



Faculty Writing Group Creation Guide

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Purpose Statement: This creation guide provides concrete suggestions for establishing and maintaining writing groups among colleagues for any kind of writing, e.g., academic or creative.

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Benefits of Writing Groups

- Having regularly scheduled meetings gives writers accountability and can help them pace their writing projects.
- Having a comfortable place to share writing-still-in-progress among colleagues can be liberating and help writers get timely help at key junctures.
- Having a community of emotional and professional support can combat feelings of isolation and frustration during the writing process.
- Having a place to practice creating supportive intellectual communities, and requesting, giving, and receiving feedback from colleagues (often from other disciplines) helps build lasting connections.
- Having dedicated time and space for writing groups helps faculty make progress towards publication, conferences, tenure, and other research and scholarly activities.

How Long Do Writing Groups Last?

- There is no single set duration for how long a writing group should last. For example, a writing group can last for a summer, a semester, the month of January, the length of a project, or a set number of sessions, e.g., 4-8 sessions.
- Writers can benefit from having sequential writing groups over time or even having multiple groups at a time, depending on their goals.
- The important key for the duration is having a shared expectation for the length and purpose of the group among the members.

Writing Retreats vs. Writing Groups

Writing retreats (*also called writing days*) are one- to two-day events where various faculty writers can “drop-in” to get writing done. Everyone can come and go during the event as needed. The main goal is for each writer to focus on their own work. Interaction among writers is kept minimal. Writing retreats are best for writers looking for a brief oasis to make individual progress on a certain topic.

Writing groups are a set group of faculty members who meet regularly for a set period of time, e.g., for a semester or a summer. The members of the group remain the same from meeting to meeting. The main goal is to provide interaction among writers and form a community around accountability, feedback, or moral support. Writing groups are best for writers looking for a more structured, regular, and collaborative source of writing support.

Four Types of Writing Groups: Work, Support, Feedback, and Hybrid

1. Writing Work Group

- **Purpose:** Members regularly meet (*weekly, biweekly, or monthly*) in a set location (*physical or virtual*) for a set amount of time. Every writer works on their own project. Work could mean writing, editing, reading, citing, or any task to support their project.
- **Benefits:** The group keeps one another accountable by showing up to write and expecting others to do the same. It is recommended to buffer the work time with some social time for writers to catch up before working and share how the session went after the work time.

Example 2-hour Schedule for a 6-person In-Person Bi-Weekly Session

- 15 minutes: Share goals for the work session (~3 min/person).
- 80 minutes: Work silently on individual projects: writing, researching, editing, reading, making citations, etc.
- 15 minutes: State how the session went, and optionally what their next step in their process is (~3 min/person).
- 10 minutes: Socialize and connect.

Example Format for Online, Synchronous Sessions*

A group might set Wednesdays as “writing work” days. They might touch base via video to set goals in the morning and then update one another once or twice in a shared Google Doc during the day. They might have a shared debrief during a video conference at the end of the day.

Example Format for Online, Asynchronous Extended Sessions*

A group might schedule their check-ins less frequently and over a longer period of time. The group might set goals for themselves on Monday and share them with one another in a shared Google Doc, video conference, or Slack channel. They do work throughout the week. They might check in together on Wednesday and Friday for accountability.

* These formats are suggested by the [University of Wisconsin's Writing Center](#).

2. Writing Support Group

- **Purpose:** Support groups are for emotional support, goal setting, and community building among writers. Members take turns discussing their project's current status and their next goal for writing. Members also share their challenges, offer best strategies, and provide moral support for one another.
- **Tips:** Having members take turns leading the sessions keeps them feeling fresh and shares the responsibility of choosing the activities/leading discussion.
- **Benefits:** The group should in equal parts cheer successes, troubleshoot problems, and provide accountability for its members. For further inspiration, read these [supportive writing activity ideas](#) and these [reflective writing activities](#).

Example 90-minute Schedule for a 5-person Monthly Session

- 25 minutes: Individual check-ins; writers share updates and receive support (~5 min/person)
- 50 minutes: Members bring up writing-related or research-related challenges for the group to troubleshoot (~15 min/challenge) or run [another supportive writing activity](#). (The activity could rotate and be announced beforehand.)
- 5 minutes: Members work on silent goal setting, journaling, or other [reflective writing activity](#).
- 10 minutes: Members share their goals to finish by the next meeting. (~2 min/person)

3. Writing Feedback Groups

- **Purpose:** Feedback groups are for sharing and commenting on one another's drafts. Members regularly meet to exchange several pages of writing. Every member is expected to read and provide feedback to that week's writers.
- **Tips:** Smaller groups of 2 to 5 tend to work well. Writers should exchange moderate amounts of writing. Agreeing on how to [request](#) and give feedback is key, so everyone receives the same quality and quantity of feedback.
- **Benefits:** Receiving timely and targeted feedback on "still in-progress" writing can greatly accelerate a writer's progress using both content comments from same-discipline faculty or readability comments from cross-discipline faculty.

