Faculty Writing Group Guide

revised Spring 2025

"an occupational hazard of writing is that you'll have bad days. You feel not only totally alone but also that everyone else is at a party. But if you talk to other people who write, you remember that this feeling is part of the process, that it's inevitable."

Ann Lamott, Bird by Bird

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What can writing groups do for you?

Writing groups can help you:

- put writing on your calendar

- develop a regular writing practice

- generate momentum on your work

- meet colleagues and build supportive relationships

- extend your relationships beyond your current circles

- make progress on all the writing that you do, from research to teaching and administration

- try new things about writing and build your writing repertoire

- apply what you learn about writing to your work with student writers

- get real about your time

- get unstuck

Types of writing groups

Choose from one of the following types or create your own hybrid that aligns with your goals.

Note: Groups can be "open" or "closed."
Open groups welcome all eligible writers and are usually conducted on a drop-in basis.
Closed groups are by membership only. Its members establish and agree to fulfill shared expectations.

☐ **Accountability/Check-In Group**

Accountability groups help writers honor their commitments and meet their goals. Each writer identifies their goals, and then reports on their actions and progress.

Accountability groups can be asynchronous and take place entirely in a virtual environment such as a shared google doc or slack channel. Just create a virtual space in which members state their goals, and report when and how they make progress on them. What matters is that members *write down* their goals and actions in a place where members can see and respond.

Or, they can meet for regular synchronous check-ins. Each writer is allotted a set time to share their goals, report what they did and how it went, and state what and when they will write until the next meeting. As time allows, group members can celebrate, support, and problem solve for one another.

Accountability techniques can also easily be incorporated into other kinds of groups.

Remember to *celebrate one another's progress*. While accountability sounds stern, it works best when it reinforces small positive actions, and meets challenges with empathy and hope.

☐ **"Show Up and Write" Groups**

Establish regular times to get together and write. Show up and write at those times.

For a Show Up and Write group to work, implement some structure for your meetings. Many groups use some version of the pomodoro technique set and write within windows of time, using the pomodoro technique to shape that writing time in ways that initiate focus and generate momentum. (See Monique Dufour's modified pomodoro for details.)

If you are a smaller writing group with a regular membership, it's worth devoting time to checking in with each other. If so, establish a clear time limit for this check-in period, and determine how long each person has to share. Keeping time can be done kindly and gently, but it is essential. Otherwise, a writing group can quickly devolve into a talking group. Provide some structure for the check-ins, and align them with the group's purpose. Writers can check in to keep them accountable to their stated goals (see accountability groups above). It's also *very* helpful for writers to state what they will *do* during today's writing session--not just what they are working on in general (grant, article).

During the writing group meeting, decide how long you want each writing period to be, and focus only on your writing for that duration. For instance, if you meet for two hours, you

might have a 30-minute check-in period, and then three 25-minute pomodoros, each with five-minute breaks. Or, you could write for 50-minutes, with a ten minute break, and then close with a 25 minute burst.

No matter how you shape the time, always end with some celebration. Acknowledge that you showed up, state what you accomplished, and cheer each other on. Many groups like to play music (you can take turns DJing).

It's also helpful to end the session by parking on the downslope. What's the first thing that you'll do the next time you work on your project? Write it down! This reduces the friction of starting again, and generates momentum in your writing.

☐ Peer Mentoring Group

All writing groups are peer mentoring groups, insofar as their members extend mutual support to one another. Some writing groups prefer to focus on this dimension more explicitly by spending their time together on sharing, discussing, and problem-solving.

These groups are similar to VT's mutual mentoring groups for women faculty, and resources from each of those programs may be appropriate for these groups.

☐ Feedback Groups

Many writers expect that writing groups will entail giving and receiving feedback on work-in-progress. However, we suggest that most writing groups focus instead on just writing together. Feedback groups are labor-intensive and work best when approached in a very specific way.

To hold a successful feedback group, try the following:
- Don't expect members to read long manuscripts. Instead, share shorter, selected parts of your work.

- Consider reading the work-in-progress under discussion during the group's meeting. For instance, if you plan to meet for 90 minutes, devote 30 minutes to reading the work that you'll discuss. This greatly increases the likelihood that writers will have the time to read and will keep the group from becoming a burden to its members. Things get done during the scheduled meeting, rather than getting shoveled onto an already full to-do list.

- The writer should *always* guide the reader. Don't ask readers to read cold without guidance.
  - > What is the manuscript?
  - > What are the parameters--page length, format, purpose?
  - > What is the writer trying to figure out? What do they want to know from a reader?
  - > Focus the reader's attention on the things that will help the writer to make progress.

- In turn, the reader, should focus on the writer's stated purpose for the work, and on what the writer has asked them to consider. Most of the time, unless otherwise asked, the reader should refrain from editing. Respond instead to what the writer wants help with.

