

# Resources to Support PGR Writing Groups



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# Welcome

Since September 2017 I have been collaborating with Dr. Sally Flint to develop and run Write Clubs for PGRs and Early Career Researchers in the Doctoral College. (The name is (knowingly) borrowed from Dr. Sarah Dyer, Senior Lecturer in Human Geography, thank you again Sarah). Our approach draws on Professor Rowena Murray's structured writing retreats for academics, the use of the Pomodoro technique in Shut Up and Write Tuesdays, and our shared expertise in academic and creative writing to promote and foster wellbeing and productivity.

I would like to thank and acknowledge everyone who has contributed to the development of this work, including: Elena Dimitriou, Dr. Sarah Dyer, Dr. Caitlin Knight, Dr. Karen Leslie, Skye Marshall, Professor Andrew McRae, Kathy O'Connor, Dr. Siobhan O'Dwyer and Alison Prior. My personal thanks go to Dr. Sally Flint for her continued professional generosity, and some truly fascinating conversations.

Finally, I would like to thank all the PGRs and ECRs who have attended our Write Clubs and Writing Retreats and generously given their time and feedback to this initiative.

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# About these resources

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Approaching the challenges of academic writing can be especially daunting for postgraduate researchers. PGRs are often working on short timescales in isolated environments whilst trying to complete the most important piece of writing they have yet undertaken. Writing is an integral part of academic practice, and yet we so often see it as ‘ancillary or marginal to the real work of research.’ (Kamler and Thomson, 2014: 2). The culture of Higher Education does not always place value on making time to write, providing appropriate spaces to write in, or even the opportunity to talk to peers and share the struggles and frustrations associated with writing.

These resources include session plans and tasks that have been produced by the DoctoralCollege to help you run your own writing groups. This handbook forms part of our University of Exeter Annual Fund project, which runs from 2018-2021 and aims to establish a culture in the PGR community that values writing time, shares writing experiences and creates a peer-led community of practice.

The plans and tasks in this pack are also available as a word document for you to use and adapt as you see fit under a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA Attribution-NonCommercial-Share-Alike licence. This lets you remix, tweak and build upon this work non-commercially, as long as you credit us as the original source and licence your own resources under identical terms. We hope that through these resources there will be many iterations that grow with the growth of this work, and our writing culture in the PGR community.



# Writing Group Plans

## Ethos and Aims

Our writing groups follow the format of structured writing retreats developed by Professor Rowena Murray (Murray and Newton, 2009). They provide focused and dedicated writing spaces for PGRs, with support from an experienced facilitator. They follows Murray's typing tool model, where:

- Everyone is writing together in one room
- Time is structured in to a series of writing and discussion slots
- Discussion of writing-in-progress and goals (Murray, 2005)

Writing slots are limited to a maximum of 30 minutes in our model, which draws on the principles of Shut Up and Write Tuesdays and Pomodoro technique. Shorter slots allow for greater focus and more opportunity to share and 'check in' with facilitators and peers - as our writing groups aim to not only create dedicated writing space, but also to encourage the sharing of writing experiences, to create a community of practice (Murray and Newton, 2009).

**We run two types of writing groups - Write Clubs, which usually last 3-4 hours and Writing Retreats, which last a day or longer.**

## Principles for Working

As part of the opening of a writing group we agree principles for working such as:

- Making sure you have all materials needed to write - including laptops, articles, previous drafts, notes - ready and with you. This enables sessions to be focused on writing itself - rather than collating the necessary materials and resources *to* write.
- Switching mobile phones to silent and leaving them in pockets, coats and bags, to reduce distractions.
- Similarly closing your email client or turning off your Wi-Fi might be productive.
- Agreeing in the writing sessions to work in (relative) silence.

## Guidance

We advise that each writing group is limited to 15-20 people, to help facilitate a high quality experience.

Providing refreshments in the form of tea, coffee, and water facilitates a relaxed, open and friendly environment.

