

Nurse Author & Editor

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In the Company of Writers

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The pressure to publish is felt by many in academia as they strive to achieve favorable faculty evaluations and obtain tenure and promotion. Those outside of academia may also have a desire to disseminate important nursing contributions. Regardless of the motivation, it is important to share scholarly work and nursing insight with others through publication. Unfortunately, many people face obstacles that interfere with the writing process, including a lack of time, aptitude, anxiety, fear of failure, lack of confidence, knowledge, or motivation (Cable, Boyer, Colbert, & Boyer, 2013; Houfek et al., 2010; Ness, Duffy, McCallum & Price, 2014). Additionally, writing can be a solitary activity that isolates you and requires discipline and self-direction. Some writers may need the structure and support of

a writing community to help them overcome these barriers and become successful authors. A writing community, in the form of a group, retreat, workshop, or another writing partnership may help to address some challenges that authors face. These groups may assist you in dedicating time on task to writing, make you accountable to yourself and the group, provide emotional or editorial support, offer peer or even expert opinions/feedback, and help prioritize writing activities. Additionally, they can offer intellectual stimulation and force participants to reserve time to write. There are a variety of writing community options available so be sure to consider what is the best type of writing group to join.

TYPES OF WRITING GROUPS

Typically, there are three types of common writing communities or groups (Reeves, 2002). The first is a reading and writing group. This group usually provides an opportunity to present work written at a previous time to group members who may offer a critical review and constructive critique, raise questions about the work, or make suggestions. Usually these sessions are a short duration (an hour or two for each meeting) and typically meet regularly during designated preselected days and times.

The second type of writing group is a writing practice group. With this approach, writers come together, either physically or virtually, and spend time spontaneously writing. Members of this type of writing group meet together at a designated time, but each member is independently writing about individual topics. The focus for this group is dedicated writing time and not peer or group review of the work.

A writing workshop or retreat is the third type of writing community. This approach usually has a director or facilitator who guides participants through a variety of writing activities (writing practice, reading, critiquing, and revision) over an extended time period, usually a full day or multiple days, with the end result being

a final written product. Sometimes, long-term support for the ongoing development and finalizing the writing project will continue after the retreat concludes.

CONSIDERATIONS

If you are interested in joining or forming a writing community, there are some things you need to consider so you select the approach that will best meet your needs. One important factor is the size of the writing group, which may vary depending upon the type of writing community. Read and write groups are generally smaller. Kulage and Larson (2016) suggest group size membership of 4-7 as reasonable. Small groups such as this ensure that members are provided with the appropriate feedback, critique, and interaction needed to strengthen writing. Some read and write groups involve partners or subgroups of a larger writing group. Frequently this may involve matching a senior mentor with a novice writer. If using this paired approach, the size of the group is not as critical as ensuring a good match of working styles, group commitment, content knowledge, and relationship between the dyad.

A group dedicated solely to writing, without the reading and critique can be much larger—almost unlimited numbers. However, this group size can seem a bit impersonal and intimidating for inexperienced writers or those insecure with writing activities.

Lastly, the writing workshop size can vary but nursing writing workshops frequently have group sizes of less than 12 participants per facilitator per retreat (National League for Nursing, n.d.; Oermann, Nicoll, & Block, 2014). The critical factor for this type of writing community is to ensure adequate time is available for the facilitator to provide individual guidance and assist with writing project review and development.

Another factor to consider involves writing group composition. Nurse authors need to consider if they want to participate in a discipline specific group or an interdisciplinary writing group. Engaging in writing activities with only nurses is helpful for read and write groups or writing workshops since participants will know disciplinary specific venues, be familiar with the topics, aware of gaps in the literature, and can help to provide specific suggestions directed at the targeted readers. However, an interdisciplinary approach may be more appropriate for writing aimed at a more diverse audience or for a writing practice group that doesn't depend upon critique.

