

WRITING GROUPS

Writing is often a solitary occupation. Granted, our race, gender, and class will shape the things we are likely to say, and the literature we create struggles to find voice amid the deafening din of all the writers who have come before us. Yet when a writer sits down at her computer, she is alone. Even if she writes in the bustle and hubbub of a coffeehouse, once she begins to compose, she is—in very obvious ways—on her own. All writers know how frightening it can be to face this isolated (and isolating) process, and writing groups offer one way of confronting the solitude.

Support groups for writers have existed whenever and wherever more than one writer inhabits the same general vicinity. Anne Ruggles Gere points out that what we now call “writing groups” . . . have existed for more than two hundred years, but the continuing ‘discovery’ of them demonstrates the extent to which they have remained on the edge of educational consciousness” (1987, 52). In large measure, this marginalization

can be attributed to ideas that are centuries old. The myth of the solitary writer would indicate that—as Gere points out—when writers mature and come more fully into their skills, they are less likely to want or need the support of writing groups. Gere notes that this attitude comes to us from eighteenth-century notions of individual achievement and genius, and it was compounded by the romantic myth of the solitary author, which has persisted since the early nineteenth century. In this model, the author always works alone, drawing on inspiration from either unseen external forces—God, the muses—or from some deep wellspring within himself. Other people exist primarily as an audience for the *completed* work; they rarely have anything to do with creating it.

However, with the rise of feminism and composition studies, college and high school writing instructors have begun scrutinizing and questioning the romantic myth of authorship (see also “Author” and “Collaboration”). Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford show that those participating in “dialogic groups,” rather than in hierarchical environments, “generally value the creative tension inherent in multivoiced and multivalent ventures” (1990, 133). Teacher-writers who have themselves experienced the desire to come together and share work with one another, who have received and offered constructive criticism, who have been consoled in defeat and congratulated in victory are constantly looking for ways to reproduce the dynamic of all-volunteer groups in their classrooms. When they are successful, the “nature and place of these . . . involuntary writing groups extend classroom boundaries, making the boundaries even more fluid, broadening the sites where writers interact” (6). And of course that broadening of boundaries, the sense that the extraordinary and unexpected are just around the corner, brings writers pleasure. Hephzibah Roskelly writes: “Groups are tailor made for playing. The group can assign roles, set up rules, act out situations, consider possibilities, and arrive at solutions—and have fun—as they talk together” (2003, 50).

One of the most persistent fears of inexperienced writers is that the group will overpower their individuality, but poet Barry Spacks believes that writers who fear being jerked hither and thither by the conflicting “reactions and prescriptions” of their peers should relax: “Those ideas that do not speak to your essence simply slide away, but now and then a brilliant ‘save’ will occur as you profit from seeing your work as if you’d taken on new sets of eyes. And there’s also the side-product of mind-sharpening that comes from trying to articulate a complex response. And sometimes the hoped-for confirmation that you’re really on to something” (2004).

Nevertheless, the belief that groups tend to homogenize the style and subject of their members are not unfounded. Poet Paul Willis recalls being told by Robert Hass, “Writing groups tend to revise toward clarity and away from strangeness.” Willis goes on to say: “That has felt true to me. The danger is the loss of a distinctive voice, of an essential non-rational quality. On the other hand, if we need to know what is ‘too’ strange in our writing, a writing group is a good place to find out” (2004). Longtime writing group leader Perie Longo adds: “Writing groups are a bit like snakes, full of beauty or sting. They can move you to unprecedented heights, if they have the right make up—challenge you to look closer and improve what is there. But they can also poison your work, if opinions are too dominant. In commentary, sensitivity is key. The voice of each poet needs to be respected. But groups can help you shed the skin of each poem, help it move where it needs to go” (2004).

Writers can be difficult at times, and groups must be prepared to adapt and compromise. If writers sometimes crave the approbation of their peers, at other times they can be frustratingly solitary. If at times they make good use of criticism from their colleagues, at other times this criticism may make them want to scream or to give up writing altogether. If writers can commiserate well with others suffering fates they themselves have experienced, they can also be hopelessly egotistical and mean.

