

Writing Groups - Why and How?

Teaching and Learning Unit of Social Sciences

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1. Writing group - what and why?

A writing group in this context consists of three to six writers with a common academic background. Each member of the group writes his/her own text, and the group meets regularly to give each other professional and useful feedback on each other's unfinished texts.

This booklet describes a well-tested concept for writing groups developed for students writing their theses. The concept has been used with success by groups of writers at undergraduate, graduate and PhD-level. Recommendations for group size, text volumes, how long meetings should be etc. are based on writing a thesis and can be adjusted if the group does not think that the recommendations are appropriate. With a little imagination, the design can be used for many other written and oral genres.

Writing groups do not replace academic supervision, but should be seen as a supplement that strengthens the student's text production, language and argumentation. Feedback from the group can be useful when preparing for supervisory sessions.

What you can gain from a writing group

A writing group is rewarding for writers due to a number of reasons:

The writer can improve his/her text. The writing group's qualified readers ask questions about comprehension, point out areas that need further explanation and make suggestions for improving the focus of the text, identify language problems etc. This feedback may help the writer to improve the quality of the text and clarify the argumentation of the project.

The writer can find inspiration by seeing other people's texts. Although group members write about different things, they can be inspired by each other's language, structure, argumentation, source use etc. Former members of writing groups often mention inspiration from reading other people's texts as the greatest benefit of being part of a writing group.

The writer has deadlines in the writing process. Deadlines provide incentives to produce text continuously, and this is appreciated by many writers. Members of the writing group also share tips and tricks to optimise the writing process.

The writer gets neutral feedback from people who are not involved in the final assessment of the product. This offers another approach than the one taken in academic supervision, where the supervisor often assesses the work upon completion.

You learn to give and receive feedback, which is a highly appreciated skill in most academic contexts.

Writing-group researchers have found the following advantages of participating in a writing group:

- Increased output (Lee and Boud 2003)
- Increased motivation (Murray 2001)
- Less feeling of isolation (Aitchison 2003)
- Increased confidence (Badley 2008)

Professionalism

Many years of experience in writing groups have taught us that members benefit more from being in a group, if the group has a relatively firm structure.

The best strategy is to have a writing-group consultant assigned to the group at the first meetings. The consultant can ensure a professional start of the group, and make sure that writers comply with the group's principles in practice. A writing-group consultant with experience in text feedback can also show the writers examples of how to give useful feedback, and will be able to help the group to take a professional approach to the writing and feedback process.

What you need to join a writing group

You can start in a writing group once you have selected a topic, provided that you are willing to start writing something. However, it is not too late to join a writing group, although you are closer to submission. It is almost always rewarding to get feedback; even if the writing group does not know your project in detail.

You can also participate in a writing group, if you are writing your project with another person.

However, all writers should consider whether they want to commit themselves to be part of a writing group before joining. It causes problems for the group, if several group members drop out along the way. Being part of a group requires active participation, and you should consider whether you think the benefits are worth your efforts.

The writer must be willing to:

- Participate in two-hour meetings and prepare for two hours before each meeting
- Write and submit drafts on a regular basis
- Keep deadlines for submitting texts
- Show up for scheduled meetings and be on time
- Prepare for the meetings by reading the texts of the other group members

Happy writing!

2. Organisation and agreements

This section describes how to start a good writing group, including what should happen at the first meeting, and the agreements to make from the beginning.

Over time, each group will develop its own way of doing things, and this is fine as long as everyone in the group is satisfied with developments. However, our general experience is that writing groups work best with a very tight structure. So, we recommend that you start with *as much structure as possible*, as it is easier to relax rules that prove unnecessary than to tighten rules later in the process.

Group size

A typical writing group consists of four to five writers. A group of three persons is vulnerable to absence and dropout. A group of six persons involves more preparation for the meetings and requires extra meeting discipline and management.

Group composition

It is a good idea to compose the group so that all members have similar deadlines to avoid that single members are neglected at the end of the process.