**Remember: No two writing groups are the same.**

**What would be your principles for working?**

**What kind of environment helps you write?**

## Example Writing Retreat Plan - 1 day

Time	Activity
10-10.30am	<p><b>Introductions</b> (5 mins) - Facilitator(s) introduce participants to Writing Retreat aims, ethos, structure and agreeing principles for working. Explain arrangements for refreshments, and location of nearest bathrooms.</p> <p><b>Writing Task</b> (10 mins) - We suggest using as introductory creative writing task, as it helps provide focus and begins to get participants in the frame of mind for writing.</p> <p><b>Goal Setting</b> (10 mins) - This is an opportunity for participants to share their writing goals for the session. This creates (positive) peer pressure, and allows facilitators to help participants set manageable goals.</p> <p><b>Getting Ready</b> (5 mins) - Give participants a few minutes to prepare their equipment and materials for the first writing session, and to get any refreshments needed.</p>
9.30-10am	<b>Writing session 1</b>
10-10.15am	<b>Break</b> - Encourage participants to stand and move around rather than sit. This will help maintain concentration and focus in writing sessions.
10.15-10.45am	<b>Writing session 2</b>
10.45-11am	<b>Break and facilitated discussion task</b>
11-11.30am	<b>Writing session 3</b>
11.30-11.45am	<b>Break, and introduce peer feedback tasks for the afternoon</b>
11.45am-12.15pm	<b>Writing session 4</b>
12.15-1.30pm	<b>Lunch</b> - Ask participants to print off what they have been working on.
1.30-2.30pm	<b>Exchange drafts for peer feedback</b> - Feedback is offered in a kind and constructive manner.
2.30-3pm	<p><b>Break</b></p> <p>Ask participants to consider their peer feedback using our Ten Steps for Dealing with Feedback and how to begin applying it in the final (extended) writing session.</p>
3-3.45pm	<b>Writing session 5</b>
3.45-4pm	<b>Revisiting Goals</b> - This is an opportunity for participants to revisit their original writing goals for the session and share what they have achieved. We suggest encouraging participants to focus on what they have achieved rather than what they still have to do.

## Example Write Club Plan - Usually 3-4 hours

Time	Activity
0-30mins	<p><b>Introductions</b> (5 mins) - Facilitator(s) introduce participants to Write Club aims, ethos, structure and agreeing principles for working. Explain arrangements for refreshments, and location of nearest bathrooms.</p> <p><b>Writing Task</b> (10 mins) - We suggest using as introductory creative writing task, as it helps provide focus and begins to get participants in the frame of mind for writing.</p> <p><b>Goal Setting</b> (10 mins) - This is an opportunity for participants to share their writing goals for the session. This creates (positive) peer pressure, and allows facilitators to help participants set manageable goals.</p> <p><b>Getting Ready</b> (5 mins) - Give participants a few minutes to prepare their equipment and materials for the first writing session, and to get any refreshments needed.</p>
30m-1 hour	<b>Writing session 1</b>
1h-1h15m	<b>Break</b> - Encourage participants to stand and move around rather than sit. This will help maintain concentration and focus in writing sessions.
1h15m-1h45m	<b>Writing session 2</b>
1h45m-2h	<b>Break and facilitated discussion task</b>
2h-2h30m	<b>Writing session 3</b>
2h30m-2h45m	<b>Break</b>
2h45m-3h30m	<b>Writing session 4</b>
3h30m-4h	<p><b>Revisiting Goals</b> (10 mins) - This is an opportunity for participants to revisit their original writing goals for the session and share what they have achieved. We suggest encouraging participants to focus on what they have achieved rather than what they still have to do.</p> <p><b>Social time for participants</b> (20 mins)</p>

# Creative Writing Tasks

A creative 'warm-up' task fosters a sense of community in the room, with everyone working together on the same task. It also gives space for people to explore constructing narrative, and value their own way of using language.

We encourage you to develop your own creative tasks as part of running writing groups. Here are a couple of examples to inspire you.

## Responding to an Image - *Farm at Watendlath, Dora Carrington 1921*



As participants arrive an image is projected on screen, (or a photocopy of the same image is handed to each person). Ideally, it's a painting that evokes a response of a curious kind. (Paintings by Edward Hopper rate high on our list.)

John Berger writes: 'Seeing comes before words' and, with this in mind, everyone's encouraged to study the image, to find something that launches them into writing for five minutes without stopping – a stream of consciousness – anything goes – and they don't have to share what they write (unless they choose to at the end!)

