Independent Writing Groups: Starter Kit

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Introduction to the Starter Kit

Strong academic writing skills are essential for success at any stage of one's academic or research career. It is the medium through which we communicate our knowledge, disseminate our findings and attempt to convince funding institutions of the merit of our line of study. However, this expertise is not born overnight – writing skills take a lot of practice and constructive feedback to develop, yet often there are limited options for formal training on writing, and students content themselves with the feedback they may receive from their professors or supervisor.

One viable and highly beneficial option for students to work hands-on on improving their academic writing abilities is to form a *peer Writing Group,* the goal of which is to meet regularly and interactively learn about writing strategies, as well as how to deliver, obtain and implement constructive feedback on works in progress. While some Writing Groups are structured and led by conveners or instructors, other groups are *independent* and are created and led by their own members.

This Starter Kit is intended to provide some basic information and helpful tips for students who wish to start their own independent Writing Group. Its main goals are to give an overview of how Writing Groups work and how they could be beneficial to participating members, as well as to serve as a concrete "how to" guide upon which students may build their own variations, to suit their own group's needs.

The Starter Kit includes some guiding questions to consider when designing your own Writing Group, guidelines to follow for giving and receiving constructive feedback, as well as some extra ideas and resources that may help you get started.

For additional guidance (e.g., in the form of workshops), feel free to contact Graphos at the McGill Writing Centre (graphos@mcgill.ca) or Kristina Kasparian (kristina.kasparian@mail.mcgill.ca).

Academic writing does not have to be a daunting process; with the right tools and with perseverance, it can become rather enjoyable and rewording.

Good luck with your Writing Group and have fun!

Outline of the Starter Kit

1. Why is academic writing challenging?

Whether you are overcome by great anxiety at the thought of Academic Writing or whether you tolerate it fairly well, it's fair to agree that writing is a challenging process for everyone – even talented writers. Many successful writers have attested to this. In fact, novelist and playwright Joseph Heller once said, "Every writer I know has trouble writing".

There are different degrees and reasons for this challenge. For one, many of us come from different educational institutions, cultural backgrounds and academic disciplines, all of which impact the degree of **experience** we have with academic writing. Secondly, although English is the universal language of communication in the scholarly realm, many students are not native-speakers of English and must cope with explaining complex ideas and conveying strong arguments in a **second or third language.** Thirdly, there is *so* much more to writing than writing per se – a whole method that takes place "behind the scenes" before the actual strings of words appear on paper. Writing involves thinking, organizing our thoughts, outlining and linking our arguments, guiding the reader, anticipating their responses, all the while engaging the reader and successfully conveying the novelty and importance of our work. Building a strong academic text involves so **many stages that are precursors to writing** that much of the skill that must be developed has to do with mastering those elements. Finally, a serious challenge is that writing is **not an easy skill to acquire**. It is difficult to learn solely by example, by imitating the style and structure of publications in our field. It is also difficult to fully internalize strong writing skills by attending a formal writing course (although much depends, of course, on how it is structured). Even when we are fortunate enough to receive feedback on our drafts, it's not always in a way to help us understand exactly why a sentence is more clearly worded that way, why the logical sequence of arguments should be re-ordered, or what kinds of transitions are missing between paragraphs.

Writing is best learned when dissected and discussed. There seems to be a great need for "**talking about writing**" and working on writing in a hands-on, analytical way. Courses on Academic Writing are an excellent resource, but creating smaller, more discussion-driven Writing Groups, especially peer-based ones, may be even more beneficial.

2. What is an independent Writing Group?

A peer Writing Group is a **small group of members who meet regularly to talk about and work on writing, typically by giving each other constructive feedback** on drafts that are in progress.

A Writing Group can come in all shapes and sizes (*see Section 5 for possible variations*) but the underlying purpose is the same: the Writing Group provides a comfortable, open atmosphere where members can have a dialogue about the writing process – sharing writing strategies, resources and concrete ideas for improvement of other members' texts, and thereby contributing to effective revisions of each other's drafts.

The **purpose** of a Writing Group is not to hunt for errors, to proof-read for typos, or to criticize peers' work. Rather, it is a space where writers can approach the challenges of writing from different angles and perspectives. Its purpose is not to serve as a formal course, but as a more interactive discussion on the *rhetorical* process of writing.