It is not important that the group members are working on similar topics. When the writing-group members are working on different topics, it is easier for them to see if the text is unclear or too trivial, in contrast to the supervisor, who usually knows the topic well.

Presentation at the first meeting

We suggest that the group members spend the first meeting on introducing themselves and presenting the projects they are working on. They should also lay down some common rules for the group as well as match their expectations for the onward process. This means that there is no text feedback preparation for the first meeting, but it might be a good idea to agree to send some background info in advance, for instance a timeline for your work.

Below you will find some suggestions for how each group member can present himself or herself at the first meeting.

1. **Topic.** Give a short presentation of your project. Do you have research questions? Why did you choose to write about this topic? Academic reasons? Personal reasons? Which knowledge or previous experience can you draw upon for this project?
2. **Horizon.** What is the deadline for your project? How fixed is the deadline and why?

3. **Process status.** What have you already collected and produced? Which texts have you read/found? Have you made your own empirical studies? In what form is your data available? How much text have you written?
4. **Work style.** What kind of experience do you have from previous writing processes? What do you need to focus on in this writing process? Where do you write?
5. **Supervisor.** Who is your academic supervisor? Have you had meetings with him/her? Why did you choose this particular supervisor? What does your supervisor say about your project? Have you and your supervisor made a plan for the onward process?
6. **Expectations.** What do you expect from the group? How can the writing group support you in your writing? Do you have any special wishes for meeting discipline and meeting frequency?
7. **Ambitions.** What ambitions do you have? For instance, quick submission, a good process, a certain grade, publication, application of your work.

Modes of the writing process

According to Haas (2009), the writer changes between five different modes when working on a major written project. It may be useful to be aware of which mode you are currently in. This will enable you to describe your mode to the writing group and therefore also your need for feedback, and it will help you to avoid being stuck in a mode for too long.

The modes do not follow each other chronologically or with a form of causality. Writing can begin in any of the modes and move on to any other mode after a few minutes or several weeks.

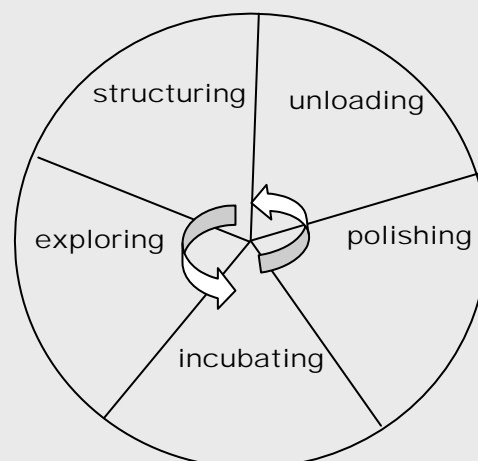
In the **exploring** mode the writer finds topics, looks for literature, researches, brainstorms and tries to see possibilities for the text.

In the **unloading** mode the writer simply writes whatever comes to his or her mind without thinking about structure in order to get some thoughts down on paper. The writer is writing to herself/himself, and not to a reader.

In the **incubating** mode there is no writing or other visible work on the project, but the writer is in a thinking process, pondering or finding courage to take the next steps. Incubating may be necessary for the writer to move forward with his/her project and should not be mistaken for procrastination where the project is deliberately avoided.

In the **structuring** mode the writer writes a draft or edits a text targeted at a reader, i.e. what we normally associate with writing. This mode is the most dominant in a healthy writing process.

In the **polishing** mode the writer works on the layout, wording, formalities etc. of the project.



Agreements at the first meeting

In addition to the presentation, we recommend that the writing group spends the first meeting agreeing the following:

Meeting frequency

How often the group meets depends on a combination of the length of the writing process and scope of the projects. It is generally better to meet often to discuss short drafts, than to meet rarely to discuss long drafts.

We suggest that students writing their theses meet every two weeks.