Example 90-minute Schedule for a 4-person Bi-Weekly Feedback Group

- 8 minutes: Individual updates, including updates on previous writing goals (2 min/person).
- ~35 minutes/person: Feedback each for Person A and Person B.
- 5 minutes: Silent goal setting or another [reflective writing activity](#).
- 8 minutes: State a writing goal to be met by the next session (2 min/person).

Example Format for Online Feedback Sessions*

- The members of the group read the work submitted, prepare constructive feedback for the writer, and answer the questions that the writer provided.
- During the meeting, the readers typically follow the prompts of a clarification round; a positive comment round; a writer's questions round; and a comments/questions/suggestions round.
- During the meeting, the author listens, takes notes, and answers questions from readers.
- The last five minutes can be used to introduce the work that will be read for the next week. Each member typically receives feedback twice per semester on successive drafts.

* This format is suggested by [Purdue University's Writing Center](#).

4. Hybrid Writing Group

Hybrid groups combine elements from multiple types of groups (work, support, or feedback) to fit the unique needs of the writing group. Elements of the different types can be pieced in different ratios to create a group that serves the most benefit for all. The ratio can change over time as well to let the group grow and evolve.

Example 3-hour Schedule for Monthly Work/Support Group

- 10 minutes: Members connect, share, and get snacks.
- 2 hours: Members silently work on individual projects: writing, researching, editing, reading, making citations, etc.
- 50 minutes: Members bring up writing-related or research-related challenges for the group to troubleshoot (~15 min/challenge), and/or make and share goals as the closing.

Suggested Setup Method for Writing Groups

We suggest that you complete the following steps to start your writing group. Feel free to modify the order, add or subtract steps, or create new documents to best suit your needs. Below shows a more formal way to set up a group to give you some ideas to help you create your own approach. Be as creative, casual, or formal with the creation process as works best for you.

- **Step 1:** Read this Writing Group Creation Guide. Choose what [type of writing group](#) you would like to create.
- **Step 2:** Invite potential members to an initial planning meeting who would be interested in the group type you selected. Consider seeking members from your department, college, or cohort; also consider seeking out faculty who have participated in Center for Faculty Development (CFD) activities with you.

- **Step 3:** At the planning meeting, (1) get to know one another and (2) flesh out how the group will run. You can use a few questions from the [Writer Self Reflection](#) and some questions from the [Expectation Agreement](#).
- **Step 4:** Schedule and set the agenda for your first official meeting. Groups tend to do well when (1) the ground rules are at least tentatively set, and (2) the first meeting has a date. At the end of the first or second meeting, create space for members to request any needed updates to how the group operates.

Group Planning: Writer Self-Reflection for Getting to Know Members

This self-reflection can help writers take stock of where they are in their writing journeys, where they can go, and what they are looking for in a writing group. We recommend choosing any two to four of these questions to use for your group planning meeting. Here is a [template of the self-reflection](#) to fill out for your planning meeting. Feel free to edit, delete, or add questions as you like.

1. What kinds of writing do you do on a regular basis?
2. What works well in your writing routine? Where do you like to write? What time of day? Do you listen to music while writing? What can you prepare beforehand to help you write?
3. What 3 or 4 adjectives best describe your feelings about writing?
4. What are 2 strengths and 2 challenges you have with writing?
5. Do you procrastinate when starting/during writing? If so, what distracts you?
6. What are your goals as a writer for the next 2 to 6 months?
7. Why do you want to join a writing group? What outcome do you hope to achieve by participating in a writing group?
8. How do you think you can help others in a writing group?
9. For a writing group to be successful, I think we should do ___ and avoid ___.

Group Planning: Expectation Agreement for How Meetings Run

Writing Groups that succeed have a shared understanding of what the group is, how it operates, and what is required from members. It is important to negotiate and build a shared set of expectations before beginning.

Answering these questions (or a subset) will help build consensus. While there are no right answers, all members need to agree. Here is an editable [template of the agreement](#) to fill out as your group decides. Feel free to edit, delete, or add questions to fit your needs.