Writing Groups can be useful for writers **at any stage of the writing process**. For example, at early stages of writing, peers can help the writer brainstorm, take a stance on his/her main argument, develop the specific focus of a paper, and clarify the intended audience and purpose of his/her work. At a later stage, peers can help the writer by providing constructive comments on a first draft, describing their responses to the text with regards to its organization, content and coherence, and offering suggestions for improvement. A writer may even present a second draft of the same paper after having revised it, and the Writing Group may discuss the improvements that were made, as well as any additional edits that would further strengthen the paper.

In many cases, particularly if the group is small, if the same members attend regularly and if the members consist of peers with experiences in common, the Writing Group may also serve as a **support system**, where writers may help each other overcome challenges such as procrastination or writer's block. Having a safe space in which to share progress, triumphs and tribulations can be a beneficial part of the writing process and academic life in general.

3. How are independent Writing Groups beneficial?

Typically, writing is seen as a solitary process, where writers isolate themselves in their "writing bubble" to focus on writing without distractions. However, many of the roadblocks that writers encounter could be surmounted by sharing these challenges and learning how other writers cope with similar obstacles. Such discussions also allow writers to become more aware of their *own* writing strategies and to discover new approaches thanks to their peers. Very often, a Writing Group may be the only opportunity that students have to *talk* about the writing process, and writers typically find this **interactive forum** to be more beneficial than plowing ahead with writing in isolation.

Writing Groups are also beneficial in that they **keep writers on task**; by meeting regularly and reporting their progress to their peers, writers find themselves devoting more time and focus to writing on a regular basis. This makes it easier to find one's groove, and with a familiar routine, writing becomes less of a daunting task. Writers often report that being members of a Writing Group helps with both motivation and productivity, and helps them stay on track with their goals, deadlines and revisions.

Another clear benefit of peer Writing Groups is the **opportunity to receive feedback** on works in progress, as well as the opportunity to learn the vital skill of providing useful, constructive feedback to peers on their work. Very often, we may not get much practice with peer-reviewing, until we join an editorial board of a journal or an organization committee of a conference. Providing – and accepting – feedback in a tactful and insightful manner is not a trivial exercise, nor is it completely intuitive from the start (see Section 7 on feedback). Furthermore, it is often the case that we do not read papers written by our peers, even if they work within the same department! Aside from the benefit of learning about different lines of research within or across disciplines, exchanging papers with peers allows for a fresh pair of eyes and an outsider's perspective on work that the writer has been immersed in for a very long time. When we have written about the same topic countless times, we automatically fill the gaps in our paper with the extensive background knowledge we have. To readers who lack this background knowledge, however, our ideas and arguments may not seem as logically connected, and our text could therefore benefit from transitions and explanations that enhance clarity. Analyzing a text with members of a Writing Group allows

writers to see their work from the outside in – an exercise that eventually becomes internalized with practice, and is extremely useful for future writing.

5. Starting your own independent Writing Group: What to consider?

If you are reading this, it is because you see the appeal in organizing a Writing Group. Now, how exactly do you do that?

There are many ways in which independent Writing Groups work; there is no universal formula or rule to follow, and different possible variations each have their advantages and tradeoffs. Given that the group's purpose is to be beneficial to its writers, **the structure of the group should address the needs, goals and expectations of its specific members**.

Here are some guiding questions you may consider when designing a new Writing Group, along with some examples of options. The goal of this section is to introduce you to a variety of possibilities, and to facilitate the implementation of your Writing Group by pinpointing specific characteristics that you could think about and customize. Where relevant, some pros and cons of the different options are presented to help with your decision.

Note that Section 10 of this Starter Guide summarizes these points in the form of a checklist for starting your own independent Writing Group.

(a) Needs and interest:

- Is there a **need** in the department or elsewhere (see point (d)) for a Writing Group?
- How many students/colleagues would be **interested** in participating?
- What is the **availability** of interested participants (times / week, hours / month, etc.)?

A note on group-size: Writing Groups tend to work best with smaller groups (5-10 people), mostly because the group feels tighter and more supportive of its members, and because individual members have more time to give and receive feedback on texts. Furthermore, the smaller the group, the more accountable members feel and the more likely they are to attend all meetings. The downside to small groups, though, is that meetings may need to be cancelled if several members cannot attend.