We know from experience that some writing groups meet too rarely in the beginning, reportedly because they do not have text prepared. That is a pity: First of all because the very purpose of writing-group meetings is to ensure that writers produce text regularly and at an early stage. Secondly our impression is that the beginning of the writing process is a challenging phase, in which feedback, exchange and encouragement are in demand and useful.

It is a good idea to plan the meetings long term, so that members can plan other activities around the meetings. Schedule the next 3-4 meetings regularly.

Time consumption

We recommend that each meeting lasts no more than two hours. In order for the group to be a success, it is important that members know how long a meeting will last; otherwise they will opt out of meetings, once the writing process intensifies closer to the deadline. Moreover, it is difficult to concentrate for more than two hours.

Set a time limit for preparation. Preparation should not take longer than the meeting itself.

Text volumes

It is also important to agree on a maximum text volume for each member to send to the rest of the group. The volume must be smaller than normally anticipated, if everyone should have time to give and receive feedback in the two hours scheduled. We recommend that each member writes no more than five pages. In this way, in a group of four persons, each member must prepare maximum 15 pages for each meeting.

It may be frustrating to select five pages out of a larger piece of writing. But from experience we know that you can easily receive useful feedback on five pages. Furthermore if the group allows longer texts, it is difficult to give proper feedback within the time-frame of the meeting. Furthermore, preparation for writing-group meetings must not be so time consuming that it interferes with the

writer's own writing process. Therefore, we recommend that writing groups take volume limitations seriously and indicate in the cover letter (see chapter 3) the sections that come before and after the text sent.

In principle there is no lower limit, and a text of 1½ pages can easily form the basis for useful feedback.

Deadlines

We recommend that the group agrees that texts are sent to the rest of the group no later than two days before a meeting, so that busy feedback givers can plan their preparation. Texts should not be sent so early that they become distant and are no longer relevant by the time the group meets.

Keep the meetings academic

We recommend keeping academic time and social time apart to maximise the academic benefits of the meetings. There is no doubt that the meetings will work best if they are held in a friendly atmosphere, but it is a good idea to remain focused on the texts and the academic aspects during the actual meeting. The group can then arrange to meet socially at other times.

Where should the group meet?

For the same reason we recommend that writing groups meet in some sort of conference room and not in the private homes of group members. This makes it easier to maintain an academic focus and ensures that no one is distracted by having to act as a host or hostess.

3. Preparing for feedback meetings

In between meetings, writers must produce texts, select the pages to be sent to the group, and read and prepare feedback for the other group members' texts.

Text must be produced

In an ideal writing process, text is produced in all phases; perhaps not text to be included in the final product, but drafts, free writing, notes for how the sources read could be included in the project, etc. Therefore, it should not be difficult to find some pages on which the group can give interesting feedback.

However, we know that many writers may occasionally experience difficulties producing text, see info-box on modes of the writing process above. A method which can be used both at the beginning and to get started on individual sections is described in the box below. This method is useful for overcoming self-criticism.

Free writing

Clear your desk, except from a blank piece of paper or the computer with an empty document open.

Write a question or a topic which you would like to write about at the top of the page or screen. Set the alarm for 10 minutes.

Write without stopping at all until the alarm goes off. Do not go back or make corrections. If you want to improve a sentence, write a new version.

If you cannot think of anything to write, write the question or theme you wrote at the top over and over again.

If you are working on a computer, you can turn off the screen, so you cannot see if you make mistakes or correct what you have written.

Sometimes you will waste 10 minutes. Sometimes you will write some good sentences or even drafts of short sections.

Sometimes you will get some thoughts down on paper, which have prevented you from getting started with your writing. It is worth trying.

Selecting a text for the writing group

A good writing-group text is first and foremost unfinished. When the writer still thinks that his/her text can be improved, he/she is more open to receiving feedback. Feedback on finished texts is a

waste of the group's time, and the writer may simply be annoyed by the feedback given by other group members.

If you are not used to receiving feedback, it may feel awkward to show other people texts that are unfinished and are not perfect.

But this is where you benefit from the writing group.