- Try focusing responses to two kinds of feedback:

  1. **Notice choices and implications.**
     Notice what the text is doing, and how it affects how the text works.
     For instance, you might notice how the text is organized, and how that affects your ability to discern key ideas and their relationship to each other.
     "I notice that the paragraph on page four is very long and identifies many important ideas. As a result, I had a hard time holding them clearly in my mind."
     You can also begin by noticing the implications of text. In other words, notice *what it is like for you to read it* at *what point in the text."*
     "I notice that on page six, I got rather confused. There's an important new concept that pops up, but it's not explained. I want to know what it means and how it's connected to what came before."
     "I notice that on page three, I wanted you to provide some reference to the literature to support your claim."

  2. **Ask "what if?" questions.**
     Rather than tell a writer what to do, ask them "what if?" This gives the writer the power to make decisions, and helps them to deliberate about the issues, potentials, and solutions in their own work.
     "What if you moved what's on page three to page six?"
     "What if you inserted some headings?"
     "What if you added a table that visualized ___?"

Finding other writers and forming groups

"[A] good writing group involves voluntary association and the lack of hierarchy. Voluntary groups are made of members who want to be there and choose to keep coming back."

    Paul J. Silva, How to Write a Lot

☐ **Post on the VT Faculty Writers Listserv**

Looking to start a group, find members, or join an existing group? Post on the Faculty Writing Listserv (faculty-writing-g@vt.edu) any time

☐ **Connect with Other Faculty at Writing Retreats**

At our writing retreats throughout the year you'll have the opportunity to meet other faculty members from around campus. Many writing groups have been forged from these connections, and we encourage you to invite others to join you in creating a group to carry on the good work you are doing while writing in community.

☐ **Consider an Affiliation Group**

You might consider seeking members from your stage of career, an important aspect of your identity, or a group of which you are a member. And/or, you might organize the group based on what you write, such as grants or monographs. (For example, groups of pre-tenure women writers, Black faculty groups, Latinx writers groups, grant writing groups, co-authorship groups, and book-writers groups, to name a few.)

☐ **Start with a Simple Format**

It's tempting to start with a ambitious format such as a feedback group. However, at the start, you're more likely to succeed if you keep it simple! If you want to find time to write, choose a "show up and write format." If you're motivated by accountability, you might just set up an accountability group that checks in regularly on a shared document.

New groups should focus on establishing a routine and relationships, rather than on more complicated structures such as feedback groups, which require skill, trust, and a lot of time.

☐ **Establish Clear Expectations for Membership**

Do you expect people to show up for writing sessions regularly? To update accountability docs with their goals and activity? To extend reliable support to one another? It's important to establish some baseline expectations at the start.

☐ **Be Practical: Consider Availability!**

Finding a common time among busy faculty is a real challenge. Many groups fail to launch because they spend most of their time on doodle polls and good intentions. Consider availability from the start. Once the group gels, it gets easier, because you'll find that you will make the meetings a priority amid busy schedules.

☐ **Consider Multi-Disciplinary Membership**

Many writers make the assumption that group members need to work in the same discipline. However, writers across domains of expertise share challenges and benefit from common strategies. Faculty who work in divergent areas of expertise are often surprised at how much they have in common and can learn from each other about developing a sustainable writing practice and advancing their projects.

Keys to successful writing groups

"Annie Dillard has said that day by day you have to give the work before you all the best stuff you have, not saving up for later projects. If you give freely, there will always be more."

Ann Lamott, Bird by Bird

☐ **Put It on the Calendar and Honor the Time**

Successful writing groups establish regular meetings or check-in times. If you meet synchronously, protect that time just as you would any important professional commitment. Make it a priority and show up for each other consistently.

☐ **Establish Your Group's Goals**

Begin by discussing your goals and making a preliminary plan. The time you spend on these conversations will pay off. What do each of your members hope to achieve? Share honestly. Select some common goals to prioritize and take an interest in one another's individual goals as well.

☐ **Name Your Group and State Your Mission**

Give your group a name! Often, this takes a little time to discover. But it's really helpful to have a shared identity--things that matter in the world have names. It's also very helpful to write down your group's goals and priorities on a shared doc.

☐ **Select a Group Format that Aligns with your Goals**

Set yourself up for success by choosing a format that will help you to realize your goals. (See "Types of Writing Groups" below for suggestions.) Of course, your group will evolve over time. Revisit your goals and format from time to time and make adjustments as needed.

☐ **Celebrate the Process, Not Just Products**

Celebrate regularly! Acknowledge showing up. Notice small wins. High five sticking with it. We tend to celebrate singular culminating moments in the writing process: a publication, a grant, a prize. However, these are short, singular moments in the ongoing process of writing. When we pause to celebrate the little things that we do along the way, we can develop a sustainable writing practice that feels good and keeps us going.