(b) Logistics and resources:

- Are there **1-2 leaders** who are keen on volunteering time and energy to organize the group?
- Would there be **additional support** of this initiative (e.g., by Faculty) that could help ensure its feasibility, efficiency and sustainability? For example, Faculty could help with:
    - moral support (spreading the word and helping recruit members)
    - participation of Faculty members (regular or occasional, depending on group)
    - investment in resources such as books
    - reimbursement of cost of printed materials/photocopies, etc.).
- Is there an **accessible and available space** where meetings could be held?
- Is there a **time** that fits all members' schedules?

(c) Group objectives:

- What is the specific **purpose** of the independent Writing Group? For example:
  - To focus **solely on feedback** on peers' drafts and discussing elements of writing directly in relation to those texts?
  - To discuss some **content** in addition to providing feedback on texts, for example by covering different topics of academic writing (e.g., introductions, abstracts, literature searches, punctuation) and sharing strategies about tackling those specific tasks
  - To serve primarily as a **support group**, for example by keeping each other on track with personal deadlines
- What are **members' goals and expectations**?
  - What do they wish to get out of the group?
  - What specifically do they prefer to work on?
  - What kinds of writing are they currently doing (as group members may vary)?

(d) Group membership:

- Should the group consist of members from **similar or different academic stages**? For example:
  - By level (Masters', PhD, post-doc)
  - All graduate students combined (Masters' and PhD)
  - Graduate students including post-docs
  - Graduate students including post-docs and Faculty
- What should the "**home-base**" of the group be?
  - A specific department
  - A discipline or Faculty (e.g. Engineering, Medicine)
  - A cluster of related disciplines with similar writing conventions (e.g. Media Studies)
  - Interdisciplinary, despite differences in writing conventions (e.g. by granting agency: SSHRC (Social Sciences and Humanities), CIHR (Health Sciences), NSERC (Natural Sciences and Engineering)
- Should the group be open to members of the **home-university only or across universities?**

A note on group membership: There are pros and cons to each of these possibilities. Limiting the group to members from similar academic stages (e.g., Master's only, or PhDs only) allows the members to be on the same page regarding their everyday experiences, but limits the kinds of texts and writing strategies they may have to share. Conversely, mixing different levels within the Writing Group allows members to read and review drafts from different stages of the academic ladder. Similarly, a student-only group creates a safe space for students to share some of their concerns or insecurities about the writing process, or about academic life in general. This safe space may be lost, to a certain extent, if Faculty members participate in the Writing Group. However, despite this change in group dynamics, what could be gained is exposure to different types of texts and to another level of writing; exploring Faculty-members' papers or grant proposals gives students a chance to see what rough drafts at that academic stage may look like, and this unique perspective may be highly beneficial. Finally, the question of whether the group should be limited to one department, related disciplines, or whether it should be interdisciplinary altogether: the advantage of

having a group of members with similar areas of expertise is clearly that there will be a common background – both in terms of knowledge of the field and of the rhetoric of writing within that field – that members will draw upon when sharing writing strategies and offering constructive feedback. On the other hand, it is precisely that shared background that may make the group dynamics less exciting or insightful; when a group is interdisciplinary, a fresh "outsider" perspective can be gained, which could lead to new awareness and new ideas.

(e) Meeting frequency and duration:

- How **often** should group members meet? For example:
  - Once a week
  - Once every two weeks
  - Once a month
- How **long** should each meeting last? For example:
  - An hour a week
  - Two hours every two weeks
  - Three hours a month

(f) Attendance:

- Should attendance be **enforced**?
- Should members let the leaders and/or the entire group know if they cannot make it to a meeting (to enhance **accountability**)?

A note about regular attendance: The group cohesion is usually best maintained if attendance at every meeting is strongly encouraged. This way, group members are more familiar with one another, and trust each other more their writing. It is also easier for the Writing Group to serve as a kind of support system if the same members attend the meetings regularly and keep their peers updated on their progress. A Writing Group should not be viewed as a kind of "drop-in" clinic to obtain feedback and editing just before something is due. All members should get back what they put in, and regular participation of all members make this balance easier to achieve.

(g) Format:

- How should the meetings be **structured**?
- Will meetings be assigned a **specific topic** for feedback and/or content (e.g., introductions)?
- Will members **update** each other on their progress at the beginning of each meeting?
- Will peers' drafts be **read** during the meeting or beforehand?
- **How many writers** will receive feedback per meeting (depending, of course, on the length of meetings and the length of texts)

A note about reading members' drafts: Texts may either be read during the meetings, or in advance. If the texts are long or if they are full-length papers, then reading them in advance and marking them with feedback is certainly the most effective use of meeting time. However, if texts are short enough (e.g., abstracts) or if they are excerpts of longer papers (e.g., an introduction), then it may be beneficial for

members to take some time to read them and jot down their feedback on the spot, during the meeting itself. This alleviates some of the workload that Writing Group participants may be reluctant to commit to in addition to meeting times. Furthermore, reading and commenting on drafts during the actual meeting allows the writer to do the same to his/her own draft – an interesting and at times eye-opening exercise!

