

Student Writing Groups: The Best Thesis is a Finished Thesis

As peer mentoring tools, writing groups offer a collegial, discipline-specific environment in which graduate and/or undergraduate students can present works in progress, sound out new ideas, and take intellectual risks. It's also a great opportunity to see what skills and techniques your peers are using in their writing.

How do they work?

There are different ways of running a student writing group. The best way for your writing group to run depends on what the needs of your members are. Here are some options:

At each meeting, one or two group members present their work for discussion, having distributed a copy of the text to group members 2-3 days in advance. Other group members read this text and come prepared to give focused feedback to the presenter(s).

The Writing Group is a quiet time, where members work in the presence of others. Rather than receiving feedback on their writing, they use the writing group as a way to carve out time for their writing.

Each member brings to the Writing Group one page, paragraph, issue, idea, etc. that s/he is struggling with. A copy is distributed to each member. The writer shares the problem and/or reads aloud. The writer then listens without speaking as each group member provides feedback. The only time the writer talks is to clarify his/her intent of the feedback session.

When are they held?

Ideally, your Writing Group meets every week or every two weeks. A regular place and time are essential.

How many members?

It depends on what format you choose to run your Writing Group. Three dedicated members are enough, while eight would probably be the maximum number.

What are the benefits?

- Writing groups are run by students for students. No professors, no pressure, no power imbalances.
- Peers make honest, helpful critics. Since they're in the same boat, they will sympathize with your issues, offer realistic advice, and crack the whip if they detect procrastination.
- Because they are department-specific, groups can open up possibilities for research collaboration.
- Helping other students is an excellent confidence booster and good practice for those interested in teaching.

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- A writing group can become a community in what may seem to be an uncaring and anonymous institution.
- A writing group allows you access to the writing of your peers. The models of “good writing” that appear in published journals can differ in many ways from your own writing. Seeing a piece of writing that is similar to your own, but better in some ways, can provide you with ideas on how to improve your own writing.
- A writing group can make you feel responsible to others: you have to write tonight, since your group meets tomorrow. The more you write, and the more often, the easier it will get, and the better your writing will be.

What other activities can a Writing Group do?

- Free-Writing: Everyone takes a fresh piece of paper, or a new Word document, and writes for five minutes. Those five minutes should be spent writing without thought of spelling, grammar, correctness, or organization. This activity builds writing fluency, and can help you sort through ideas or emotions that are clogging up the writing process. Free-writing for ten minutes would be an excellent activity for a Writing Group with which to begin its weekly sessions.
- Invite a guest speaker to come to your group. This might be an instructor with many publications, someone from the field of writing, or someone who has just finished defending his or her thesis and can speak to the process he or she went through.
- Collect and distribute to each other information on all the different resources that can support your writing. Is there a tutor at the Writing Centre who you found particularly helpful? Did you attend a seminar on campus that was motivating?
- The Red-Pen Friend: Exchange a shorter piece of writing with a fellow Writing Group member. Perhaps members could pass their papers to the person on the left. Then, set a timer for five minutes. In that five minutes, members take a pen or pencil and underline as they read any sentence that doesn't make sense to them the first time reading through it, a word they can't understand in the context, or a skip in the logic of the ideas. After five minutes, pass the papers back. All members can then go home with some feedback as to what they need to spend time revising before the next Writing Group meeting.
- Two wishes and a star: Exchange papers with your Writing Group members. There should be a limit as to how many pages there is each time this is done. After reading through it, the reader writes a note to the author of the work stating the two things she or he wishes the writing had done (e.g., given a clearer example, explained a term, linked ideas more clearly), and one thing that she or he really liked about the piece of writing. This is feedback the writer can then use to guide their revision. Remember, knowing what is good about your writing is as important as knowing what needs more work.
- The Sounding Board: Pair up with someone in your Writing Group. Decide who is “A” and who is “B.” For ten minutes, A shares with B a problem s/he is having with the writing, whether it be a textual, time management, or stress issue. B provides an ear, and gives some suggestions. After ten minutes, change roles.