Questions for All Writing Groups:

1. How often will the group meet and for how long?

2. What type of writing group are you making? What does a typical session look like?
3. Where will the group meet? If in-person, where on campus? If virtually, what platform?
4. What day of the week? What time of day? We recommend using the same recurring day and time. Use an online scheduling tool, e.g., [Whenisgood](#) or [Doodle](#), to find a date/time.
5. How big will the group be? We recommend anywhere from 2 to 6.
6. What is the initial time commitment?
7. Are there “formal roles” for the group? If so, do roles rotate? How long are roles held? For example, group roles might include a “facilitator” (*to keep meetings on task*) or an “organizer” (*to send reminders and answer questions between meetings*), etc.

Additional Questions for Feedback Groups: (Read [tips on approaching feedback](#).)

1. What kind of writing will the group review? A specific type? At a certain stage?
2. When, how, and how many pages can members submit for feedback?
3. What kind, how much, and what format should feedback be provided in?
4. How will members respond to one another’s writing?
 - Read the [sample feedback request form](#) for ideas on requesting feedback.
 - Will the author provide a detailed request for feedback on the text?
 - Will readers comment on the draft itself, in a separate document, over email, or make oral comments at the meeting, or in some combination?

How to Approach Feedback

Tips for Hearing Feedback

- **Assume best intentions.** Remember that your group members are on your side. It is not always easy to hear feedback about our writing, but we want to assume that their comments come from a positive place that wants to help us grow.
- **Listen for understanding.** Try not to interrupt someone who is giving you feedback to defend or contradict what they are saying. Let them finish their thoughts, so you can better understand their point of view as a reader. Be curious. Ask questions.
- **Take with a grain of salt.** While you should thoughtfully consider feedback, you don’t need to make all the changes just because they were suggested. Use what helps.
 - Use this [section to help prioritize and use feedback](#).

- **Express gratitude.** Remember that your group is taking time and expending energy on your behalf. Acknowledging their care and effort will help foster a mutual culture of trust.
- **Organize and prioritize comments.** Keep track of your feedback. What should get most of your attention? Are there any patterns? E.g., do readers often praise a certain feature of your writing? Do readers often point to issues with clarity?

Tips for Asking for Feedback

These questions are an example of the type of information the writer should provide to the group along with their pages of writing. Answering these questions will help the group understand what the context of the work is and how best to help.

Having some kind of feedback request is especially useful if you are distributing work ahead of time. Feel free to edit, delete, or add questions as will best serve your group. You can use this [template as a foundation to create your own Feedback Request Form](#).

Sample Feedback Request Form:

1. Briefly describe why you wrote this piece. What was the assignment, context, or task? Is this piece a first or second draft? Is this piece part of a larger writing (e.g., *abstract for a conference, first half of a drafted article to be published, or the introduction to a short story collection, etc.*)
2. What are you most proud of / confident about in this piece of writing? What was your biggest challenge with this piece of writing?
3. What kind of feedback would be most helpful to you at this stage?
 - a. Be specific. List a few macro or micro concerns.
 - Macro Examples: paragraph or page level concerns, e.g., *transitions, evidence, sequence, or structure*
 - Micro Examples: sentence-level concerns, e.g., *tone grammar, vocabulary, citations*
4. Are there any aspects you don't want readers to comment on this time? E.g. "*Please disregard grammar.*" or "*Don't worry about citations this time around.*"
5. When is the deadline for this piece of writing? How much time do you have for revision?

Tips for Giving Feedback

This chart below gives advice about how to give effective feedback to writers. Writers may feel vulnerable when sharing drafts of their writing, so you should take care to frame your feedback in a helpful manner. You should aim to give balanced feedback that is supportive, specific, descriptive, and prioritized.

| Ineffective Feedback is... | Effective Feedback is... |
|---|---|
| <p>Attacking: Hard-hitting and aggressive, focusing only on the weaknesses of the other person's writing.</p> | <p>Supportive: Feedback is delivered in a non-threatening, encouraging manner.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Say something positive about the piece first. ("To me, the best-written part of this piece was..."; "The most interesting idea in this chapter was ..."). ● Acknowledge your understanding of the writer's goal based on your careful reading of the feedback request. ("I realize that your main point was ..."). |
| <p>Too General: Feedback with general statements, aiming at broad issues which are not defined.</p> | <p>Specific: Focus on specific writing areas or issues.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Explain issues by pointing to concrete areas of the writing. ● Provide a solution/suggestion to help improve it by explaining how you have handled such problems. ("<i>When I have a problem with transitions, I usually try ...</i>"). |
| <p>Judgmental: Feedback criticizes the writer. ("You aren't very good at conclusions.")</p> | <p>Descriptive (audience perspective): Describe the problems in the piece of writing itself from the perspective of the reader, whether it is yourself or another imagined/real audience.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Speak from your perspective. ("<i>As a reader, this section was a little unclear to me because, ...</i>"; "<i>My reaction to this was ...</i>"). ● Speak from a reader's perspective. ("When I read this sentence, I wasn't sure if the paragraph was going to be..."). |
| <p>Scattered: Feedback focuses on too many writing issues or touches on issues that the writer does not want to discuss at this stage. Too many suggestions can be overwhelming and disheartening to the writer.</p> | <p>Prioritized: Prioritize what you want to say so as not to overwhelm the writer but also to address their main concerns.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Select only two or three major "big points" to cover verbally during writing group discussions. ● Write a list of additional "big points" and "little points" that the writer could take away with him/her after the writing group discussion. ● Tailor your comments to the writer and the needs listed in their feedback request. While your big points may cover issues other than those listed in the writer's feedback request, be sure to include some responses to the matters that the writer is most worried about. |