(h) Characteristics of writing samples:

- Will members of the group peer-review **whole** papers or **parts** of papers?
- Should texts reviewed during a meeting or series of meetings be **grouped by genre**?
  For example:
  - Texts of a similar kind or length (e.g., grant applications, abstracts)
  - Texts within a similar field or topic (depending on group membership)
- If only parts of papers are being reviewed, should there be a **page limit** for each sample?

(j) Preparation for meetings:

- What do the **leaders/organizers** have to do in **preparation** for each meeting (if applicable)?
- What do the **group members** have to do in **preparation** for each meeting?
- Are to-be-reviewed texts assigned on the basis of a **schedule, or on a week-by-week basis**?
- How is **text-assignment** decided? For example:
  - Based on needs/deadlines
  - On a voluntary basis
  - By genre
  - By choosing from a sample pool to which members upload their drafts
- How are the **drafts circulated** to the group? For example:
  - By e-mail
  - By Dropbox
  - By uploading them onto a university portal like My Courses
- Will **hard-copies** of drafts be provided to all members, or printed individually by each member?

(i) Feedback style and turn-taking:

- Before receiving feedback, should the writer first **invite** a specific type of feedback from peers?
  For example:
  - By highlighting the aspects that the writer would specifically like feedback on
  - By explaining the purpose and audience for the text, to ensure that this clearly comes across for readers
  - By indicating any formal guidelines that had to be met
  - By underlining specific areas that he/she feels were difficult to write and which may need improvement
- What **form** should the feedback take? For example:
  - Verbal only
  - Verbal and written, as peers will give the writer access to a marked copy of the draft
  - A summary of key points only, or extensive feedback (including edits)?

- How should **turn-taking** be coordinated when communicating feedback to the writer? For example:
  - Will each peer provide all his/her comments before moving on to the next peer?
  - Should each peer limit him/herself to a few comments (e.g., maximum 3) in a first round, in order to give other peers a chance to provide feedback to the writer?
  - If whole papers are reviewed, should the draft be tackled section by section (e.g., all comments on introduction, etc.).
- What should the writer do when **receiving feedback** from peers? For example:
  - Listen attentively and take notes
  - Engage in a dialogue with reviewers, clarifying his/her intentions in a non-defensive manner, coming up with potential solutions together, and asking questions about specific elements that he/she wanted feedback on. This allows the writer to talk about his/her writing, which can help generate new ideas for the revision of the draft. Remain completely silent until all comments have been provided and only respond after having reflected on the comments, much like the non-interactive process of peer-reviews. This ensures that the writer listens carefully, without becoming defensive.

6. Responsibilities of Writing Group members

In order for an independent Writing Group to run smoothly and efficiently, it helps to communicate the responsibilities of its members, both those of the group organizers/leaders specifically, as well as those of participants in general.

(a) Responsibilities of Writing Group organizers/leaders:
- Identify a *need* for an independent Writing Group within a particular community
- Gauge *interest* and *availability* of potential members (e.g., e-mail or scheduling tools such as Doodle)
- Determine whether necessary *support* is available to ensure efficiency and sustainability of the group (e.g., Faculty support, resources, meeting location, etc.).
- Enthusiastically *recruit* members and "sell" the group to them, emphasizing its benefits.
- Volunteer time and energy to tend to the group's *organizational and logistical needs*, at various stages of the group's progress. For example, organizers/leaders may:
  - *initiate* the group
  - *design* its structure, based on the needs, goals and expectations of its members
  - *facilitate* the content and flow of the meetings
  - *moderate* group discussions
- Communicate the *responsibilities* of participating members (see (b) below)
- Actively participate in meetings as an *equal member* (whereby responsibilities in (b) apply equally to organizers/leaders)

(b) Responsibilities of Writing Group participants:
- *Attend* all group meetings
- *Attentively* read peers' texts according to agreed-upon schedule

- *Actively participate* in group discussions
- Make a consistent and honest effort to *provide insightful, analytical, detailed and constructive feedback* that would help the writer with short-term goals (revising the draft) as well as in the long-term (improving writing skills)
- *Act in a respectful, tactful and professional manner* during group interactions, particularly when giving or receiving feedback on texts

7. How to invite, give and receive feedback constructively

This section outlines some "golden rules" about the best ways in which to solicit, give and receive feedback. These tips and suggestions are useful not only in the realm of Writing Groups but for peer-reviewing in academic and research domains in general.

