
Advice on Setting Up and Working with a Writing Group

I. At the First Meeting or by Email Prior to the First Meeting

- Send out a writing inventory and personal goals questionnaire to get each group member thinking about his/her writing needs and goals for the group.

II. First Meeting: Getting Organized

- *Ice Breakers for getting to know each other* (if you don't already know each other):
 - Break up into pairs and interview each other. Introduce the person you interviewed to the group.
 - Tell the group what your favorite piece of writing is and why.
 - Tell the group the kind of writing you are most comfortable with and why.
 - List 10 adjectives that describe you as a writer; share them with the group.
 - What metaphor best describes you as a writer?
- *Setting up goals for the group*
 - What do you want to get out of your writing group? (Refer to your personal goals/writing inventory. See next sheet.)
 - Decide on a set of goals for the semester and have one member of the group type up the list to distribute to the whole group.
- *Logistics*
 - How often will the group meet?
 - Where will the group meet (Starbucks, a group study room in the library, off campus, etc.)?
 - How long will each meeting be?
 - How will the group communicate between meetings (e-mail, phone)?
 - How will work be circulated for review (e-mail, handed out at previous meeting)?
 - Who will submit pieces when? In order to get the full benefit from a peer writing group, it works best if you focus on one project/paper/chapter at a time. Set aside at least an hour to workshop each person's piece of writing. If the work is read prior to the meeting, the group may be able to respond to two pieces of writing per meeting. The time it takes may also fluctuate depending on the length and difficulty of the work and how "finished" it is.
 - Since many of you are working on longer projects involving various stages and styles of research, your group should decide what stage of the project the group is willing to discuss. Will you find it helpful to submit research ideas, charts, graphs, lists, outlines, etc. to the group, or would you rather discuss a more complete draft of a chapter or an article?

III. Guidelines for the Workshop

- The writer should circulate his/her work ahead of time, and include the goals for the project and some questions and comments to guide readers in providing feedback.
- Everyone should participate thoughtfully by reading the work to be discussed ahead of time and making comments on the draft. If group members decide not to print out the draft, they should keep careful notes and page numbers for the comments they want to make. Specific pages can be printed out to guide

discussion. *For suggestions for how to make comments, see “Tips for Responding to Other People’s Writing” below.*

- The writer whose work is being discussed should set the agenda for the discussion and also spend some time talking about the goals of the project. If the group is reading a paper that will be graded, the writer should explain the criteria on which the paper will be evaluated. *For suggestions see “Questions to Ponder While Evaluating Peer Writing” below.*
- The writer whose work is being discussed should listen closely to recommendations, answering questions group members may have but not dominating the discussion. We all can get defensive about our own writing and the urge to explain what you mean, even though it may not be written on the page, is tempting. However, it works best if the writer saves his/her comments and questions until the end of the discussion. Also, keep in mind the participants of the group are offering *suggestions*, and you, the writer, do not have to take everyone’s advice. If you don’t agree with someone’s advice, however, you should still listen and decide what you’re going to do. You’ll learn rather quickly which readers seem to have the best sense of what your project entails. .

Tips For Responding to Other People’s Writing

1. **Say something positive.** It is just as important to know what we are doing well in our writing as what things need improvement.
2. **Talk about your responses while reading the work.** “When I read this sentence, I wondered if the paragraph was going to be about this topic.”
3. **Critique the writing, not the writer.** Instead of telling someone they have trouble staying on topic, say something like, “This paragraph doesn’t seem to support your thesis.” Be sure to ask lots of questions of the writer.
4. **Be specific.** If you make a statement about lack of organization in the paper, back it up with specific examples in the text.
5. **Prioritize your comments.** Start with bigger concerns—the quality of the argument, the thesis, and the structure of the paper—and then move to smaller issues like wordiness, grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc.
6. **Give the writer something to walk away with.** But don’t try to write the paper for the writer by telling him/her what to say and how to say it. Write out your key comments and suggestions on the back of the paper or on a separate sheet of paper so the writer can refer to them later while revising.

Questions to Consider When You Respond to Your Peer’s Writing

Before you respond to your colleague’s writing, you may want to try organizing your comments into higher order and lower order concerns. At the Writing Center, we always begin with higher order concerns. These are the large issues in the paper that may interfere with the overall meaning of the work and/or effectiveness of the argument. We recommend spending less time on lower order concerns because, though they may be distracting, these are things that typically can be caught in a later draft. If the writer asks for proofreading comments, however, try to pick out the big mistakes rather than picking on every single thing that might be incorrect. Consider also that we don’t all have the same perceptions of what constitutes an error. It could be productive to have a discussion about the errors that tend to be most annoying or distracting to the group members and to make a list of these as you go along.

Higher Order Concerns:

1. What is the writer's position (thesis/main point)? Is that position clearly communicated to the reader? Point to places in the text where the position is articulated and argued.
2. What evidence does the writer provide to support his/her position? Is the evidence persuasive? Specific enough? Well-documented if from another source? Does the evidence match the point being made?
3. How is the piece of writing organized? Does the writer follow a logical sequence to guide the reader through his/her reasoning? Are transitions needed? What about other organizational cues, like headings and subheadings (if called for by the discipline)?
4. Think about the overall effectiveness of the piece. Does the writer accomplish his/her goals? If not, point to one or more areas where the writer should focus his/her attention for the next revision.

Lower Order Concerns:

1. Are the "mechanics" correct, e.g. sentence structure, sentence syntax (the phrasing and word choice), grammar, punctuation, citations, and, of course, spelling?
2. Are there stylistic problems you find annoying? (Unclear use of "this" and "it"? Wordiness)

Writing Inventory and Personal Goals Questionnaire

These questions are meant to help you get a better sense of yourself as a writer and the goals you have for your writing.

1. What are your greatest strengths as a writer? What do other people normally praise about your writing style?
2. What is your favorite kind of writing to do? Do you participate in social networking sites like Facebook, for example? Do you like to write creatively?
3. What are your biggest challenges as a writer? What kinds of critiques have you received from professors, friends, and other readers?
4. In what contexts and for what audiences and purposes do you produce your best writing? Are there some types of writing you're more comfortable doing than others?
5. If you could change one thing about your writing or your writing process, what would it be?
6. Have you changed as a writer over the past five years? If so, how? And for what reasons?
7. What are your goals as a writer? (This answer can include the kinds of writing you would like to do, the kinds of audiences you would like to reach, the writing skills you would like to master, and so on.)
8. What kinds of things do you think a writing group will help you do better?
9. How do you think you can help others in your writing group?
10. What, for you, would be the best possible outcome of your involvement with this writing group?

*Questions adapted from The Writing Center of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb>
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