savings to be shared at the end of each year. Apart from rearing a few cattle, goats, and pigs, my father was a regular wine tapper. The wine he tapped brought in little income because most of this precious white liquid was for local consumption. It also served as refreshment for visitors or his fellow quarter friends. In our society of today, we serve visitors a drink whenever they visit our homes. My father spent most of his time drinking palm wine from his raffia palm bush, relaxing after meals, during any celebration - deaths, births, marriages, annual traditional festivals. There were

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This phrasing makes me think that you are going to list chores, but your list includes a mix of chores and leisurely activities, so you might want to think about rephrasing "we equally had activities".

Endicott, Kelsie J
This is a pretty comprehensive list, but it doesn't do much for the experience of the reader. As a reader, I want to see what, for example, annual traditions looked like. What are examples of medicinal plants? How did they heal people? What are the moral values? The list is almost a way into a deeper conversation/narrative about this important culture of Mankon that I want to know more about. To see better through your eyes since you are the storyteller.

Endicott, Kelsie J
I bet it did! I want to know why and how.

Endicott, Kelsie J
More details please. What does this taste like? Smell like? Is it good?

Sample Letter

- Dear [insert writer's name here],

  Thank you for sharing your draft with me. I think the findings that you discussed have a lot of potential to impact how professors teach writing in higher education. Generally speaking, the writing is clear and easy to read. I liked how you thoroughly explained your findings by using multiple sources of data as evidence and by making connections across participants to evidence your claims/findings. I especially liked the table you included on page 13 because that allowed me to quickly and easily see all of the resources that writers used as they drafted their assignments. I think this draft is off to a great start.

  As for areas of improvement, I struggled a bit with understanding how you analyzed your data. I know that you engaged in multiple cycles of coding, but I wanted to know the names of the codes you used and why you used them. I believe that you put a lot of work into analysis, but as a reader, I don't get enough information about it, and so you could be more detailed in your method section about this. I also wondered how your findings can be applied to teaching situations. You did provide suggestions for future research, which I found helpful, but I want to know more concretely about takeaways that educators can put into practice now.

  Overall, I enjoyed reading your draft and think that with a bit more polishing, it'll be ready for publication.

  See you next week,

  [insert your name here]

Resources and Contact Information

▶ Guides for starting a writing group: https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/writing-groups/writing-group-starter-kit/

▶ UMES's Graduate Writing Center: https://wwwcp.umes.edu/grad/graduate-writing-center/

▶ UMES's Graduate Writing Center resources: https://wwwcp.umes.edu/grad/writing-resources/

▶ Writing support for graduate students: https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/graduate_writing/index.html

▶ My contact: Dr. Kelsie Endicott, kjendicott@umes.edu; EASC 3047 (located in the School of Graduate Studies suite)

Questions?

- Please join my study!

SCAN ME