How to Organize a Successful Writing Group: A Start-Up Guide

This guide walks you through important considerations as you set up a dissertation writing group. The guide is organized to allow you to check off each question after your group has addressed it.

❏ What will be your group's primary method of communication?

If you plan to use email, make sure you exchange email addresses and decide who will send the initial group message. Be sure to include all group members in an email, including those who could not attend the initial meet-up.

❏ How often will your group meet?

Common frequencies: weekly, biweekly, monthly.

❏ Where will your group meet?

We recommend always meeting in the same place (e.g., coffee shop or classroom).

❏ When will your group meet?

We recommend always meeting at the same time. You can use www.when2meet.com or www.doodle.com to find a time that works for all.

❏ Will one or two people be in charge of managing the group (sending reminder emails, etc.), or will you share responsibilities? Who will be responsible for what?

❏ What is your group policy on absences?
  ❏ Should group members notify others if they will be absent? How?
  ❏ Are group members responsible for contributing anything (like written notes/feedback) if they are absent?
  ❏ What happens if a member misses more than [x number of] meetings?

❏ Will your group offer goal-setting activities? What will these look like?

For example: each member naming their day's or week's goals aloud; the group taking a moment for individuals to privately record goals; the group collecting everyone's goals on one public document, etc.

❏ Will your group offer opportunities for members to talk through challenges as they arise?

Some groups assign time in which members can talk out new ideas or solicit feedback on particular questions. Designating these times in advance can help groups offer needed support without losing working time to digressions.

- ❏ Will your group co-work (work independently in each other's company)?

    Some groups combine co-working time with goal-setting and/or draft feedback.

- ❏ Will your group exchange work for peer feedback? In what forms?

    Some groups use their meetings as mini-deadlines and require writers to supply formal written drafts; others use meetings as opportunities for writers to try on new ideas and allow for informal "verbal drafts."

- ❏ Will your group exchange work before or during each meeting?
    - ❏ How many pages will be circulated?
    - ❏ If before: how far in advance must the writer circulate work?

- ❏ In what form will readers offer feedback?

    Your group can choose how readers will provide feedback to writers. We suggest **guided verbal feedback** *as a model that is least labor-intensive for readers and most helpful for writers: When circulating work, the writer provides a short list of the areas in which reader feedback would be most useful to them. Then, in your meeting, readers offer verbal feedback focused on addressing these areas while the writer (or another member, on behalf of the writer) takes notes. You may also decide to provide peer feedback in pairs or as a whole group.*

- ❏ Will your group have regular accountability check-ins?

    Regularly updating others, verbally or electronically, about writing progress can help writers meet goals. Possible forms for group check-ins: a weekly email to a group thread about progress; a quick verbal report by each member; a longer round-table discussion during a meeting; group accountability apps such as Forest.

- ❏ Is remote meeting attendance ever an option?
    - ❏ If so, how will your group facilitate it?

    You could use video chat tools like Skype or FaceTime, or you could use Google Chat to "check in" for co-working time or similar. If your group uses an app, like Forest, this can also be used remotely.

Write out a short plan for an ideal writing group meeting. Once the group is together, what will you do? How will your session go?