These guidelines are suggested to help inspire the writing:

- Enter and inhabit the painting
- Use the senses to drive the writing – what can you see, hear, touch, taste and smell?
- Really look and navigate the painting's interesting, peculiar and particular details
- Go where imaginations lead – which may be far beyond the frame

By Dr. Sally Flint





**What creative tasks might you use to 'warm up' your synapses, practice your skills and prepare to write?**



# Goal Setting

Discussing writing goals is an important part of our writing groups.

Rowena Murray argues that goals should be ‘specific, measurable and motivational’ (2015: 84-85) and help us to focus on the task. Articulating goals at the beginning of a writing session and revisiting them at the end helps to ‘prompt reflection on the setting of **realistic** writing goals’ (2015: 84-85), breaking down writing tasks in to achievable chunks.

**S**pecific

**M**easurable

**M**otivational

Setting, sharing achieving realistic goals is key to motivation – and introduces a gentle amount of peer pressure.

“

*I found that by setting goals and having half an hour chunks of writing time meant I developed a much more realistic idea of what I can achieve in 30 minutes and I also found the prospect of writing much less intimidating than when alone at my desk trying to focus.*

PGR feedback on Write Club

”

## What can I work on at a writing group?

Anything, including but not limited to:

- Planning your next piece of writing
- Starting to write your literature review
- Responding to your supervisors’ feedback
- Writing an abstract for a conference
- Catching up on some reading!

Writing groups are an open space for any work you need to do. You can get further ideas from Tanya Golash-Boza’s blog post ‘10 Ways to Write Everyday’ on the next page.

## Ten ways you can write every day

- 1** Write on a **blank page**
- 2** **Line-edit** something you have already written
- 3** **Restructure** a paper that you have been working on
- 4** Pull together pieces of older documents you have written into a **new paper**
- 5** Check references and footnotes for **accuracy**
- 6** Outline or mind-map a **new project**
- 7** **Summarise** or **take notes** on something you have read recently that might be relevant to present or future research projects
- 8** Make a revision plan for a rejected article or a “**revise and resubmit**”
- 9** Make **tables, figures, graphs, or images** to represent visual concepts or trends in a paper
- 10** Create an **After-the-fact** or **Reverse Outline**

# Ten Steps For Dealing with Feedback

## adapted from *Get a Life, PhD*

by Kelly Louise Preece

1

Read or listen to  
the feedback



2



Take some time out

3

Create an Excel File to  
list the Revisions



4

Extract the suggestions  
from the reviewers' and  
editors' letters



5

Re-arrange the  
suggestions for  
revision in a logical  
fashion



Decide how you will respond to all of the suggestions

6



7

Tackle your revision plan, step by step



8

Double-check



Do a final read-over

9



10

Submit!



## Example Discussion Tasks:

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Our approach draws heavily on Rowena Murray's typing pool model, where everyone is writing together in one room and time is structured in to a series of writing and discussion slots. (Murray 2005) The discussions are important in recognising that writing is a situated social practice (Kamler and Thomson, 2014: 4) that benefits from engaging and supportive communities of practice. Sharing frustrations, experiences and tips can help shift perception of writing, as well as writing practices. We have included questions to structure an initial discussion task.

- What's the best time and place for you to write?
- How long do you typically write for before taking a break?
- What helps you write?
- What stops your writing?
- Do you write in any other context? Blog? Creative writing? Journaling? Twitter?
- Do you approach it differently? If so, how? Why? How or why is academic writing different?

**The discussions you have can be surprising in revealing long held perceptions and anxieties about writing – but always in a supportive, collegiate environment.**



**What other questions could you discuss to help share frustrations, experiences and writing tips?**

# Useful References and Resources

## Books

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You can find out more on the writing section of our ELE page: <https://vle.exeter.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=6718#section-6>

# Notes



For further information and support, see [www.ex.ac.uk/writing](http://www.ex.ac.uk/writing), or contact [researcherdevelopment@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:researcherdevelopment@exeter.ac.uk).

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This approach to writing groups was developed by Kelly Preece from the Doctoral College and Sally Flint from the English department as part of a piece of practice-based pedagogical research with PGRs in the Autumn term of 2017. It is licensed under the Create Commons as CC BY-NC-SA - Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike. This license lets you remix, tweak, and build upon our work non-commercially, as long as you credit us and license your new creations under the identical terms.

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