Another membership factor is how writers join the group. Is the writing community open to all and can participants attend when convenient? Or, does the group have a closed membership with participation by invitation only? Open groups can be effective for writing practice activities but this free flowing participation doesn't work well for read and write groups that depend upon trust and community building that enable authors to freely share their works publically.

When exploring what group might work best for you, consider meeting location and timing. Some people may want that physical closeness associated with a face-to-face group meeting where they can see actual written materials in person. Also, this personal meeting helps to ensure accountability where attendance or lack of attendance would be easily noticed. Others may prefer a virtual writing group. These groups rely on electronic communication such as email or Twitter or they may use more sophisticated technology such as interactive video meetings using Skype, Zoom, or other delivery platforms. These virtual group meetings can be advantageous as they do not require travel and can draw members from a wide geographic area. However, one drawback involves the loss of some personal connection due to the limited ability to fully capture physical expression and limitations on group interactions.

Writers also need to consider timing of writing groups. Before joining a writing group, it is important to self-assess writing styles, needs, and preferences. Consider how much time can be devoted to participation in a writing group. Do weekly, monthly, or even less frequently occurring groups meet your needs? Also, consider time of day and length of the meeting. For writing practice groups, you would want to select a meeting time that corresponds to your peak writing productivity. Some writing practice groups meet in the early morning before the workday begins. This could be problematic for writers whose performance peaks in the afternoon or evening. Conversely, people who arise early may be tired in the evening and not function effectively for a late day writing practice group.

Along with time of day you need to consider how often you can reasonably meet with your group and how long you can devote your time to the writing group on a regular basis. Are you more likely to attend a short weekly meeting held conveniently near your work location or would you prefer to immerse yourself in a day (or multiple day) writing session at an off-site location? Sometimes these group meetings are held locally at a coffee shop or library. Others writing groups may involve traveling to a hotel, rented retreat locations like a conference center or bed and breakfast, or even spa-like settings. These spaces away from home and work offer the freedom to immerse yourself in writing and prevent work and family interruptions. However, travel and accommodation costs may be expensive for these retreats.

GROUP GUIDELINES

Once you've decided to either start a writing community or join an existing group there are some general guidelines that must be established. Members must agree upon the purpose and focus of the group. A clear plan for the writing group and meeting times should be mutually agreed upon by group members. They should

determine group aim, purpose, process, structure, leadership, and expectations of participants.

When working with a writing group it is important that group members agree upon group activities and set some ground rules and expectations. Offering respectful, thoughtful, collaborative and supportive guidance to other writing community members will foster mutual respect and promote success. Realize that sharing writing can be intimidating. Even successful writers may feel exposed and vulnerable when sharing their work. Group members need to acknowledge those feelings of inadequacy and potential rejection and offer feedback in a sensitive manner.

Other possible considerations for the group can include discussing a plan for managing non-accountable group members, people who get sidetracked from the writing topic, and prevention of potential uncivil or unsupportive interactions. Suggestions such as responding to writers by asking questions or commenting in a direct, respectful yet kind manner can be a better approach to writer development than harsh criticism and extensive editing (Kulage & Larson, 2016). Criticism is vague, negative, and fault finding. Critique, when used effectively, is positive, specific, and structured.

Another key strategy for success involves reserving some time at the beginning or ending of the group meeting time for socializing. Having a planned time for sharing of personal updates can help eliminate distractions and digressions during the writing group. Social bonding such as having a drink or a meal together can effectively help to build community and may eliminate diversionary discussions during the formal writing group time.

CONCLUSION

Participating in a community committed to writing can provide writing support, eliminate isolation associated with writing, and may offer insight for writing improvements. Literature also supports the effectiveness of writing groups in increasing publication outputs (Oermann, Nicoll, & Block, 2014). So, consider what sort of writing group may be most helpful with your writing. Certainly, being in the company of writers warrants exploration for those interested in further advancing their writing.

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