It may be helpful to go over these suggestions with your Writing Group during one of your first meetings. There may be many points that are intuitive to group members, while others may be worth hearing about and keeping in mind.

Reading comments about your writing and your work – and by extension, about yourself – can be a nerve-wracking and emotional experience, but an experience that writers must embrace and learn from. The key is to learn to process the feedback in an objective and unemotional way, to see its value without becoming overly defensive. Giving feedback is also an extremely delicate art, but one that must definitely be mastered in our line of work. It is of ethical value to make an honest effort to provide useful feedback to our peers, in order to allow their work and the field at large to advance.

Feedback is most useful when it is delivered and processed gracefully, insightfully and thoroughly. Being on the same page about how to do this will ensure a smooth, productive and respectful dynamic in your Writing Group.

(a) How to invite useful feedback

Writers often complain that the feedback they receive is dissatisfying; at times, it can be vague, incomplete, superficial, harsh, and utterly unhelpful for planning a revision. It can be very frustrating and disappointing to receive imprecise feedback. One way of maximizing the benefits associated with peer-reviewing is to *invite* the kind of feedback that will allow you to revise your draft, i.e., convey to your readers what type of feedback you are specifically looking for.

To receive feedback that is useful for you, you may provide your peer-reviewers with an idea of:

- What is the **purpose** of this text? What are you trying to accomplish in writing it?
- Who is your **audience**?
- What **formal guidelines** did you have to follow?
- What **specific difficulties or concerns** did you have while writing parts of the text?
- What **kind of feedback** do you prefer (modality, level of content, structure/organization or grammar/punctuation?)
-

Below are some **guiding questions** you may consider asking your peer-reviewers:

- Is my argument/main position clear in this paper?
- Is the text engaging for the reader?
- Do I back up my argument with good evidence? Is it convincing?
- Are the ideas/arguments well-organized? Did the text flow logically?
- Are there any sections where it looks like I have strayed away from the topic?
- Is it clear why I did what I did? Is my contribution to the field evident?
- Does the conclusion follow logically? Is my take-home message clear?
- Are there terms or concepts that were ambiguous or that used too much jargon?
- Could any part of the text be shortened?
- Is the text repetitive at any point?
- Does this point (or paragraph or section) belong here or should I move it elsewhere?
- I need extra evidence to back up this argument - can you recommend any papers or authors?

(b) How to give constructive feedback:

The **worst kind of feedback** consists of comments that leave the writer feeling discouraged and stuck, or if the feedback is unspecific and does not help the writer understand where the readers' problems with the text may lie. For example, it may be extremely disconcerting to get feedback where passages are crossed out or have only a question-mark or an "awkward!" next to them. This kind of feedback is not particularly helpful either, because it doesn't help the writer pinpoint where the specific problem is, and doesn't suggest a concrete way to improve the writing.

Conversely, the **best kind of feedback** consists of comments where the reader elaborates on his/her own response to the text, without explicitly telling the writer what he/she *should* do, but rather by asking questions (thus engaging in a dialogue with the writer) that allow the writer to evaluate whether the text meets its intended goals for its intended audience, and that generate new ideas that will shape the revision.

The delicate art of providing constructive feedback is mastering *what* to say and *how* to say it. Below are some basic guidelines that hold no matter the style of the Writing Group and no matter the field.

Suggestions for WHAT to say:

- Before providing your comments, be sure to understand what type of feedback the writer is inviting. What does he/she want feedback on? What type of feedback would be most helpful to the writer?
- Ask questions to help situate the work. What was the goal and readership of the text?
- Let the writer know what you liked. Begin with positive impressions! Point out aspects of the paper that you found particularly interesting, well-articulated, well-organized, easy to follow or insightful.
- Give the writer your own reader response and let him/her know where a reader's understanding may be improved. For example, let the writer know:
    - Where you got **stuck** or lost the logical flow
    - Where you see a **gap** that could be addressed
    - Where the **organization** could be improved (for example, by changing the order of sections)
    - What **concepts/terminology** you did not understand while reading

