



WRITING GROUPS: ACTIVITIES

Touching base

Mutual support can be one of the most important functions of a writing group. Sometimes encouragement and the knowledge that others are interested in and committed to your work and your progress as a writer can be just as helpful as feedback. To that end, your writing group may want to reserve some time in each session to "touch base" or "check in" with one another. During this time you could:

- ✓ Describe your writing activities since the last group meeting 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 related works, editing previous work, meeting with a professor or advisor to discuss the work-in-progress, etc.). Or you could talk about the obstacles to writing that have hindered your progress (writer's block, having three tests this week, needing to gather more data before you can write, etc.).
- ✓ 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 and which you chose to ignore, or explain 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 your group members will know what kinds of writing they will see and so that you can help one another stick to your writing goals.
- ✓ Decide, as a group, on a theme for the next writing group meeting - brainstorming, drafting, proofreading, style, writer's block, etc. Choosing a writing issue to tackle together will help you understand the challenges each member is facing at the moment and enable you to plan meetings that will help group members meet those challenges.

Systems for sharing work

Some writing groups ask members to distribute their work in advance of the group meeting, particularly if the piece of writing in question is lengthy. You might distribute

your writing at one meeting for discussion at the next; leave writing in people's mailboxes; drop writing off at people's dorm rooms, carrels or offices; or send writing via e-mail, either by pasting material into an e-mail message or by including it as an attachment. 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 response.

Responding to work that you read outside of the group

The following ideas might help you respond to work that has been distributed beforehand:

- ✓ Group members can write comments and suggest editorial changes on their copies of the paper and give those to the writer during the group meeting.
- ✓ Group members could prepare a written response to the paper in the form of a letter to the writer, a paragraph, a written discussion of the work's strengths and weaknesses, or on a form developed by the group. See the Responding to Other People's Writing worksheet in this packet for a helpful model.
- ✓ Group members could respond verbally to the piece, each offering a personal response to the overall 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.
- ✓ One group member, either the author or (perhaps preferably) a different member of the group, could keep careful notes on key reactions and suggestions for the author's future reference.

Responses to writing presented during the group meeting

Some groups prefer to bring writing to the group meeting for immediate discussion, particularly for shorter pieces. You might bring a draft of an entire paper, a section of a paper, or just a sentence or two that you can't seem to get "just right." Many of the above ideas will work just as well for writing that has been presented during the meeting of the writing group. However, since writing presented during the meeting will be new to everyone except the author, you might try these additional strategies:

- ✓ 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.

Sharing writing without the anticipation of feedback

Sometimes, especially with new writing or writers needing a boost of confidence, it can be helpful to share writing without anticipating feedback. This kind of sharing can help writers get over the fears of distributing their work or being judged.

- ✓ For writers undertaking long projects, sharing a piece can serve to show the rest of the group the progress made since the last meeting, even if the author doesn't need of feedback right now.
- ✓ Sharing a piece of writing without expecting feedback can provide the writer with a deadline to work toward without generating anxieties over whether or not the piece is "good enough" to share.
- ✓ Sharing writing early in a writing group's work together can be a no-pressure way to get to know one another's projects and writing styles.

Brainstorming as part of the group process

Writing groups can not only provide feedback and a forum in which to share work, but also creative problem-solving for 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.
- ✓ If a phrase or sentence is causing problems, have each group member try rewriting it and compare the possibilities, discussing the merits and drawbacks of each.

Writing during writing group meetings

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.
- ✓ See the Writing Exercises handout for more ideas.

Reading during writing group

Just as writing during group meetings can prove beneficial, reading can sometimes help writing groups work together better:

- ✓ Pick a book on writing such as *Bird by Bird*, *Writing with Power*, *Writing Down the Bones*, *Writing Without Teachers*, or *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day* and assign yourselves sections to read for each meeting. Discuss the reading during some part of the group's meeting each time.
- ✓ Read about a particular writing topic during the group meeting, such as editing techniques or writer's block, and then spend the session working on that aspect of one another's writing.
- ✓ Bring a piece of writing (an article in your field, an article from a journal or magazine that you enjoyed, or a piece of fiction) that you think is especially well-written. Read over it as a group and talk about what the author did in the piece that

made it so effective.

- ✓ Bring pieces of data or evidence that you are using in your writing and share them with the group. If the group is familiar with the things that you write about, they may be better able to help you write about them effectively.

Bring in a guest

Just as guest lecturers in courses sometimes spice up the classroom experience, guests in writing groups can enliven the discussion:

- ✓ Invite a friend's writing group to have a joint meeting with yours. Share writing from all participants and also talk about writing group strategies that have worked for each group.
- ✓ Invite a professor or other guest writer to your group to talk about his or her writing process and to offer suggestions for improving your own.
- ✓ Bring in a friend who is working on a project related to the project of a group member. This may help your group member develop a network of people interested in his or her particular topic and may also show your friend how helpful a writing group could be.
- ✓ Invite a Writing Center tutor to attend your meeting.

Planning

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.
- ✓ Create a group calendar in which you all set goals and deadlines for your writing. This calendar could be for a week, a month, a semester, a year, or more. The Writing Center publishes a planning calendar each semester. See www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb
- ✓ Give each other writing "assignments" for the next meeting.