☐ **Don't Compete in the Overwork Olympics**

Most faculty have high standards and big dreams for their work. But this can curdle into imposter syndrome, hyper-competitiveness, and burnout. Focusing on and celebrating the small, ordinary elements of the writing process can really help. Take care in your group to notice and redirect any valorization of overwork (working excessively long hours, working through illness, balancing a seemingly impossible workload or set of life demands, completing Herculean tasks).

☐ **Give Advice Sparingly, If At All**

You don't need to fix one another's challenges. What works for one writer may not work for another. Successful groups offer empathy and a commitment to their common goals. If you do share suggestions, offer them as "what if" questions.

☐ **Periodically Take Stock and Regroup**

Over time, writing groups can lose focus, shed members, or morph into talking groups. It's essential that groups pause occasionally to restate their core mission and align their group activities with their goals. Groups evolve. They may no longer serve some member's needs. That's okay. The natural rhythms of the academic year offer moments to take stock and begin again with renewed purpose.

Ongoing open writing groups

Do you host an open group? Know of an existing group willing to accept members? Email Catherine Piché at copiche@vt.edu and we'll add it to the list.

Wednesday Writing Group
Meets virtually on Wednesdays, 9-11.
Hosted by Virginia Tech faculty member Dr. Danna Agmon.
Drop in as your schedule allows. 25-minute pomodoros on the half-hour.
Contact: dagmon@vt.edu

Writers' Hour
Writers' Hour is a virtual, global, hour-long writing sprint held each weekday. Free for all to attend.
Four morning sessions across four time zones. Join as many as you like.
Hosted by London Writers Salon.
Learn more and sign up.

Resources for writing groups

VT Faculty Affairs Writing Group Grant Program 2025-2026

Learn more and apply through the Faculty Writing Group Grant webpage.
Deadline for 25/26 funding: May 15, 2025.

On-Campus Spaces for In-Person Meetings/Collaborative Work (Blacksburg Area)

- **Athenaeum**: both the main classroom space and the collaboration space are managed by the Athenaeum Coordinator, Joe Forte (joeforte@vt.edu). You can do a quick check on their webpage to see if the space is available and then contact Joe to make reservations and ask any questions.
- **Goodall Room (MPR), Newman Library**: this larger space can accommodate more people than the Athenaeum. 8 video boards and easy set-up for Zoom. More information and the reservation link can be found on the Lury and Barbara Goodall Room webpage.
- **Inn at VT**: meeting rooms of varying sizes can be reserved by faculty at no charge if the reservation is less than 30 days away. If a room is available, those in attendance will also have access to the continuous break (coffee, snacks, etc.). The Smithfield Conference Room can seat up to 16 attendees, with only one attendee per table in a classroom setup, or with a U-shape table can fit nine attendees. You can check availability and make reservations by contacting Bianca Norton at the Inn. Her email is: nortonb@vt.edu and her phone number is (540) 231-0115.
- **New Classroom Building**: There is a faculty lounge located on the 2nd floor of the NCB (Room 208) that has swipe access for VT Faculty/Staff (so no students). The room has a small kitchen area, high top/bar seating for 4, 2 smaller worktables (each seats 4), and a couple of armchairs. Although the space cannot be reserved, it is available for faculty to use any time. There is an accessible bathroom and lactation room right next to this room as well. For more information or questions about this space, you can contact the building manage Rob Viers (roviers@vt.edu) and he would be happy to help.
- **1100 Torgersen Building**: This spacious room at the corner of Alumni Mall and Drillfield Drive has lots of natural light, adjustable seating and tables for about 40 people, and smartboards on two walls. A small kitchen next door allows for food and drinks, and there is a foyer space in front for setting out food or other materials. The contact for reserving the space is Debbie Zier (debzi5@vt.edu) and her phone number is 540-231-9195.
- **Library, Creativity and Innovation District:** 185 Kent Street. Contact is Kevin Ayoub ((540) 231-7011, kayoub@vt.edu) A smaller space, with flexible seating arrangements and smart boards on three walls. A kitchen space is next door for accommodating snacks. While the room is smaller, it is off of the much larger atrium area for the CID which allows for overflow. There is also an outdoor space upstairs that can be reserved.

