

Milestones and Pathways Toolkit

Off-campus Writing Retreat

Purpose: To provide graduate students with a structured, supportive environment to focus on a writing project in a condensed period of time.

Recommended Duration: 1 to 3 Days

General Description: A writing retreat allows graduate students time to focus on a writing project in a relaxed environment away from their normal work setting. These concentrated multi-day events can help students break out of ruts and produce a substantial amount of writing in a short period of time. They can also help students develop better daily writing habits with support and motivation from their peers. Through structured interactions, participants help each other address challenges encountered in the academic writing process, and celebrate successes. Writing retreats are versatile activities, and a retreat may be used as a culminating or ancillary event to another activity (such as a weekly writing group or symposium).

A writing retreat will feature daily individual writing time alongside formal discussions and workshops about goal-setting and writing practice, as well as time for informal discussion about writing experience, leisure, and social interaction. The attached toolkit provides a list of questions to ask when planning a retreat, resources for developing activities, some suggested locations for a retreat, a sample budget and schedule (as well as kinds of activities you may run), and a checklist for running the event.

Recommended Facilitators: At least one writing instructor or faculty member who will lead group discussions, run writing workshops, and provide one-on-one consultation during the retreat (as needed).

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: See Section C below

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 retreat. Reading Week, for example, is a convenient teaching-free time, but it also tends to be a busy travel and marking period for graduate students. Also, remember to allow yourself and your colleagues enough time to plan and prepare the retreat (e.g. purchase supplies, book appropriate space, order catering).

Set the Goal and Focus of the Retreat. Consider carefully what a reasonable goal may be for a writing retreat. Why is concentrated writing time useful in your department? Will the retreat be primarily a focused and accountable period of time for writing? What is a reasonable expectation for participants to accomplish over the course of the retreat? How will you and the participants assess whether the retreat is successful?

Determine Your Target Audience. Who will attend the retreat and why? If applicable, how will students apply or be selected for the retreat? Will the retreat be open to students working on a particular form of writing only (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)?

Set the Level of Support and Accountability. What will students need to prepare in advance? Will they need to come prepared with a specific outline of their goals for the retreat? Will they be required to bring any writing or research materials with them? 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? Who will facilitate writing sessions or activities? Who will provide one-on-one support as students write?

Book a Location Accessible for Students. How accessible is the location for your students? How will and how long will it take students to travel to and from the location? If you plan a multi-day retreat, will participants be able to leave and return the following day? (Graduate students with family obligations, for example, may be unable to stay overnight.) Is A/V available at the location? Are there electrical outlets available for all students to plug in their laptops? Will an internet connection be available if needed? What should they bring (e.g. sleeping bags or linens, toiletries, etc.)?

Plan Meals and Downtime. Will participants be responsible for cooking or providing their own meals? Will you arrange for meals to be brought in? Will snacks and drinks be provided for participants?

Troubleshoot Potential Issues in Advance. Within reason, what could potentially go wrong? For example, what happens if a car breaks down? What happens if someone forgets groceries? Who will be responsible for covering these costs in cases of emergencies? If the event includes an overnight stay, you may consider setting some community ground rules for the retreat.

B. Resources for Writing Retreats

Consult the Writing Experts at the University of Toronto

As you plan a writing retreat, 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 retreat.

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 bootcamps” 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. Potential Locations for Off-campus Retreats

The following suggested locations have been used for off-campus writing retreats by departments at the University of Toronto or other Ontario universities.

Locations Within Toronto (Accessible By Transit)

1) Artscape

Artscape offers various event locations throughout the city, including Wychwood Barns (near St. Clair West and Christie) and Gibraltar Point on Toronto Island (accessible by ferry or water taxi). For more information, see <http://artscapeeventvenues.ca/>.

2) Centre for Social Innovation

The Centre for Social Innovation has multiple locations in Toronto, including meeting spaces a short walk from the St. George campus at 720 Bathurst St. and 215 Spadina Ave. There are various meeting spaces available to book. For more information about the centre, see <https://socialinnovation.org/>.

3) The Guest House at The Sisterhood of St. John the Divine

The Sisterhood of St. John the Divine is located near Finch Station, adjacent to the St. John's Rehab site of Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre. Guest House visitors are welcome to enjoy the 25 acres of parkland surrounding the hospital, as well as other nearby parks and quiet residential walking areas. For more information and booking, contact the Guest House administrator (guesthouse@ssjd.ca) or visit <http://www.ssjd.ca/guesthouse.html>.

Locations Outside Toronto (May Require Overnight Stay)

4) Hart House Farm (U of T Property)

Located in Caledon Hills, an hour north-east of Toronto, Hart House Farms boasts a large farmhouse (Ignatieff House) with a fully-equipped kitchen (stove, fridge, grill), central heating, indoor washrooms (but no shower facilities), as well as a piano and fireplace. Guests sleep in bunks or pitch tents outside (note: participants must bring their own sleeping bags / bedding). For more information, see <http://harthouse.ca/learn-discover/hart-house-farm/> and contact Meeting & Event Services at 416.971.2343, the Hart House HUB at 416.978.2452, or email (farm.harthouse@utoronto.ca).

