

HEY JANE! How can I start a “shared space” writing group?

JANE SAYS:

I have trouble sitting down to write and getting into a “zone” so that I can make progress on scholarly projects. I have so much on my plate and get distracted by my other responsibilities! I have heard that regular groups for writing with others can help. How do these groups work?



Scholarly writing can be lonely, and plenty of research shows that it can be helpful to make writing more social, providing accountability and support. For people who want to work in a space with others, getting together for in-person “shared space” writing is an easy strategy that can contribute to your consistency and productivity as a writer.

There are different ways to approach social writing. One model is to organize periodic writing retreats like the ones started by geologists Mary Anne Holmes and Suzanne O’Connell as part of an NSF grant that became the model for the SWS Winter and ASA pre-conferences on gender, science and organizations. In these sessions, participants get together for one day to share goals, write and network in a particular research area. A second approach is to participate in “virtual” online communities for writers, as in the popular free site phinished.org and pricey subscription services like academicwritingclub.com (see the resources area below for related books and websites). The third approach combines the regularity of the virtual mechanisms and the face-to-face benefits of the retreat: “shared space” writing. An early example comes from groups started in 2010 at Skidmore College that brought together faculty across campus for weekly writing sessions followed by a lunch discussion of goal setting and troubleshooting about barriers to scholarly productivity. In the first year, 100% of respondents agreed that participation increased their research productivity and all said they would strongly recommend the group to a colleague. Similar groups have taken off with faculty at The College of New Jersey and with graduate students at SUNY Buffalo.

Weekly shared writing groups are simple and can be modified to fit your circumstances. In a nutshell, people in shared space groups find a time and place where they can write together for a few hours, and commit to showing up. One person sets up the group’s calendar and sends reminders. Everyone brings whatever they need to write that day, usually a laptop (and cord). At the meetings, participants briefly share their concrete writing goals for that session. Then, they write independently for a set amount of time. At the end, they report back to the group on whether or not they met their goals. Often, they conclude with a meal or snack to foster bonding, create opportunities also for (peer-) mentoring, and reward their hard work.

How do I get a group started?

First, find a suitable space on your campus where your group will be able to write without distractions. It may be good to find a place that is not associated with other activities (e.g., committee meetings, classes). Many groups write in a study room in the library; some campuses have designated faculty or graduate student space in the library so look for this. Alternatively, seek a room on campus that can be booked weekly and where you will not be interrupted. Be sure there are electrical sockets in case folks need to plug in their laptops. Wifi is a plus, too. Public space like a café might work for people who like a more bustling environment, but the danger is that people from outside the group might interrupt.

Next, figure out a time every week when you will be able to use this space for 2.5-3.5 hours to meet and write. Try and think of a time that will work for others you know on campus. At first, seek a schedule that works for the current semester. As the group gets established, you may settle on a time that can be standardized across semesters.

Then, send out an email to people you know to invite them to join the group. Encourage people to invite others. In the email, describe the purposes of the group, when and where it will meet each week, and the agenda.

A typical agenda is as follows:

--9:30-9:45: Everyone sets up and gets ready to write. Going around the room, participants each state their concrete writing goals for the session.

--9:45-11:45: Participants work independently and quietly.

--11:45-12:00: Participants share how it went: did they meet the goal(s) for that session?

-- 12:00 Lunch (optional)

Some groups write for two hours, some for three. Warning: don't overdo it! The literature on academic productivity warns against "binge writing" sessions because they are not sustainable (Silva 2007). Instead, as Robert Boice's (1990) research shows, the most productive writer write in regular, short periods up to one or two hours per day.

What if they don't come? How can I be sure I will not be doing "solo" writing?

To avoid this problem, and to increase accountability, set up poll on doodle to send with your invitation (www.doodle.com). Ask people to sign up for at least one session if they want to get reminders. Then, include the link to the poll when you send reminders and check it each week to be sure that at least two people are signed up for the session(s) that week—if not, you can send an email to cancel undersubscribed sessions and avoid showing up to find you are all alone.

Are there any other rules or norms?

The purpose of the group is for everyone who participates to advance their scholarship. Participants in the group should try to make the space a good one for scholarly writing, and should support the others. Encourage people to stay for the whole session so that they can participate in the goal setting and the report-back time together. Encourage participants to focus on scholarly writing (rather than email, service-related or teaching work, or the siren call of social media). You may want to include these norms or any other specifics about your group in the email you send out to recruit new participants. Some groups emphasize confidentiality—this may be particularly important if you have untenured faculty or graduate students in the group.

How much work is it to organize a group like this? Is it worth it?

Starting a "Shared Space" Writing Group is not hard—the organizer just needs to scout out a location, set up a doodle poll and send an initial email, then send reminder emails every week. The dividends come from building a community of writers on your campus, and supporting one another. This is good for your own writing and scholarship and it is beneficial for networking and community. As one writing group participant at my institution (The College of New Jersey) shared, "Publication isn't really the point for me. [After childbirth and health-related problems] I let so many projects go over the years that I had no confidence in my abilities as a scholar and writer. Shared Space has helped me regain some of that confidence. The accountability the meetings provide has helped to keep me on track." Another agreed with the importance of shared accountability: "The shared space writing group has been incredibly helpful in terms of getting writing done. Those two hours are among the most productive hours for my writing—perhaps because it is a shared commitment I have made, and thus, I feel free to ignore email or the other things on my work 'to-do' list during that time, or perhaps it is just the act that other people around me are also writing." She added, "For me, it is the only time I see other people also struggling and succeeding and just in general putting effort into scholarship, and I really like that sense of community."

JANE still has you stumped? Don't worry. For more insights and additional resources please peruse the following resources:

Books:

Belcher, Wendy Laura. 2009. *Writing Your Journal Article in 12 Weeks: A Guide to Academic Publishing Success*. Los Angeles: SAGE.

Boice, Robert. 1990. *Professors as Writers: A Self-Help Guide to Productive Writing*. Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press.

Silvia, Paul. 2007. *How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

(continued on pg. 30)

(continued from pg. 29)

Internet resources and apps:

Phinished, online discussion and support for writing theses and dissertations: phinished.org

Pomodoro Technique: pomodorotechnique.com

Simple Pomodoro Timer iPhone App

Academic Ladder's Academic Writing Club: academicwritingclub.com

National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity: www.facultydiversity.org, founded by sociologist Kerry Ann Rockquemore.

Hey Jane! This is a project of the SWS Career Development Committee.

This column was guest written by **Liz Borland**, Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Sociology & Anthropology at The College of New Jersey, with special thanks to Kathrin Zippel and Laura Kramer for their helpful suggestions.

The *Hey Jane!* series editor is Andrea Miller.