- o Where the **link and transitions** between paragraphs and ideas needs work
- o Where **further elaboration or additional examples** may be needed
- o Where the writer's **argument** is not expressed as convincingly as it could be
- o Where there is an **apparent contradiction**
- o Where **additional support** from the literature may be needed
- o Where the writer can take the **opportunity to emphasize** an interesting or ground-breaking point about his/her work but has remained sort of neutral
- o Where you thought an **alternative perspective or argument** may not have been considered
- o Where you had doubts about **citations and referencing** (for example, if it is unclear whether the position is the writer's own or another scholar's)
- o Where there is **unnecessary repetition**
- o Where there are problems with **mechanical elements** such as grammar, punctuation, referencing style, etc.
- - Ensure the writer understands your comments and knows how to proceed with them
- - Brainstorm in a dialogue with the writer to try and find solutions to potential problems together.

Suggestions for HOW to say it:

- - When describing your response to the writer's text, use "I" to emphasize your response as a reader, rather than "you" which may instead sound accusatory and lead the writer to become defensive.
- - Evaluate the paper, not the writer. Throughout your comments, keep the focus on the characteristics of the paper. The objective of the task is not to criticize the writer.
- - Re-iterate that it is your impression and opinion, given your background and other factors. The writer may not (and does not have to) agree with all of your feedback.
- - Be as generous as possible. The more feedback, the better.
- - Be as specific as possible. Let the writer know precisely what was difficult to understand and why. If you reword a sentence, try to explain why. If you suggest re-ordering or re-organizing sections, elaborate on the reason.
- - Ask questions. Questions help the writer clarify your impressions and plan the revision.

Suggestions for what to AVOID:

- - Avoid making judgments on the writer's position and ideas
- - Avoid prefacing your comments with "you should". A writer ultimately remains in control of his/her choices and final decisions about the text. Given that your role is to give the writer ideas for alternative possibilities, instead of "you should", try to use "you may want to consider X", "you could also say Y".

(c) How to receive feedback constructively:

- o Listen carefully
- o Take careful notes and ask for hard-copies of your reviewers' feedback when possible
- o Ask for clarifications
- o Engage in a dialogue with the reviewer(s) and brainstorm possible solutions together
- o Avoid becoming defensive

- o Avoid becoming accusatory and accusing the readers of not having understood
- o Don't accuse the other(s) of not having understood
- o Be grateful and thank your reviewers! Reviewing and discussing writing is no easy task!

8. Extra ideas for your Writing Group

The beauty of organizing and participating in a Writing Group is that there is room for creativity and flexibility in the group's choices. Below is a list of some additional ideas that you could try out with your group:

- Have an **introductory meeting** for the members to get to know one another. Everyone could present themselves, their work in a nutshell, at which stage they are, what their writing goals are for the term, what they have difficulty with or wish to improve, and what they expect to get out of the Writing Group.
- Start every group meeting with an **informal "progress report"** where every group member briefly mentions what they worked on during the previous week, what their goals are for the new week, and how they are doing (e.g., in terms of motivation, procrastination, writer's block). This allows for the group to feel close-knit and supportive, and may sometimes allow members to discuss strategies for overcoming some of the writing challenges that are not directly linked to writing per se.
- Consider organizing relevant **workshops as guest sessions**. Workshops can be a great extra resource and would allow for a nice break from the group's routine. Some ideas include a library workshop about literature searches and databases, a guest-speaker seminar by a Faculty member about peer-reviewing papers for publication, or a guest-speaker seminar by a Faculty member who studies writing and rhetoric, etc.
- Invite a **Faculty member to participate** in the Writing group on an occasional basis (if group is for students-only). Exploring texts written by Faculty members gives graduate students and post-docs the chance to see what rough drafts at that stage may look like, and may also give them more practice with different forms of writing, such as grant applications.
- Use a portal like **My Courses** as a tool to distribute writers' texts and other resources on writing.
- In addition to providing feedback to the writer, members may use their meetings to:
  - o Brainstorm and outline together on the board
  - o Conduct literature searches together on a computer (with projector)
  - o Work on timelines and goal-setting
  - o Discuss how to plan effective revisions based on feedback and how to respond to reviewers
  - o Discuss authorship rules and principles of academic integrity
  - o Practice giving elevator pitches and lay summaries of their work
  - o Give practice talks if someone has an upcoming presentation for a seminar or conference
  - o Give feedback on posters for upcoming conferences
  - o Practice trimming down abstracts to meet a word-limit
  - o Practice generating titles for a text or for members' own papers
  - o Practice reverse-outlining a text
  - o Write on the spot while being timed in order to practice spewing out ideas about worrying about eloquence
  - o Do planned exercises on different elements of writing

