

Milestones and Pathways Toolkit

On-campus Writing Group

Purpose: To provide graduate students with a supportive community and regular, structured meetings to focus on a writing project over several weeks or months.

Recommended Duration: 4 to 12 sessions over several weeks or months (depending on the goal and scope of the group)

General Description: A writing group can provide a regular structure, and a measure of accountability, for graduate students at any stage of their program. Establishing a community of peers is one of the most crucial elements of a successful writing group, premised on the conviction that individuals benefit from sharing their experience while writing. Through structured interactions, participants help each other address challenges encountered in the academic writing process, and celebrate successes. Weekly writing groups can help students develop better writing habits over time. Writing groups are also versatile. They can aim at a variety of different writing projects (e.g. drafting and editing a dissertation or preparing a conference presentation), and they may be used to complement a more concentrated event (such as a writing retreat or symposium).

Writing group meetings will include scheduled time to work individually on a project as well as time to discuss the academic writing process as a group. For example, writers will share their goals and debrief their progress together, but they may also devote some meeting time to running practical workshops on specific writing strategies (e.g. reverse outlining). The attached toolkit provides a list of questions to ask when planning a writing group, writing resources for developing activities, and a discussion of spaces on campus for holding group meetings, as well as a sample budget and session plan.

Recommended Facilitators: Weekly meetings may be peer-facilitated by graduate students, but we recommend that faculty members or experts be invited to run writing workshop sessions.

Recommended Participants: Graduate students at any stage in their program, in groups of 6 to 15. Departments may opt to target a specific group of graduate students (e.g. students preparing conference submissions or PhD candidates writing their dissertations).

Suggested Locations: Department Lounge or Classroom Space

For more detailed information and suggested activities, see the attached toolkit. This toolkit is based on activities currently offered through departments in the Faculty of Arts & Science. Please feel free to modify any proposed activity to suit the specific needs of your department. If you have any questions about proposing or preparing your activity, please contact Joel Rodgers (joel.rodgers@utoronto.ca) in the Faculty of Arts & Science.

A. Questions to Ask and Decisions to Make

Schedule with the Academic Term in Mind. Consider the rhythm of the term when planning a group. For example, some graduate students may find it easier to book a weekly Friday afternoon session, while others may prefer a Monday morning session to start their week. Also, remember to allow yourself and your colleagues enough time to plan and prepare the group (e.g. purchase supplies, book appropriate space, order catering).

Set the Goal and Scope of the Writing Group. Consider carefully what a reasonable goal for a regular writing group may be. What is a reasonable expectation for participants in your department to accomplish over the course of a few weeks? Will each participant be responsible for completing a substantial piece of writing? Will participants share selections of their writing for critique? How will you and the participants assess whether the group is successful?

Decide the Session Format and Structure of the Group. There are two broad models for writing sessions: 1) a “just write” model based on accountability, dedicated primarily to setting aside time for writing, and 2) a “writing process”-driven model, based on exercises and activities to help graduate students develop better writing habits. For a convenient outline of different models for writing groups, see Kerry Ann Rockquemore’s “Shut Up and Write” from *Inside Higher Education* (<http://bit.ly/MPwgmmodels>).

Determine Your Target Audience. Who will attend the writing group and why? If applicable, how will students apply or be selected for the group? Will the group be open to students working on only one particular form of writing (e.g. thesis proposal, dissertation chapter, journal article, or conference presentation)? Will students be asked to provide a letter of endorsement from a faculty member (e.g. supervisor or committee member)?

Book a Regular Location Accessible for Students. How accessible is the location for your students? Is A/V available? Are there electrical outlets available for all students to plug in their laptops? Will an internet connection be available if needed?

Decide Whether to Offer Coffee, Snacks, and/or a Light Meal. Will you provide coffee and healthy snacks? Who purchases the snacks and coffee or tea?

Set the Level of Support and Accountability. Will someone provide one-on-one support while students write? What do students need to prepare for each meeting? Should students come with a specific outline of their goals for each session? How will students be held accountable for their progress?

B. Resources for Writing Groups

Consult the Writing Experts at the University of Toronto

As you plan a writing group, consider consulting with one of the writing experts at the university, such as Dr. Rachael Cayley (rachael.cayley@utoronto.ca) who works in the ELWS program. Writing experts may be able to offer specific suggestions or recommendations based on their experience running similar events. In some cases, they may also be available to direct workshops, run sessions, or provide specific activities and resources for your group.

