



THE WRITING CENTER

Academic Services • Phone: 962-7710

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Writing Groups: Guidelines for Writing Group Mentors

As you know, writing is one of the most important skills that undergraduates will learn at Carolina. Independent writing groups can help students realistically evaluate their own writing, develop a strong writing process, learn to draft and edit carefully, become supportive and insightful critics of one another's work, and improve their writing and course performance in a variety of academic disciplines. As a mentor, you can help these independent groups get going, resolve problems that might emerge during the course of the year, suggest activities for group meetings, and model good writing and response strategies for group participants. The following tips can help you make the most of your writing group mentor experience:

- ✓ Let the group help you figure out your role. Some groups may want you to sit in with them, offer feedback on their writing, and share your own writing from time to time. Others may want their mentor to help them get started but then stand back and allow the group to evolve as it will with minimal intervention. Be honest about your time commitments and how often you are able and willing to meet with the group, and listen to their comments about the kind of mentor that they want. Don't feel badly if you cannot attend all or even most of the group meetings--remember that the goal of a writing group is to move students toward independent learning. The group should be able to function apart from you. Expressing your interest, helping them get started, and being there (via e-mail or in person) from time to time to answer their questions can be all the mentoring that a lot of groups will really need.

- ✓ Use your own writing history as a guide. Think about the struggles you have had as a writer--either now or when you were an undergraduate or graduate student. Remember the obstacles that challenged you and the solutions that you found. Think about your own writing process now and the tips and strategies that help you write and edit effectively. Sometimes writing habits become so ingrained that they seem to happen effortlessly, and we forget about the small steps that, when put together, make up our writing process. Try to deconstruct your own process so that the students in your writing group can learn from it. How many days before a deadline do you start to write it? What strategies do you use for generating ideas (free-writing, talking out loud to yourself, chatting with a friend, drawing diagrams or flow charts, etc.)? When you sit down to write, when, where, and under what conditions do you feel the most comfortable? What are the steps in your editing process? How do you use feedback to improve your own writing? Your process may not work for every student, but a discussion of your writing process may help all of them think about their own

processes, strengths, and weaknesses.

- ✓ A lot of students are under the misguided impression that only poor writers struggle. Many think that good writers are born, not made, and that good writers somehow have a magical writing gene that enables them to write perfect prose without effort or revision. You can help dispel the myth of the writing gene by being honest about your own struggles as a writer and maybe even by sharing some of your own early-stage writing. Doing so may take a bit of courage, but your students will benefit from seeing that someone they consider an expert writer has troubles in early drafts, revises, and needs the feedback of others to succeed.
- ✓ You can share almost any kind of writing with your students. Your research may be of interest to a group of advanced students majoring in their field. You might also share writing that is geared toward a less specialized audience, like a grant application that might go out to a group of reviewers from different academic fields. You could also ask students to read and comment on your syllabus or writing assignments, giving you feedback about their clarity and style. Of course, you could also share your own creative or personal writing as well.
- ✓ When you do attend meetings, step out of grading mode and participate as a fellow, albeit more experienced, writer. Find ways to encourage students to write, help them push their ideas further, nurture their own critical insight, and allow them to develop as writers and editors of their own prose. Balance constructive critiques with the kinds of encouragement and praise that will foster good feelings about writing.
- ✓ Stay in touch with your group, even if you don't meet with them regularly. Send out a group e-mail periodically to ask you the students' writing is going, send out pieces of your own writing to share with the group, or meet students for coffee informally. Any interested contact that you can make with students will send the message that your engagement with their writing is sincere and sustained.
- ✓ Capitalize on the novelty of the concept of a writing group with your students and the potential it has to transform them as writers. While most students feel reluctant or uncomfortable about sharing their writing at first, the Writing Group packet provides a wealth of activities, guidance, and structures to help them make effective use of their time and talents. Use the handouts in our Writing Groups packet to allow students to get to know one another, build up some trust, and map out their preferences for the group's meetings before commenting on writing directly. Acknowledge the difficulties in sharing one's writing and help students ease their way into that process by offering a great deal of praise and supportive feedback early on.
- ✓ Feel free to call the Writing Center staff for assistance in working with your writing group. Staff members can meet with you to discuss strategies, meet with your group (with or without the mentor present), and offer additional resources for mentors and

writing groups. Call us at 962-7710 and check out our website at <http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb>.