

## Faculty Writing Groups Guide

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workshops, retreats, and consultations with writers and writing groups

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### 1. VT Faculty Affairs Writing Group Grant Program 2024-2025

[Learn more and apply at the VT Faculty Affairs Website.](#)

Deadline for 24/25 funding: May 15, 2024.

### 2. 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

### 3. 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.

Works best as a closed group.

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.

Can work as an open or closed group.

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'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 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 a song (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**

Work best as a closed group.

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

### **Feedback Groups**

Work best as a closed group.

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, require trust and commitment, 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 6?”

“What if you inserted some headings?”

“What if you added a table that visualized \_\_\_?”

## 4. Keys to Successful Writing Groups

### 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.

### 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.

### **Use Your Resources**

Monique Dufour is available to help you to meet your goals. Please don't hesitate to reach out. She can find resources, answer questions, and consult with the group. Just email her at [msdufour@vt.edu](mailto:msdufour@vt.edu).

### **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. The natural rhythms of the academic year offer moments to take stock and begin again with renewed purpose.

### **Accept that Groups End. Or, They May No Longer Work for You. That's Okay.**

Groups evolve. They may no longer serve some member's needs. That's okay.

## **5. Finding Other Writers and Forming Groups**

### **To Find Other Writers and Open Groups:**

- **Post on and Read the VT Faculty Writers Listserv**

Looking to start a group, find members, or join an existing group? Post on the Faculty Writing Listserv any time and look out for announcements about group opportunities.

Not on the listserv? Sign up at <https://groups.google.com/a/vt.edu/g/faculty-writing-g>. Click on "Join Group" at the top of the page. (Everyone who attends a Faculty Affairs writing retreat gets automatically added to the list.) All posts are emailed to every member. Also, you can go to your "Groups" page in Google and click on the appropriate list to view and search the full message archive.

- **Watch for Periodic "In Search of a Writing Group" Clearinghouse**

A few times each semester, we'll open a document on which you can announce your interest and find other members, and help you put together a group that works for you.

We'll announce this on the Faculty Writers Listerv, on the Faculty Affairs website, and at our writing events.

- **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 instance, I have advised 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 Simply. Don't Overthink It.**

It's tempting to start with an 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. What matters most is that you show up for yourselves and one another.

**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.

**6. Ongoing Open Writing Groups**

*Do you host an open group? Know of an existing group willing to accept members? Email Monique Dufour at [msdufour@vt.edu](mailto:msdufour@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](mailto:dagmon@vt.edu)

### **College of Science Summer Proposal Writing Groups**

“For the past seven years, we have had Proposal Writing Groups for COS faculty members to work together in helping one another strengthen proposal submissions. These have been groups of 4-8 faculty members (plus the AD for Research and Andy Volker) that typically meet every other week (although this could be more often as certain submission windows become imminent.) One of the main goals of the groups is to assist one another in crafting proposal sections that more effectively convey the value of and generate excitement in our research ideas. We have also spent time looking at example proposals that have been successful and discussing the aspects that make them effective. I have a collection of successful NSF CAREER and NIH proposals from COS faculty members who have generously made them available.”

Contact: John R. Morris, Associate Dean for Research, College of Science, [jrmorris@vt.edu](mailto:jrmorris@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 timezones. Join as many as you like.

Hosted by London Writers Salon.

[Learn more and sign up.](#)

## SPACE FOR IN-PERSON MEETINGS/COLLABORATIVE WORK

### ON-CAMPUS (BLACKSBURG)

- > **Athenaeum:** both the main classroom space and the collaboration space are managed by the Athenaeum Coordinator, Joe Forte ([joeforte@vt.edu](mailto:joeforte@vt.edu)). You can do a quick check on their website to see if the space is available (<https://lib.vt.edu/spaces/athenaeum.html>), 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 here: <https://lib.vt.edu/create-share/classrooms-meeting-spaces/mpr.html>
- > **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 for 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](mailto:nortonb@vt.edu) and her phone number is (540) 231-0115.
- > **New Classroom Building:** There is a faculty lounge located on the 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 work tables (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 manager Rob Viers ([roviers@vt.edu](mailto: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](mailto: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](mailto: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](mailto:victoriaperfer76@vt.edu) More information about the space can be found here - <https://www.vt.edu/about/locations/buildings/Solitude.html>
- > **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](mailto: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. The [link to reserve space](#) is on the Women's Center website.
- > **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](mailto:hahngardenrentals@vt.edu)