



THE WRITING CENTER

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Writing Groups: Writing Exercises

Your writing group may want to spend some of its meeting time actually writing. Writing your responses to different kinds of writing prompts and exercises can provide your group with material to discuss in your meetings, even when no one has brought a draft for the group to read. Using writing exercises can also help you develop an effective writing process and practice various components of your writing process in a relatively stress-free and productive way. Comparing your responses can help you get to know the other group members better and learn from one another in a constructive setting. Below are several writing exercises that your group might try. You could spend anywhere from five minutes to an hour on these exercises, depending on your interest and the directions your conversations take.

Writing About Your Group

By writing about the writing group, the way it is working, and the policies that you have established, your group can get to know one another's preferences better, resolve potential problems, and learn to work together more effectively.

- ✓ If you could change one thing about this writing group, what would it be? Spend five minutes writing your answers to this question, explaining why you feel the way you do in your response. Discuss the answers with the group - you may find that several of you had the same idea, but just hadn't brought it up in conversation.
- ✓ Spend five minutes writing down ideas for your writing group's name, sketching ideas for its logo, or listing possibilities for its theme song. Names, logos, theme songs, and other symbols can provide a fun way for your group to solidify its meaning for participants and help you start a conversation about what the group means to you and what you want to get out of your participation in it.
- ✓ Write a paragraph about what you like about each member's writing and what you like about the feedback each member provides on your writing.

Writing About Your Writing Process

Every writer is different and so, too, is every writer's writing process. Writing about and talking about your processes with one another can help you think about your own process more concretely and learn from each other's strategies.

- ✓ Imagine the perfect writing situation for you and describe it in as much detail as possible. Where is it? What time of day? What sounds do you hear? What objects surround you? What are you using to write? What can you see when you look up from your writing? How do you feel? Try to explain why this situation would be so comforting and productive for you.
- ✓ Think about a piece of writing that you felt really good about - a writing success story. Write about the process you used to craft the piece, the feedback you received on it, and the feeling of writing success. Why do you think this piece was successful? What was good about it? What can you learn from that success that will help you in future writing?
- ✓ Start a five-minute writing activity with this sentence: The most important piece of writing advice I ever received was ...

Writing About a Specific Piece of Writing

Instead of writing text that will become a part of a paper, it is sometimes helpful to write about the paper itself. Doing so can help you find trouble spots, solidify some of your ideas, and figure out a useful organization before you start writing the paper.

- ✓ Use free-writing to generate ideas for your paper. Free-writing involves simply putting pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard) for a specified period of time and writing without worrying about spelling, punctuation, organization, or whether or not you're even making sense. If you run out of things to write, just write, "I can't think of what to write" until you think of something to say. Let your imagination take the writing wherever it happens to go. You can free-write about your topic generally, or about a specific part of your paper. Some good starts for free-writing can be: (1) One thing I know to be true is ... (2) I've thought about this topic a lot, but I still don't quite understand ... (3) The most interesting thing about this topic, to me, is ... (4) If I had to explain this topic to someone who knew nothing about it, I would start with ...
- ✓ Use "cubing" to think about your paper topic from different perspectives, which should help you generate some new ideas about your topic and help you ensure that you don't get too bogged down in one way of seeing things. Imagine the six sides of a cube as each being one way of looking at your topic. Quickly (no more than 3 minutes each) write down your responses to these six sets of questions/prompts in order. It might help to number your responses so you can keep track of them as you go:
 1. Describe: Think about your topic in terms of the five senses. What does it look like? What color is it? What does it smell, taste, sound, or feel like?
 2. Compare: What is your topic similar to? What is its exact opposite?

3. Associate: What does your topic remind you of? When you close your eyes and think about your topic, what pops into your head?
4. Analyze: Think about the parts of your topic and how they work together. Tell what causes your topic, how it emerges/emerged, what causes or influences it, and how it can be categorized or grouped.
5. Apply: What can you do with your topic? How can your subject be used productively? What good does your subject do anyone?
6. Argue: Take a stand for or against your subject - or both! Think of as many reasons, logical or silly, that you might have for favoring or opposing your subject.

Don't pause between each set of questions -- just keep writing until you have responded to all six sides of the cube. (From the Ohio State Center for the Study of Teaching and Writing website: <http://www.cstw.ohio-state.edu/>)

- ✓ Make a "reverse outline" from a draft. Read over your paper and, after you read each paragraph, summarize that paragraph in one sentence. Write these sentences, in order, on a piece of paper and then read over the outline they create. Do ideas flow logically from one to the next? Do any parts seem to be missing? Does anything seem to be in the wrong place, or is there anything that should be eliminated? Does this outline, read by itself, clearly convey the argument you want to convey?
- ✓ Use grouping strategies to help you mold your ideas into an organized argument. Take a piece of free-writing or a cubing and use a highlighter pen or underlining to identify ideas that seem interesting to you. Read back over the highlighted/underlined sections and ask yourself if any of the ideas you have identified might go together. You could highlight ideas about one theme in one color and other themes in other colors. You might also cut out key sentences with scissors or copy them onto individual index cards and then physically move ideas around to see how they might be grouped or fit together.
- ✓ Imagine that your paper is being published in a journal or magazine. Write about the audience that might read it and what they would get out of it. Write a letter to the editor by someone who praises your paper and another letter to the editor by someone furious about your argument.
- ✓ Imagine that a big-shot Hollywood producer is making your paper into a movie. Write about the changes he or she might make to your "plot," the actors who would play key roles, and the reviews that the movie might receive.
- ✓ Write about your paper in a letter to a family member or friend. Start with, "I have to write this paper about X and here's what I'm thinking right now ..." Explaining your

ideas to a friendly person is often a helpful strategy for clarifying those ideas for yourself.

Creative Writing

Writing doesn't have to be focused to be helpful. Your group may want to experiment with creative writing as a way of accustoming yourselves to the regular habit of writing. For some, creative writing can be less stress-inducing than writing that must follow rigorous academic conventions or writing that will be graded. Try these starters:

- ✓ **Shifts in Perspective:** Write about a past family gathering, the most embarrassing thing that ever happened in your high school, the best (or worst) teacher you ever had, the time you learned to do something important (swim, ride a bike, use a computer), or the biggest event you ever attended. Write the story in as much detail as possible, explaining what you saw, what you did, and how you felt. Then rewrite the same story from the perspective of someone else - a relative, a fellow student, another participant, a passer-by, etc.
- ✓ **Genre Changes:** Write out your favorite joke (or fairy tale or poem). Then rewrite that narrative as a tragedy, as a limerick, as a haiku, as a serious academic treatise, as a breaking news story, or as the script for a music video.
- ✓ **Open the dictionary and pick five words at random.** Ask each member of the group to write a story that incorporates all five words and share your results.