On the other hand, narrative text is to be preferred. It may be difficult for feedback givers to assess argumentation, unclear passages etc. if the writer has only sent keywords.

"Most people experience feedback as painful, however they get it. After all, getting feedback on an early draft usually means getting criticized before you've had a chance to make your piece as good as you can make it. But getting feedback on a final draft feels even worse because you're usually getting criticized for your very best work, and besides, you are so tired of working on it by now that you can't even bear to look at it any more"

(Elbow, 1981:238)

You should send a new text for each meeting. Resending a text which has already been reviewed by the writing group, very often sends the message that the writing group has to "approve" the revised version. This is not possible for the writing group, as the group cannot actually assess the project. The writing group is far

more useful in providing inspiration for a new section, which the writer is subsequently responsible for completing.

Text samples can be taken from all parts of the project: the introduction, the method, the theory, the discussions, etc. In the beginning of the writing process you can send texts which probably will not be included in the final product, but which includes thoughts about angles, problems, questions etc.

If you are unable to send a text for a meeting, we suggest that you, as a minimum, send an explanation and a status report of your process to the group before the meeting.

Cover letter

Enclose a cover letter with the pages you have selected and as a minimum describe what kind of text you have chosen and what you would like the group to review. This provides the readers with an angle when reviewing the text and ensures that the writer gets relevant input at the meeting. You can also write what is going well in your writing process, and inform the group if anything special has happened since the last meeting that influences your need for feedback.

You can also add dispositions and research questions to make it easier for the group to relate the selected text parts to the entire project.

Example of cover letter

Dear writing group

This text is in continuation of the text you got at the last meeting, and is therefore still from my theory chapter. Last time I ended with a table which was not explained further. Therefore I will start by explaining the table and then move on to other parts of the theory chapter. I would particularly like feedback on whether the descriptions in the various paragraphs (and not least my hypotheses on page 3) provide an overview of the very different areas I have worked in? Or do they need to be explained further? Does it make sense?

At the moment I am working on my interviews which I only have in a rough and incomplete version. But I get plenty of new ideas through this work and I feel I am on the right track. More ideas to link theory (including my table) and empirical studies are more than welcome. How do I move on from the theory to the empirical part?

See you on Friday

Reading other group members' texts

The purpose of preparing is to be able to give the other writers suggestions, different angles, objections and input, so the writers can improve their texts.

As described, preparation for a two-hour meeting should be no longer than two hours. We recommend that you print the texts for practical reasons, because most people read more thoroughly on paper, and because you can easily give the print to the writer, if you find this to be appropriate. You can also write notes in the margin when you are reading the text making it easier to remember. Working with a printout makes it possible to identify specific passages in the text that illustrate your feedback.

Begin with the cover letter

We recommend that you begin by reading the cover letter. This is the best way to ensure that you know what the writer wants you to look at and writers are usually happy to get response to their specific questions. This does not necessarily mean that you should keep important observations to yourself, because the writer has not mentioned these areas in the cover letter, however taking the cover letter as your starting point is a professional approach to feedback. If the cover letter does not target the reading assignment enough, the reader may start from other angles.

General academic criteria dictate that texts should:

- Comprise one coherent argumentation, which is documented and discussed
- Present sound academic proof for the central claims
- Build on the knowledge and tools used within the subject area (theories, methods, concepts)
- Give reasons for all choices made
- Use the accepted structures of the scientific genre
- Shift between the concrete and the abstract
- Be consistent and unambiguous with regard to the use of concepts and language
- Use correct, neutral and impersonal as well as precise language
- Contain meta communication aimed at the reader
- Follow common guidelines for references and formalities

Criterion-based feedback

Criterion-based reading relates the written text to the requirements and quality criteria in the study programmes, textbooks and teaching staff's descriptions of the goals according to which academic projects must be assessed. There are often local perceptions of what characterises a good text within a certain subject area, which are good to know and use. When giving feedback you try to identify which criteria the text meets, to what extent, where the text meets the criteria and where the text could be improved in relation to the criteria.