Simply *forming* a writing group that meets outside of a school setting requires diligence and ingenuity. Chris Golde suggests a writing group be put together with the following criteria in mind:

- Groups are best organized along different lines and themes
Having a shared bond is an important basis for building intellectual trust.
- The participants should have a similar commitment to the group.
- A long-term commitment to the group is important.
- The number of participants should be limited, with the size of the group geared to the frequency of presentation.
- A group convener helps: someone to reserve a space, remind people who is on, etc. (1996)

We’ve found that in poetry groups having two or three more members in the group than is absolutely desirable is a good safety measure. Someone is always out of town or at work on something else, and there is

no more discouraging meeting for a writing group than one where there are only two or three participants. On those rare occasions when everyone is able to make it to the meeting, less work will be accomplished, but there is a satisfaction in having everyone together. However, when members are all working on longer projects—essays, short stories, novel chapters, plays—a group with as few as three participants can function effectively. As long as the work is distributed ahead of time so that everyone can read it before arriving, members should be able to receive valuable and extensive feedback in a relatively short time span.

For many writers, especially those living far from urban centers, locating other writers who want to come together seems daunting. Tina Marie Smith recommends looking for fellow writers in the workplace. She claims four advantages for such groups: (1) everyone is already there, ready to meet; (2) companies often have a large and pleasant meeting space that can be used after work; (3) the writers in the group will share a common bond and level of professionalism; and (4) the networking done among writers in the group may also benefit the company for which they work (Smith 2003, 22–23).

If seeking group members at work fails, writers can always try the Internet. Fortunately, writers can take advantage online of the equivalent of posting notices in the local newspaper or on the notice boards of area coffee shops or bookstores. The Web site forwriters.com lists both national and local writing groups, as does the Yahoo! directory for Creative Writing Workshops (dir.yahoo.com/Arts/Humanities/Literature/Creative_Writing/Workshops/). In Britain, writers may turn to the National Association of Writers' Groups (www.nawg.co.uk/).

Online writing groups solve two of the biggest problems facing most writers when they want to meet with one another: time and space. Mary Pat Mahoney laments that after “I put eight hours on the job, ferry my sons to after-school activities, prepare dinner, and attempt to make a dent in the pile of laundry . . . I can usually squeeze in two hours of writing, if I don't fall asleep first! There's barely enough time to write, let alone get together with my fellow writers for a critique session. That's why I was so excited to start an on-line writing group” (2003, 67). Deepa Kandaswamy belongs to a writing group with members in India, Britain, Australia, Hong Kong, Canada, and the United States. Clearly, members cannot convene face-to-face for their meetings. Nevertheless, Kandaswamy finds the group functions effectively, provided participants interact the way they would with friends. He believes members need “individual attention;

pats on the back; prompt responses; a little empathy; and honest, intelligent, and gentle critiques” (2003, 95).

Once the group has formed, work is far from over. A writing group is not a perpetual motion machine: it needs constant, if usually minor, attention on the part of *all* of its members. Spacks warns that unwary groups can devolve from a locus for serious criticism to “the kaffeeklatsch, offering mainly a chance to socialize” (2004). Jeffrey Golub proposes a number of strategies for making participant interaction successful. He suggests group members practice the following skills during meetings:

- Ask appropriate questions as well as answer them.
- Contribute and respond, but do not dominate the discussion.
- Help the group reach agreement.
- Recognize the significance of nonverbal communication.
- Draw the group back to the topic.
- Check perceptions about and clarify the meanings of statements and ideas.
- Seek people’s opinions, especially those who have not been talking. (2000, 86)

Even when groups are running smoothly, however, writers who come to rely too extensively on their group—whether it meets online or in person—inevitably face disappointments. Not everyone’s advice will be equally useful, and advice may too often take the form of encouragement rather than close critical scrutiny. Tara Harper cautions: “If you are looking for a writing group to fulfill your need for professional-quality editing, you had better think about this a bit. How many professional editors do you know who hang out in writing groups just so that they can give away their time and skills for free?” (2000).

Nevertheless, both the authors of this book have benefited for decades from sharing our work in groups that have consisted of friends, colleagues, and even former students. And we are not alone. Ken Autrey points out: “Some writers, such as Ray Bradbury, have participated in a writing group for much of their careers, believing that they continue to need stimulation and critical commentary from other accomplished voices” (2004). Barry Spacks believes that “putting new poems to the test of comment by peers [is] a central device in the toolbox of poetry-work” (2004). Above all, writing groups will continue to “offer a means for individuals, both in and outside of school, to enter literate communities” (Gere 1987, 121).