For example, Dr. Cayley runs a weblog featuring essential guides to and reflections on various aspects of the academic writing process: **Explorations of Style** (<http://bit.ly/MPwgEOS>). She also runs “dissertation boot camps” for graduate students.

Check Writing and Teaching Centres for Possible Activities

The writing and teaching centres at the University of Toronto have developed exercises that can be adapted into writing sessions for graduate students. For example, you may run a session on “reverse outlining” using the UTSC Writing Centre’s template activity (available at <http://bit.ly/MPwgTWC>).

Writing Centres at the University of Toronto (<http://bit.ly/MPwgUofTWriting>)
English Language & Writing Support for Grad Students (ELWS) (<http://bit.ly/MPwgELWS>)
Centre for Teaching and Learning (UTSC) (<http://bit.ly/MPwgCTL>)

Further Research on Academic Writing

For more research on academic writing, consult the following reference lists compiled by experts at the University of Toronto:

Writing for Graduate Students (<http://bit.ly/MPwgWfGS>)
Writing in Specific Disciplines (<http://bit.ly/MPwgWiSD>)
Academic Writing and Speaking (<http://bit.ly/MPwgRAW>)

C. Meeting Spaces for Workshop

Book a space that suits your writing group's format. For example, if students will be participating in smaller groups during writing workshops, you may want to book a seminar-style classroom space with moveable tables and chairs. In general, we recommend using department space for hosting writing group meetings, but students may wish to meet outside of the department. You may be able to reserve other space on campus.

Booking a Room

Rooms can be booked through ACE (osm.utoronto.ca). Pictures and descriptions are also available on the ACE website. There is no rental fee for University of Toronto departments to use these classrooms, but there may be a fee to use the built-in A/V. Any A/V requirements should be noted on the booking request.

D. Budget and Money Questions

The essential budget items for a writing group are likely going to be the costs associated with

- 1) providing drinks, healthy snacks, and/or a light lunch,
- 2) purchasing other supplies, and
- 3) A/V requirements.

Designate in advance who is responsible for purchases and collecting receipts. Keeping track of spending can be hectic. Designate one person who will be responsible for collecting receipts before and after the sessions. (It may be unfair to ask one graduate student to cover all costs in advance. Consider distributing these costs among a small group of organizers.) Consult with your department's business officer when preparing a budget for the workshop. The University of Toronto has set guidelines covering reimbursement rates for meals (see <http://bit.ly/MPperdiem>).

Sample Budget for a 12-week Writing Group

Location: Department Lounge

Participants: 10 doctoral students and 1 facilitator

<i>Lunch & Refreshments</i>	\$374 \$924	2 lunches (\$17 per participant); 12 sessions with refreshments (\$7 per participant)
<i>Materials</i>	\$150	Writing supplies (e.g. flipchart paper, markers, journals for participants to track goal-setting and progress)
TOTAL	\$1,448	

E. Sample Session Plan and Recommended Components

Schedule Time for Goal-Sharing and Check-Ins. We recommend beginning each meeting with a brief goal-setting and sharing discussion, so that participants can assess their own progress (and develop better goal-setting strategies). Set aside time for participants to check in and debrief their progress. This time may be informally built into coffee breaks.

Provide Dedicated Time To Write Individually. Weekly meetings should include time for students to work individually on their own writing projects, alongside scheduled breaks for information discussions about progress. Experts who run writing groups and “boot camps” typically schedule no less than one but no more than two hours of individual writing time at once.

Consider Including Writing Workshop Activities. Rather than structure every session around independent writing time, you may want to invite a guest facilitator (such as a faculty member or writing instructor) to work through specific writing strategies or skills (e.g. outlining, the [Pomodoro Technique](#) for time management) with the group.

Sample Session Plan for a Weekly Meeting

8 weeks, Monday mornings from 9 am to 1 pm

9:00	Goal-Sharing and Writing Tips
9:30	Individual Writing Time
10:45	Break / Check-In and Informal Discussion
11:00	Individual Writing Time (or Workshop Activity)
12:30	Break / Check-In and Informal Discussion
12:45	Debriefing and Plan for Next Session