# Starting a Writing Group

This handout introduces practices that you can use to start two basic types of writing groups: **sustained writing** groups and **peer review** groups. You can use this guide to try writing together with peers in your department, with friends outside of academia, or with one writing partner. There’s no one best way to run a writing group—try a few approaches and see what works best for you!

**Section 1: Getting Started**

**Logistics**

* Finding space:
	+ Reserve a Scholars Commons room: libcal.lib.utexas.edu/booking/scholars
	+ Reserve a PCL study room: libcal.lib.utexas.edu
	+ Open meeting spaces on campus: PCL Learning Commons, UT Libraries (lib.utexas.edu/help/librarylist)
	+ Ask your department’s Graduate Coordinator for help reserving a space
	+ Other options: home, coffee shop, public library, Google Hangouts
* Finding members:
	+ Contact your department’s grad student listserv
	+ Ask your Graduate Coordinator and professors about departmental writing groups
	+ Attend UWC, Libraries, and GSA events to meet students outside your discipline
* Scheduling:
	+ Use Google Forms or Doodle polls (both free) to determine shared availability

**Questions to Consider with your Group**

* **Purpose:** What do you hope you (and your group-mates) will get out of this group?
	+ **Tip:** Writing groups can offer emotional support, accountability, protected writing time, peer feedback, structured writing activities, and explicit writing instruction.
* **Goals:** What short term and long term goals will help you stay focused and productive?
	+ **Tip:** Be aspirational, but don’t set yourself up to fall short. Reasonable goals help you feel productive and satisfied, while “stretch goals” help you push yourself. They work best when set in tandem.
* **Leadership:** Who will facilitate group meetings? Who will oversee group logistics?
	+ **Tip:** Leaderes should facilitate in-meeting activities, enforce group expectations for in-meeting behavior, and handle scheduling, location, and communication logistics.
* **Time:** What days and times will you meet? How long will your meetings be?
	+ **Tip:** Set meeting times that will suit your purpose and facilitate success. For instance, 4-hour sustained writing sessions might seem ideal, but may not be realistic.
* **Duration & Frequency:** How long will you continue meeting and at what intervals?
	+ **Tip:** Plan a manageable duration and frequency to start, such as one hour per week. Then check in and adjust as needed, either by scaling up or scaling back.
* **Place:** Where will you meet? Will there be a backup location?
	+ **Tip:** Choose paces that will support the group’s desired “energy.” Coffee shops are great for accountability check-ins; a library might be better for sustained writing.
* **Membership:** Who will be in this group?
	+ **Tip:** Look beyond your social circle and department. Peers from outside your discipline can offer unexpected social, emotional, and intellectual benefits.
* **In-meeting activities:** What will the group do during meetings?
	+ **Tip:** Group meetings can be devoted to multiple activities. For instance, you might check in with one another for 15 minutes before writing quietly for 45 minutes.
* **Boundaries & Expectations:** What behavior do you expect during group meetings?
	+ **Tip:** Shared ground-rules can enhance productivity, collegiality, and good will. They shouldn’t be overly draconian or proscriptive.
* **Between-meeting activities:** What responsibilities will group members have between meetings?
	+ **Tip:** Group leaders should plan to facilitate between-meeting activities, such as sharing texts for feedback, maintaining a shared writing log for accountability, etc.

**Section 2: Sustained Writing Groups**

* Keep track of members’ goals for accountability and check-in at group meetings
	+ Use a shared Google doc or Google Sheets spreadsheet
	+ Verbal reporting: “Last week, I wrote 3 pages of my Master’s thesis draft. This week, I want to send those pages to my advisor and write an outline for my next section.”
* Set writing goals
	+ SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time-Bound
	+ Goals may be time-based, word-count or page-based, or project-focused
	+ Weekly goals, month goals, in-session goals for the writing group
* Structure your in-meeting writing time
	+ Pomodoro method: 25 minutes of work + 5 minute breaks
	+ Agree on how to use your shared space: headphones, snacks, drinks, devices?
	+ Check-ins, or just silent writing?
	+ Plan to adjust after a few meetings

**Section 3: Peer Review Groups**

**Strategies for structuring your group**

* Set manageable minimums and maximums for pages to be shared – start small!
* Set reasonable sharing deadlines: Weekly? Bi-weekly?
* Set clear expectations for feedback time-table: “I’ll submit a draft by 6pm on Monday, and reviewers should return comments by 12 on Thursday.”
* Decide how to share, label, and comment on drafts.
	+ Options for storing: Dropbox, UT Box, Google Docs
	+ Summarize/paraphrase the draft’s main argument
	+ Make a “reverse outline” of paragraphs: reviewers write down a paraphrase of each paragraph’s main point, either in the margins or in a separate file.
* To learn more about exchanging constructive comments, refer to our “Working Guide to Giving and Seeking Feedback.”