- **Solitude:** 705 West Campus Drive. The oldest standing building on campus, next to the Duck Pond. The contact is Victoria Ferguson victoriaperfer76@vt.edu More information about the space can be found on Solitude's webpage.
- **240 Data & Decision Sciences Building:** a larger classroom in the new D&DS building with flexibility of seating. Food and drink not allowed in the room, but there is space on the mezzanine outside the room for that. Reservations are made through the Registrar's office scheduling group, and the contact for the room is Rob Viers: roviers@vt.edu
- **Women's Center**: The Women's Center, located on Washington Street has 2 large conference room spaces, one on the main floor and one downstairs with a separate entrance that can be reserved for use by faculty groups. Reservations can be made through the Women's Center webpage.
- **Hahn Garden Pavilion**: Capacity of up to 50 people. Rental fees apply for half- or full-day rentals. Projector screen and zoom capability. Galley kitchen. Parking is difficult, with only 5-7 metered spaces available. Faculty parking is on the street or across Washington. Contact hahngardenrentals@vt.edu

Off-Campus Spaces for In-Person Meetings/Collaborative Work (Blacksburg Area)

The following list is crowdsourced from other writing groups and campus faculty. We do not endorse any of these locations, but we are happy to provide what information we have and can put you in touch with those who have used them in the past for further details.

These locations were mentioned by groups seeking a more structured space and place farther afield to meet in retreat or as an extended work session.

- **Rising Silo Brewery**: 2351 Glade Road "writing retreat" packages are available that includes coffee and breakfast snacks, and lunch if requested. Area is semi-enclosed with portable heaters, several large tables in a well-spaced, rustic farm setting (note: Wi-Fi is not strong there). Contact: (540) 750-0796, info@risingsilobrewery.com

- **Mountain Lake Biological Station**: Located at the top of Salt Pond Mountain in Giles County, VA, the Station is surrounded by thousands of acres of forest. Its historic facilities are equipped with modern technology, offering guests the unique opportunity to have a productive, memorable experience at a field station with a long, rich history of biological research. The Station is an ideal venue for visiting classes and conferences/retreats with science- or nature-based themes. Several meeting rooms with projection equipment are available, including 2 small classrooms, an auditorium, a computer lab, and a library. Free Wi-Fi is available throughout the Station. Contact: (540) 626-7196

- **Selu Conservancy (Radford):** A retreat/meeting center and classroom facility that offers 380 acres of natural beauty and charm. 4,000 square-foot "Barn" equipped with meeting rooms and an observatory. Special events also take place at Selu, using either the multi-purpose "Barn" facility or the Selu Retreat Center. Contact: Deborah Rynberg Director of Conference Services (540) 831-6037 selu@radford.edu

On-Campus Spaces for In-Person Meetings/Collaborative Work (Greater Washington DC Metro Area)

- **Executive Briefing Center:** the Executive Briefing Center has a variety of smaller rooms that can be reserved at no charge under the guidelines describe in the EBC Fund Agreement. To make arrangements for space at the EBC, please contact Larissa LaCour at llacour@vt.edu.

Collaborative Writing Sessions/Opportunities (Blacksburg Area)

Provost's Office writing retreats
The Provost's Office hosts a number of faculty writing retreats and workshops throughout the year that group members are welcome to participate in either collectively or individually. Several of the retreats offer a Zoom option for remote participation.

More information is available on our Faculty Writing Retreats webpage

Faculty Writing Google Group
Announcements of upcoming writing retreats, as well as information about faculty-led writing sessions throughout the year can be sent to this listserv.

If you aren't on the list, you can join here:
Faculty Writing Listserv**, (click on "Join Group" at the top of the page)**

Further Reading

Curtis, C., "The Rules of Writing Group." The Chronicle of Higher Education (2011)
https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-rules-of-writing-group/

Kwan, Patchareeya P., Shannon Sharp, Sarah Mason, and Carrie L. Saetermoe. "Faculty Writing Groups: The Impact of Protected Writing Time and Group Support." *International Journal of Educational Research* (2021). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2021.100100.

Lamott, A., "Bird by Bird" (1995). Penguin Random House.

Silvia, P. "How to Write a Lot" (2018). APA Life Tools.

Other writing resources can be found on our Writing on Writing webpage.

Check out the Faculty Affairs Library for books that you can borrow on a variety of faculty/academic topics.

For More Information

Office of the Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs
Email: facultyaffairs@vt.edu
Phone: 540-231-6670

Appendix A: Pomodoro Technique

The basics.

1. Choose a task. Write it down.

2. Set a timer for 25 minutes.

3. Engage in this task, without interruption, for that time.

4. Take a 5-minute break.

5. After 4 pomodoros, take a 30-minute break.

Appendix B: Modified Pomodoro Technique

by Monique Dufour

1. Orient yourself.
   Where am I? What's next? You can orient on the
   level of the goal (i.e., this entire retreat), or on the
   level of the session.

2. Plan next steps. State them as actions, **in verb form**--something you
   can DO.
   You might need to spend time figuring out what's next. Counts as writing!
   You might engage in open-ended, exploratory drafting. Counts as writing!
   Write down your next steps.

3. Set a timer for between 2-25 minutes.

4. Engage in this action, without interruption, for that span of time.

5. Park on the downslope.
   What will you do the next time you work on this? Write it down.

6. Celebrate! Take in the good.

7. Take a short break.
   Take a longer break when you need it, or after 4 pomodoros.