- Have content-guided discussions about different topics (e.g., what are the elements of a good introduction, how to write a critical literature review, etc.) and use this content as the basis to share writing strategies. See Appendix for ideas about content.
- **Pilot the group** first. What you do in the first term doesn't have to be set in stone. Piloting the group with a smaller set of members may help iron out any kinks you hadn't thought of, and may relieve the pressure of offering the group to a wider audience.
- Leaders may ask group members to **anonymously provide feedback** about the Writing Group (about meeting frequency, organization, feedback and overall benefits), so that adjustments may be made for the next term(s).

9. How to make your peer writing group sustainable over time?

As useful as independent Writing Groups are, and as beneficial as their members find them to be, it can be a real challenge to sustain such groups over time. It is often the case that the leader(s) who organized the group graduate and move on, or become too busy to continue with regular meetings. If there is no one to take over, the group eventually dissolves. Writing Groups are also difficult to sustain if participants cease to show up at meetings, or if they attend irregularly. Steady participation is key to the efficacy and sustainability of the group. If participation dwindles, it's only a matter of time until the group unravels. Finally, a lack of infrastructure or of key resources may also pose a challenge to the sustainability of a Writing Group. Although the group is independent in nature, it helps its longevity if its value is appreciated by the department or university, and if its continuation is encouraged and facilitated.

We hope that the compilation of this Starter Kit helps address the problem of sustainability of independent Writing Groups, and serves as a resource that interested individuals could pull off the shelf when initiating or continuing an independent Writing Group.

10. Resources on writing

Books on academic writing

Giltrow, J. (2002). *Academic writing and reading across the disciplines*. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press.

Gray, T. (2005). *Publish and Flourish: Become a Prolific Scholar*. New Mexico State University.

Hofmann, A. (2009). *Scientific writing and communication : Papers, proposals, and presentations.* Oxford : Oxford

University Press, 2009.

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Final Text.

Silverman, J., Hughes, E., & Wienbroer, D. R. (1990). *Rules of thumb: A guide for writers.*

Swales, J. M., & Feak, C. B. (2008). Academic Writing for Graduate Students: Essential tasks and skills.

Online sources/tutorials

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/6/

http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/

Resources for writing style

Barzun, J. (2001). *Simple and direct: A rhetoric for writers*. New York: Harper-Collins.

Smith, K. (2004). *Junk English 2*. New York: Blast Books.

Strunk, W. Jr., & White, E. B. (2000). *The elements of style.* (4th ed.). New York: Longman.

Walsh, B. (2000). *Lapsing into a comma: A curmudgeon's guide to the many things that can go wrong in print — And how to avoid them*. New York: Contemporary Books.

Zinsser, W. (2001). *On writing well.* (25th anniversary ed.). New York: Quill.

Resources for motivation/time management/procrastination/writer's block

Friedman, B. (1993). *Writing past dark: Envy, fear, distraction, and other dilemmas in the writer's life.* New York: Harpers-Collins.

Hjortshoj, K. (2001). *Understanding writing blocks*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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King, S. (2000). *On writing: A memoir of the craft*. New York: Scribner.

Lamott, Anne. (1995*). Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. Anchor.

Resources for giving effective feedback

Hyland, K. (2004). Disciplinary discourses: Social interactions in academic writing. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Kamler, B., & Thomson, P. (2006). Helping doctoral students write: Pedagogies for supervision. London: Routledge.

Resources on grammar

Gordon, K. E. (1984). *The transitive vampire: A handbook of grammar for innocent, the eager, and the doomed.* New York: Times Books.

Gordon, K. E. (2003). *The new well-tempered sentences: A punctuation handbook for the innocent, the eager, and the doomed.* Boston: Mariner.

Hale, C. (1999). *How to craft wickedly effective prose.* New York: Broadway.

Silverman, J., Hughes, E., & Wienbroer, D. R. (1990). *Rules of thumb: A guide for writers*.

