

**Excerpt From Writing Groups Workshop
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Writing Groups – How to Get Started

Working together, group members should determine the operational parameters of the group and write them down. Including:

1. ***First and foremost, start with respect*** for the writing, the individual, and the group. It is not permissible for group members to use ideas or research shared by the author. It is not permissible to share the author's work-in-progress with people outside of the writing group. It is also not permissible to use the author's contacts in the publishing world without their permission
2. ***Create a group list.*** Maintain a document which contains all member names, addresses, home phone and cell numbers, email addresses, and regular meeting schedule information. Cell phone numbers come in handy when the inevitable emergency strikes at the last minute, and someone isn't able to show up.
3. ***Determine frequency of meetings.*** Many groups meet an average of 1 or 2 times per month (often same day, place, and time), also allowing plenty of writing time in between.
4. ***Meeting time.*** Are your members available more readily for evening or daytime sessions?
5. ***Meeting location.*** A neutral setting, such as a coffee shop, book stores, or reserved library room, works well. Groups have also used homes for meetings, as long as members aren't sidetracked by interruptions or the informal setting.
6. ***Group size.*** You'll need to determine the "right" size for your group. A general rule is that 5-6 members provide the author with varied opinions, and everyone may not be able to show up at every meeting. If the material is lengthy or detailed, a smaller group size of 3 - 4 members may work best. Groups with 3 - 4 members may work well with poetry groups (detailed review of poetry and meter), middle

grade(MG) or young adult (YA) novels (longer chapters). However, since not everyone shows up all the time, 8-10 members may be preferred.

7. ***Adding members.*** Some groups find it effective to invite a guest member to visit the group. This may help to determine whether there will be a good “fit” for the potential future member. Often you have a trial period for new members where they are allowed to sit and listen to the group for a few sessions before presenting their own material. The focus is on a good fit for both the group and the new member. Other groups, especially ones that have been together for a long time, ask for potential members to submit some of their writing to the group in order to ensure a good match in style, experience, etc.
8. ***Session length.*** Your group will determine the time length—usually 2-3 hours should allow adequate time for mingling, review, and participation. It’s best to set someone as the clock watcher so the group doesn’t spend too much time on mingling or critiquing.
9. ***Amount of material to be reviewed.*** Your group’s time constraints, genre (e.g., picture book (PB), young adult, middle grade novels) and size will determine this. E.g., a group of five to six members may allow up to 5 double spaced pages per session. Smaller groups may permit more material (e.g., ten to twenty pages) for submissions. See what works for you. Usually the material is submitted to members **before** the meeting in order that everyone has read it and critiqued it beforehand. Sometimes, the first page is read aloud by the author or by another member. This gives the author an opportunity hear how the words sound aloud.
10. ***Evaluate and address group chemistry.*** Do you have the right combination of people? Do you have different talents? Do you need a fresh perspective? Do you need more seasoned writers? Is someone upsetting the balance or not participating? Individual members can become problematic (e.g., the person who only shows up for her own critique; someone who talks too much or is overly critical in reviewing the work of others and/or defensive in critiques of her own work). One difficult member can destroy a group. The group should have a plan on how to address this. For example, some groups have a moderator (or two) who address the person. Others will address it as a group.

11. ***Give your group a name.*** Create a group identity. In Illinois, we have everything from the Pen Hens, to the Ma'amuscripts, to the ABC Writers (All 'Bout Children). Who would your group like to be? .

Structure of Writing/Critique Group Meetings

The author benefits when each person reviewing the work has a copy of the manuscript (MS). The reviewer writes his name at the top of the first page, and clearly notes all helpful comments on the MS during the critique process.

To review a MS in a writing group meeting, your group may elect to follow one of these methods:

1. ***Author or another group member reads aloud while others review silently.*** This can be a very effective choice. The author will either read their own work, or have their work read by someone unfamiliar with the MS, similar to what an editor will experience when the work is submitted. An unfamiliar reader may help identify stumbling blocks with phrasing or word choices. There are always good opportunities to note typos and grammar problems with more reviewers. Often only one chapter is read or the first 1-5 pages.
2. ***All Read Silently (not quite as effective for the author. Hearing your work read by someone else can help the author hear what is missing or wrong in the writing).***
3. ***All reading and written feedback completed PRIOR to attending meeting.*** Authors submit work (snail mail or email) to members at a specified date (ex., one week prior to meeting.) This can be very effective for lengthy submissions and is just as effective with poetry and picture books, gives plenty of time to explore the meter and rhyme.

How Should Your Meeting Run?

1. ***Have a designated facilitator/leader for each meeting.*** They will divide the allotted meeting time equally among attendees, help move discussion along in proper fashion, and help the group follow the general operational rules. The facilitator helps groups start and end on time! Some groups rotate this role every month or year.
2. ***After greeting time period, start first MS review.*** A group may have a set rotation of what member presents on what date (this is the most common) or the group may proceed by arrival time—first to arrive has work reviewed first, and so on. Outline your method at your first meeting or ahead of time.
3. ***Review the first attendee’s material.*** Choose your format: read aloud, read silently, have previously read and prepared comments prior to meeting.
4. ***Have critiques ready after reading.*** If it is a “cold read” (read for the first time at the meeting), you (each member critiquing) write your name at top of your copy of the manuscript (MS). Jot down positive and negative notes clearly and with a focus on specific, constructive criticism (character, plot, language, dialogue issues, etc.). Hand the copy with your written comments back to the author at the end so the author doesn’t have to be distracting by writing down everyone’s comments vs. just listening.
5. ***Reviewers share what they liked about the MS and what did not work for them.*** The author remains silent, listening to all CONSTRUCTIVE feedback and should not speak until everyone has given their comments (unless someone needs a specific question answered by the author). The author is not there to defend work, but to listen on how it might be improved (remember the author is free to pick and choose what comments make most sense for revision).
6. ***Secondly, a detailed discussion may follow (or take place while members are giving feedback), going page by page and incorporating all group comments – positive comments and constructive criticism.*** Questions may be posed to the author to clear up confusing items in MS, a method which may help to prevent the author from becoming defensive. *Key point: Author does not defend the work, but may address questions, or continue to listen quietly.* Valuable input is being

shared, and more often than not, it will take time for the feedback to “sink in.”

Feedback may include comments such as:

- Does the beginning of story grabs reader’s attention
- How is the flow of words and scenes
- How are the characters developed
- What is the main problem or challenge in story (what is the main character’s heart’s desire that drives his/her actions)
- Point of view (POV)—first person, third person, etc. Does it work?
- Length
- Pacing
- Tension and plot
- Showing vs. telling (SNT, standing for Show, Not Tell)
- Does the ending make sense, emotionally, logically?
- How is the dialogue—does it sound authentic, true to the characters or not

7. ***Final summary of work given by a group member or facilitator (optional).***

8. ***Author may respond to questions or comments, if time available and based on group format.*** Be careful with this, more often than not, the feedback needs to simmer for a period of time. Many group members have had many “aha” moments regarding their MS a week or two after the meeting. Often, they return with changes suggested by the group and “you were right about that. . .” comments.