

Dissertation and Thesis Writing Groups

Starting a writing group is a very good way to keep you connected and supported during what can be an isolating act of writing. The scheduled meetings should be frequent enough to keep the writing momentum going—a long, two-hour meeting every month can work more effectively than shorter, more frequent meetings.

The group should discuss their goals and make some kind of agreement on how the group's time can support them best. The following are some responses to frequently asked questions and guidelines to consider while starting a dissertation group. The logistics are up to the group.

What do dissertation groups do?

Writers should discuss their work and receive supportive feedback that enables them to develop their writing further. Group members agree on exchanging their manuscripts during or before meetings and commit to reading and providing feedback. Also, a helpful group will share tips and strategies for confronting dissertation challenges. Group meetings should feel energizing and inspiring.

Where should we meet?

Choose a comfortable location for your meetings. It should be a place where you can hear well and people do not have to speak loudly to be heard. It should also be a place where the group can do focused thinking.

How big should the group be?

A group of three to four members is an ideal size. Having too many people in a group can make planning more difficult. It also extends the time dissertators spend on others' texts. You will also sometimes get conflicting feedback; keeping the group size small limits the amount of potential conflict.

What if I don't know what to say, or what to comment on?

Ask writers to explain their concerns and questions. Invited feedback is much easier and more productive to give and receive. You should have a specific list of issues to look for and to think about in the manuscripts.

Your task is to read another student's work from your perspective, and explain to them how you "see" it.

Writers find general feedback extremely valuable as well. It's helpful to:

1. Mark the sections in the text where you were confused or wanted to know more.
2. Help the writer by brainstorming (This reminded me of . . .)

3. Ask the writer to make the connections clear (It seems that your purpose in this paragraph is . . . , This paragraph does . . .)
4. Ask “so what” questions. These encourage the writers to make the implications explicit.
5. Play the devil’s advocate, offer counter arguments, bring up other interpretations, or offer more details.

The final decision for revision should be the writer’s. Ask for writers’ feedback on your comments; this will help you make your future comments even more helpful. Be respectful of each other’s efforts and anxieties. Overall, sustain a supportive and encouraging context that inspires members to write.

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