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## New Faculty Writing Groups

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In composition, writing groups are standard operating procedure. It's in these groups that we learn to write, learn to read, and learn to be constructive critics of others' work. (Or, that's the goal.) First-year students need guidance when they learn these skills. They need to know they are not alone as they become competent in academic writing, and they need to learn that others have strategies and skills that might be helpful to them. First-year students are not the only ones who need this type of support. So do first-year tenure-track faculty.

Forming a writing group for first-year tenure-track faculty is a proven method of helping these faculty members strengthen their confidence as academic writers in the often overwhelming and stressful time of acclimating to a new career, a new life, and a new professional perception of one's self. Writing groups can help new faculty members feel they are not alone as they struggle to (re)locate their *writing mojo* after the often exhausting work of completing the dissertation.

### **The benefits of a writing group**

In the television series *Lost*, a common phrase many of the characters mutter is, “live together or die alone.” We could look at academia the same way. An academic career—we have all heard the lore—is a solitary and isolating experience, particularly when we are writing. It doesn't have to be so. Groups can make the writing experience more meaningful and fruitful.

Another benefit of writing groups is that your writing group peers can hold you accountable for your work. If, for example, you state that you will turn your dissertation chapter into an article by a certain date (next week?!?), your writing group colleagues will remind you about your progress. This is not to say that you need reminding, of course; you will always remember what you haven't yet completed, but the external voices of reminder can be helpful. These writing group colleagues can motivate you to meet the goals you set for yourself. Likewise, you will do the same for them. Indeed, sometimes the role of a writing group is to help each other set realistic goals for ourselves.

Additionally, these groups allow you to meet colleagues from across campus, and the groups can help you discover what these colleagues are working on. Maybe there is an opportunity for cross-disciplinary collaboration. Maybe you have a scientific perspective on a particular issue that, as a fine arts scholar, your colleague does not share. You can inform her work. She

can inform yours.

## **Types of Groups**

Writing groups can form based on broad field divisions (social sciences, hard sciences, humanities, fine arts) or by department (political science, English, chemistry, drama). You can form groups based on any number of different factors. It's important to recognize that each group member will have varying needs and perspectives (as well as personalities). Groups will need to be sensitive to those individual needs. That means you might need more than one type of group. That's OK. The more groups the merrier (and potentially, the more successful). The groups can be as small or as large as you wish; however, smaller groups can be more focused, and therefore, can be more effective.

## **The obstacles of a writing group**

Some of the obstacles in new faculty writing groups are similar to those found in first-year composition courses: (1) lack of sincerity or commitment to the group/process, (2) the inability (or unwillingness) to offer usable feedback on another's work, and (3) scheduling.

Some members of your group might not be getting what they need, so they stop attending meetings and participating in reviews. In this case, restructuring the group might be beneficial. Second, scheduling can be difficult, as new faculty members are juggling many activities as they settle into their new careers. As George noted in an earlier [ProfHacker column](#), Doodle can help in that regard. If face-to-face meetings are problematic, online meetings can also work. Lastly, just as in most first-year composition classes, the critique of another's work is difficult. No one wants to be harsh in his or her feedback to a potential life-long colleague, but the disingenuous comment, "oh, it's good" doesn't do anyone any favors.

Constructive feedback is a learned skill that requires time and trust.

## **How do you get started?**

First, you will want to ask yourself some questions. (summarized from an article in AAUP by Jennifer I. Friend and Juan Carlos González, “[Get Together to Write](#).”)

- What do I want from a writing group?
- What do I expect from a reader of my works-in-progress?
- What do I expect to contribute as a reader of others’ works-in-progress?
- What are my priorities for a writing group?
- What’s more important to me: professional publication, or personal satisfaction?
- What kind of timeframe can I reasonably expect to maintain?
- What kind of interaction with others do I want (face-to-face meetings once a month, online forums daily)?

You can ask first-year tenure-track faculty who are in your cohort to join you in a writing group. You could work through your dean. You could ask the Excellence in Teaching center (or the equivalent on your campus) for recommendations. Your dean or other campus mentors could help you find facilitators for your group if that’s the way you want to go. (You might also choose not to have an outside person in your group, as sharing responsibility among group members is more your style.)

## **What do you have to add?**

What have been your experiences with writing groups (face-to-face, online, or other forms)?

What are some of the solutions to writing group obstacles you have found? What are some of

the many benefits? What advice could you offer new tenure-track faculty as they begin the process of writing for a living? Leave your advice/comments below.

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