5) Koffler Scientific Reserve at Jokers Hill (U of T Property)

Located in Oak Ridges Moraine in King Township, approximately one hour from the St. George campus, the Koffler Scientific Reserve at Jokers Hill offers 350 hectares of diverse habitats, suitable for a broad spectrum of biological studies, and features a series of public walking trails. Desk space can be set up in the Hospitality Barn. Shared and private housing options are available. For information on availability, logistics and fees, see <http://ksr.utoronto.ca/>, and contact the Director (ksr.info@utoronto.ca).

D. Budget and Money Questions

The **essential budget items** for a writing retreat are likely going to be costs associated with

- 1) renting the location,
- 2) purchasing groceries, catering, and/or other supplies (e.g. paper), and
- 3) arranging transportation.

When proposing a budget for your writing retreat, please note the University of Toronto has established guidelines for expensing the costs of transportation, specifically the use of personally-owned vehicles. See <http://finance.utoronto.ca/policies/gtfm/travel-and-other-reimbursable-expenses/reimbursement-rates/> for more information. Consult with your department's business officer when preparing a budget for a retreat.

Designate in advance who is responsible for purchases and collecting receipts.

Keeping track of spending can be hectic. Most locations require deposits in advance of the event, and other purchases will need to be made closer to the event. Designate one person who will be responsible for collecting receipts before, during, and after the event. Also designate who will be responsible for handling major rentals, emergency expenditures, and other purchases (especially if it is not the same person handling receipts). **Remember that emergencies happen and additional costs may arise** (i.e. vehicle breakdowns). It may be unfair to expect a graduate student to cover all costs in advance. Consider distributing these costs among a small group of organizers.

Sample Budget for a 3-day Retreat

Location: Hart House Farms

Participants: 10 doctoral students and 2 facilitators

| | | |
|-------------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Space Rental</i> | \$960 | \$70 per person, fee for 3 days and 2 nights |
| <i>Meals and Refreshments</i> | \$1080 | \$90 per person for 3 days (approx. \$30 per day). Organizers will purchase groceries to prepare snacks and meals. |
| <i>Transportation</i> | \$600 | Van rentals for transportation from campus to farm. |
| TOTAL | \$2640.00 | |

E. Sample Timetable and Recommended Components

| 3-Day Retreat Schedule | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Day 1 | |
| 9:00 | Set out for Artscape: Gibraltar Point |
| 10:00 | Introduction to Artscape Space |
| 10:30 | Goal-setting for the Retreat |
| 11:00 | Workshop Activity |
| 12:00 | Lunch |
| 1:15 | Individual Writing Time |
| 3:00 | Break / Check-In |
| 3:15 | Individual Writing Time |
| 4:30 | Debrief and Goal-Setting For Day 2 |
| 5:00 | Dinner and Recreational Event |
| Day 2 | |
| 8:00 | Breakfast |
| 9:00 | Individual Writing Time |
| 10:30 | Break / Check-In |
| 10:45 | Individual Writing Time |
| 12:00 | Lunch |
| 1:30 | Individual Writing Time |
| 3:00 | Break / Check-In |
| 3:15 | Individual Writing Time |
| 4:30 | Debrief and Goal-Setting For Day 3 |
| 5:00 | Dinner and Recreation |
| Day 3 | |
| 8:00 | Breakfast |
| 9:00 | Individual Writing Time |
| 10:30 | Break / Check-In |
| 10:45 | Individual Writing Time (or Workshop) |
| 12:00 | Lunch |
| 1:30 | Individual Writing Time |
| 3:00 | Break / Check-In |
| 3:15 | Debrief and Reflection on Writing |
| 4:30 | Closing and Clean-Up |

Time to Settle In and Move Out

Reserve time for students to familiarize themselves with the space (e.g. setting up their workspace or unpacking if it's overnight), as well as time to clean up after their stay.

Breaks and Meals

Allow generous and regular breaks for coffee, snacks, and meals. Remember to budget time for meal preparation as well.

Goal-Sharing and Check-Ins

Set aside time throughout the day for participants to set goals, check in with their peers, and debrief their progress. Check-ins may be informal and built into breaks in order to foster a community of support and accountability.

Individual Writing Time

Schedule specific blocks of time for individual work. 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.

Workshop Activities

Rather than devote a retreat entirely to structured individual writing time, include a few short workshops or discussion sessions devoted to specific writing strategies or skills (e.g. outlining, the [Pomodoro Technique](#) for time management).

| | Task | Person Responsible | Date Completed | Cost |
|------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|----------------|------|
| | Attendees confirmed | | | |
| | Guest speakers confirmed | | | |
| Rentals | Reserved space | | | |
| | Deposit(s) paid | | | |
| | | | | |
| | Book transportation | | | |
| | Deposit(s) paid | | | |
| | | | | |
| | Vehicle picked-up | | | |
| | Vehicle returned | | | |
| | Reserve A/V or other equipment | | | |
| | Deposit(s) paid | | | |
| | | | | |
| | A/V picked up | | | |
| | A/V returned | | | |
| Meals and Snacks | Meals Planned | | | |
| | | | | |
| | Groceries Purchased | | | |
| | | | | |
| | Catering booked | | | |
| | Catering Numbers Confirmed | | | |
| | Deposit(s) paid | | | |
| Other | | | | |
| | | | | |
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