Writers often appreciate criterion-based feedback, because it gives you an idea of the goals/objectives of the text, and in which direction it should move to reach those goals/objectives. See examples of general criteria for academic texts in the box above.

Reader-based feedback

If the criteria for the texts are unclear or difficult to use as a basis for reading, you can let your reading be reader-based instead.

Reader-based reading is based on the immediate experience of how you, as a reader, are affected by the text, for example: What do I find particularly interesting? What annoys me and why? How does the language affect me?

It can be very interesting for the writer to hear how other people react to his/her text.

Summary as feedback

If none of the above reading strategies have worked, you can read the text in order to give a summary. The purpose of the reading will then be to find out exactly what the text is about and summarise it thoroughly to the writer. Writers may find it interesting to hear a reader's version of what the text communicates. It is not always the same as what the writer thinks, and can provide good reasons for revising the text.

Be assertive in your feedback

We would generally advise feedback givers to give their feedback assertively. We have often experienced feedback characterised by “perhaps it’s a little...” and “maybe it’s just me, but...”, which can be a waste of time. The professional task of feedback givers is to communicate ideas and make suggestions. Feedback is not about hiding or diluting your observations, but about communicating them in a way that is constructive, forward-thinking and acceptable for the writer. The most important principles of good feedback are described in more detail in the next chapter.

Prioritising feedback

We recommend that after reading the text you prioritise your observations and select the three most important issues for the writer to focus on. Such a prioritisation is often necessary for meetings to be time-efficient; and there are limits to how many suggestions a writer can cope with in one meeting.

4. The feedback meetings

This section describes the course of the feedback meetings and specifies how the person giving feedback and the person receiving feedback should act professionally.

The frame may seem stiff and formal, but has been developed to support the purpose of feedback; i.e. the person receiving feedback gets as much useful input to work with in his/her text as possible. On the other hand, the purpose is *not* to come up with a common solution, and therefore there is no point in engaging in discussions. Discussions are time-consuming, and any kind of agreement will deprive writers of their power to decide about their own texts. It is difficult to go home and decide to do something else than what was agreed in the writing group. And in our type of writing group, it is important that the group's role is purely advisory, and that the writer always has the final word.

In order to avoid discussions, it is important that the person receiving feedback stays quiet during feedback from the other group members. Therefore, as a feedback giver try to avoid discussions by not wording the feedback as questions. This is more difficult than it sounds.

Agenda for feedback meetings

1. Appoint a time-manager and find out how much time there is for each member, and remember to allocate time for scheduling a new meeting before the two hours are up.
2. The first person receiving feedback starts the round by briefly telling if there is anything the group should know that has not been mentioned in the cover letter.
3. The first person giving feedback has the floor and comments on the text, while the writer stays quiet. If the person giving feedback spends more time than allocated, the time-manager must stop the person and move on to the next feedback giver.
4. Other feedback givers get to speak one at a time and comment on the text in the same way.
5. If there is any time left, the writer may ask the feedback givers questions.
6. The same applies for the texts of the other group members.
7. Schedule a new meeting.
8. You can also evaluate whether anything in the preparation for the meeting or the meeting itself could be done differently and better next time.

The person receiving feedback should remember:

- to have a printout of his/her own text in order to make it easier to follow the feedback
- to stay quiet
- to listen
- not to reject the feedback by negative body language
- to take notes
- only to interrupt with necessary clarifying questions
- not agree or disagree on the feedback at the meeting
- to thank for the feedback

The person giving feedback should remember:

- to prioritise his/her feedback
- to try to help the writer to move on in the writing process
- not to ask the writer questions
- to illustrate the feedback by pointing at passages in the text - also for positive comments
- to repeat briefly if he/she agrees with the comments of the previous feedback givers

Receive feedback as positive input

For most people it is more difficult to receive feedback than to give feedback. Most people are prepared to give friendly and

constructive feedback, whereas it can be difficult to listen to and accept feedback on your own texts.