10. Peer writing group checklist

I. Getting started

1. Is there a **need** for a Writing Group in the department (or elsewhere)? ❏
2. Are there 1-2 **leaders** who are keen on organizing the group? ❏
3. Are there least 5 individuals who are interested in **participating** in the group? ❏
4. Has the **availability** of interested participants been assessed? ❏
5. Have a number of **possible days/times** for meetings been identified? ❏
6. Has a potential **location** for meetings been identified and reserved if necessary? ❏
7. Is there additional **support** of this initiative (e.g., by Faculty)? ❏
8. Are there **resources** available to aid organization (e.g., materials, photocopier) ❏

II. Group objectives and membership

9. Has the **main goal** of the Writing Group been decided (e.g., peer-review)? ❏
_____

10. Have the participating members' expectations and wishes been identified? ❏
_____

11. Has group membership been decided (graduate students, Faculty included, interdisciplinary, related disciplines, cross-department, cross-university, etc.) ? ❏
_____

III. Meetings and attendance

12. Has the frequency and duration of meetings been established ? ❏
_____

13. Have attendance requirements been decided? ❏
_____

14. Has the structure / flow of the meetings been decided ? ❏
_____

15. Has the required workload / preparation for meetings been decided ? ❏
_____

IV. Drafts and peer-reviewing

16. Has a schedule for peer-reviewing been determined in advance? ❏
_____

17. Have specific criteria (grouped by genre, page limits) of drafts to review been set? ❏
_____

18. Have the logistics about draft distribution / printing been organized? ❏
_____

19. Has the routine for giving and receiving feedback during meetings been established? ❏
_____

20. Have members been debriefed about their responsibilities and the principles of inviting, giving and receiving feedback effectively? ❏
_____

11. Appendix

Possible topics Writing Group members could cover and discuss, in addition to reviewing drafts:

1. **How to give effective feedback**

   o Dos and don'ts

2. **How to get started?**

   o How to get from a topic to writing?

   o Planning and setting goals: How to make the task feel less daunting?

   o How do you look up relevant literature?

3. **How to get organized?**

   o How to narrow down your question and determine your focus?

   o How to organize your thoughts and arguments (outlining)

   o Connecting parts of your paper: Thesis statements, transition words

4. **Introductions: Structure and tips for a strong introduction**

   o Describing and motivating your topic

   o Reviewing the key literature and highlighting unanswered questions / gaps

   o Explaining how your paper/study/project will answer these questions

   o Logical connection of arguments

   o Making your objectives and argument clear from the start

   o Making your paper engaging for readers

   o Making your paper accessible for your readers (knowing your audience)

   o Different styles of introductions and how they vary depending on genre/purpose of paper

5. **Methods sections of papers and dissertations**

   o Content

   o Structure

   o APA (or other reference style) requirements

6. **Results sections**

    o Content and structure

    o What are the parallels and differences between a Results and Discussion section?

    o APA (or other reference style) requirements

7. **Discussion sections**

    o Content and structure

    o What are the parallels and differences between a Results and Discussion section?

    o APA (or other reference style) requirements

8. **Critical review papers**

    o What is the goal of the paper?

    o Structure (how does it differ from other genres of texts)

    o Some Do's and Don't's

9. **Research proposal (fellowships or grants)**

    o What is the goal of the paper?

    o Elements and structure

    o Granting agencies and their requirements

    o Grant proposals (with specific requirements like "budget")

    o Some Do's and Don't's

10. **Abstracts (conference, paper)**

    o How to sell a detailed study in very few words

    o Exercising cutting down words to meet a limit

11. **Lay summaries**

    o How to write in layman's terms

    o How to sell your idea and make it sound exciting

    o How to convey the important contribution and "bottom-line" of your work

12. Presenting ourselves and our work

- o Practicing a short "elevator pitch" about our research projects and background

- o Practicing describing our program/research interests to people we meet outside our field

- o Practicing presentations (if anyone would like to give a practice talk)

13. How to revise texts after we receive feedback

- o Where to start?

- o Tips and tools for effective revisions

- o How to respond to reviewers

- o Cover letter to the editor

14. Academic Integrity and authorship in writing, publishing and presenting

15. Cover letters and responses to editors/reviewers

16. Applications

- o CV and cover letters

- o Research statements

- o Teaching statements

17. Mechanical aspects of writing

- o Common English errors

- o Punctuation

- o Paragraph structure

- o Sentence length

- o Prepositions

- o Transition words and expressions

18. Visual representation of data

- o Powerpoint slides

- o Poster presentations

- o Tables and figures (including titles and captions)