Chart Credit: Lee, S. and Golde, C. (n.d.). "Starting an effective dissertation writing group." [Giving Feedback Chart, p. 20]. The Hume Writing Center at Stanford University. Retrieved <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1PCo0UvRxPouN4QoRymkMuWlKlozhf7Bz/view>

Tips for Using Feedback

Revision is so crucial to the writing process that some believe it is when real writing starts. Revision isn't just about correcting grammatical errors and improving flow. Revising is also a creative part of the writing process that asks you to critically rethink your writing strategies. It is the part of the process when the ideas become more fully formed; the meaning is clarified; and the arguments are better supported or rearranged to be more persuasive.

Writers can more efficiently and effectively revise their work after receiving feedback if they break down their revision strategies into two types: macro-revision and micro-revision.

- Sort your feedback answers into two “macro-revision” and “micro-revision” to-do lists.
- Apply the macro-revision suggestions first. Then apply the micro-revision suggestions.
- Re-read again (a day or so later), focusing on macro-revision issues. Then focus on micro-revision issues.

MACRO-REVISION focuses on the presentation of the “big picture” and addresses global writing issues. When revising, macro-revision should be done first. As you target your essay for macro-revision, you will bring ideas into sharp focus by reviewing the organization of the section, chapter, or entire book, reassessing evidence and sharpening the idea. Macro-revisions include the following activities:

1. **Rearranging your writing to improve argumentative flow:** Move sections or sentences around to present the most rhetorically effective case, highlight an argument better, and improve the logical progression of argument.
2. **Subtracting–“trimming the fat”:** Eliminate sections that don't fit in the argument to exclude extraneous or tangential arguments that can distract the reader.
3. **Adding–bringing in new examples and including more explanations:** Identify “gaps” in the argument to bridge the ideas better or illustrate a point more effectively.
4. **Improving transitions and making main points consistent:** Make explicit connections between ideas (between sections or between paragraphs); review how the reader is reminded of the thesis argument or central idea throughout the piece; make sure that evidence and data are connected to the topic argument.

MICRO-REVISION focuses on the “little things” that matter a lot in writing: the language choice, syntax, and grammar direct us through your ideas but also set the mood of the writing and help shape what readers think of you as a writer and scholar. Working on micro-revision before macro-revision is not efficient because you may end up deleting sentences and paragraphs that you worked hard to polish.

Micro-revisions include the following activities:

1. **“Cleaning up”:** Proofread for grammatical and typographical errors.

2. **“Sharpening” sentences or words:** Find a better phrase or word to make your writing smoother, more vivid, and more expressive. This includes replacing some passive verbs with more descriptive action verbs, improving the syntax of sentences and phrasing to improve writing style.
3. **“Tightening” sentences—writing less to say more:** Cut out extraneous words, condense points to clarify meaning, and make sentences more concise.

Choose your top three or four macro-revisions and micro-revisions. Use this list to guide you through your first cycle of macro-revision and then your first cycle of micro-revision. The checklist or to-do list will help you (1) keep track of all your revision activities, (2) help you keep focus, and (3) give you a sense of “work done.”

| Macro-Revisions | Micro-Revisions |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| | |

Using Feedback Credit: Lee, S. and Golde, C. (n.d.). “Starting an Effective Dissertation Writing Group.” [Revision Strategies, p. 23-24]. The Hume Writing Center at Stanford University. Retrieved <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1PCo0UvRxPouN4QoRymkMuWLKlozhf7Bz/view>

If you have questions about writing support for faculty, please contact the SJSU Writing Center: writingcenter@sjsu.edu. If you have questions about Center for Faculty Development (CFD) programs and initiatives, including specific programming to support faculty writing, please contact the CFD: cfid@sjsu.edu.