It is important to see feedback as suggestions, not corrections. It is a privilege that other people have read and related to your text. As a writer you choose the suggestions you find useful and ignore the irrelevant ones, so there is no point in defending yourself against the suggestions of the writing group.

In fact, there is no point in even trying to separate the useful suggestions from the irrelevant suggestions at the meeting. You do not have to make up your mind about the feedback until you start working on your text again. It is a good idea to accept *some* suggestions, but not all, and think of *why* you choose some and not others.

When receiving feedback the writer should have a 'the-more-the-merrier' approach: The more feedback the writer gets from the feedback round, the more opportunities for improving the project. The other members of the writing group are qualified professionals, who the writer should have an interest in using in the best possible way. This is done best by staying quiet and noting all input for later consideration.

Writers who interrupt to defend themselves, will experience that they do not gain as much from the feedback as they would if they had stayed quiet and not asked questions until the feedback round was over.

It is also a good idea to remember that the final target group for the text only sees the actual text. It does not help that the project can be explained orally, if the text cannot stand on its own.

Give feedback as positive input

Many academics are more trained in criticising a text than suggesting how to improve it. A critical approach is necessary and useful when reading writing-group texts but given that the purpose of writing groups is to help writers improve their texts, it is important that feedback givers can shift focus from identifying errors and unclear passages to suggesting how to improve the texts.

In the preparation phase the feedback giver has read the text and prioritised some particularly important issues. Now these issues need to be worded, so they can be applied as useful suggestions for improvement by the writer. This is done by following four rules in the order below:

- **Be kind.** First and foremost, feedback is meant to motivate the person receiving feedback to keep writing.
- **Be concrete.** Base the feedback on the text. Point at the passages you comment on, and avoid too many sporadic and general comments.

- **Be constructive.** Try to make the feedback forward-looking, for instance, make suggestions to what the feedback receiver could do to improve the text and promote the writing process.
- **Be critical.** People receiving feedback want to hear your honest opinion and do not just want to be praised. As long as the feedback giver complies with the three other rules above, it is perfectly OK to be critical.

Feedback givers need not be afraid to repeat something that has already been said. This only emphasises that this is an important issue, which the feedback receiver should take seriously.

After the meeting

It is a good idea to turn on the computer and start writing useful feedback and your own thoughts into the text as soon as the meeting is over while you can still remember the feedback. Do not use the writing-group meetings as an excuse not to work any more on the project that day.

5. Writing groups at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Copenhagen

Students writing their theses and PhD students from the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Copenhagen can get help to start writing groups at Teaching and Learning Unit of Social Sciences.

In groups of no less than four, PhD students can get a meeting with a consultant from the Teaching and Learning Unit of Social Sciences.

Writing groups for students writing their theses are typically formed at the departments' seminars on thesis writing. The groups will then be offered an introduction with a consultant from the Teaching and Learning Unit of Social Sciences. The purpose of the introduction is to establish a professional framework for the writing group and to train group members in constructive feedback.

The introduction is planned in agreement between the group and the consultant. The consultant will act as chairperson at the writers' presentations and discussion of expectations. The consultant will also make sure that everyone in the group knows the framework of the writing group concept and the principles for feedback. The consultant will suggest a tight structure, which can be relaxed later.

The group will also try giving feedback on specific texts. The role of the consultant is to act as a time-manager and chairperson, and to help the group comply with the rules of the writing group. The consultant will have prepared feedback on some of the texts and give exemplary feedback. It is important to emphasise that the consultant is only there to help. The group should quickly become autonomous.

The consultant can attend meetings with the writing group later in the process, if necessary. The purpose of such meetings may be to evaluate the writing group, or to help the group if it has experienced problems.

The starting point for our writing groups for students writing their theses is meetings of no more than two hours based on a maximum of five pages per group member.

6. Literature

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Other booklets from the Teaching and Learning Unit of Social Sciences

Study Groups (2010)

Study Skills for International Students. (2007)

See also the Teaching and Learning Unit's website;

www.samf.ku.dk/pcs/english