

Five approaches to writing group success

By Dionne Soares Palmer

Writing groups offer their members a wealth of benefits. In fact, studies indicate that membership in a writing group can actually help boost your publication rate. In an examination of the publication rate of 48 female medical school faculty before and after participating in a writing group, Sonnad et al. found that the professors' average publication rate increased from 1.5 papers per year to 4.5 papers per year after joining the writing group. Cumbie et al. also describe increases in productivity among writing group members, reporting "significant and positive writing outcomes in the form of manuscripts submitted for publication, abstracts submitted for conference presentations, [and] grant proposals developed."

In addition to increased productivity, anecdotal evidence suggests that writing groups can also help socialize new professors and improve relationships among colleagues. In an article describing their experiences in the University of Massachusetts-Amherst's "Professors as Writers" program, Peter Elbow and Mary Deane Sorcinelli write that their writing program has the "capacity to support pre-tenure faculty in developing productive habits in research and teaching" and "create a sense of intellectual stimulation and community that help break down the isolation of many faculty as scholars and teachers."

Jennifer Friend and Juan Carlos González, authors of "Get Together to Write," report that not only did participation in their writing group help them build collegiality with other faculty members, but the need to produce something for the next meeting also motivated them to keep writing despite their hectic schedules.

Writing groups come in many different varieties, and can be tailored to suit the particular needs of participants. Here are five very different approaches that have proven successful:

1) Moderated courses. In "A Writing Group for Female Professors," Seema S. Sonnad, Jennifer Goldsack, and Karin McGowan describe a writing group that met every three weeks over a nine-month period. Each session was led by two moderators who helped teach members relevant writing and publishing skills such as how to craft great titles and how the publishing process works. Their group takes applications in order to include only highly committed members.

2) Online arrangements. Writing groups no longer need to be face-to-face affairs constrained to a single university campus. Twenty-



one faculty members from three academic disciplines working at five different universities in the western United States participated in the writing support group described by Sharon Cumbie and her colleagues in the article "Developing a Scholarship Community." Cumbie et al.'s group members met biweekly via teleconference to support each other's writing efforts.

3) Monthly peer review. Friend and González take a more prototypical approach to the writing group. They meet once a month, split into groups of four, and distribute five pages of their writing to their collaborators. They spend a set amount of time—usually thirty to forty-five minutes—reading and providing constructive comments on each other's writing. At the end of the session all comments are returned to the writer for review.

4) Small-group sessions. For those who prefer a more personal writing group experience, forming a partnership with one or two other academic writers may be the best option. In "The Rules of Writing Group," Claire P. Curtis recommends forming a writing group of no more than three trusted colleagues. Curtis meets with two friends from her university once a week. The rules of their group are that each person must provide writing ahead of time, must show up, and must provide feedback for others.

5) Hands-off retreats. Elbow and Sorcinelli describe a largely unstructured, but equally valuable, writing group idea in "The Faculty Writing Place: A Room of Our Own." In this approach, all faculty members are invited on a first-come, first-served basis, to write in a quiet, off-campus room. In this designated room, only writing is allowed, but just outside the closed door people can socialize, have coffee, and trade manuscripts for review.

Any elements of these approaches can be mixed and matched to suit individual needs, but whatever approach you choose, prioritize making time for your writing group. "Block off [time for your writing group] on your calendar, and do not cancel it for last-minute meetings," Curtis writes. "This time has to be as important as a class." ■

For more information on writing groups, please consult the following articles:

- Cumbie, S., Weinert, C., Luparell, S., Conley, V., & Smith, J. (2005). Developing a scholarship community. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 37(3), 289-293.
- Curtis, C.P. (2011, March 24). The rules of writing group. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.
- Elbow, P., & Sorcinelli, M. D. (2006). The faculty writing place: A room of our own. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 38(6), 17-22.
- Friend, J., & González, J. C. (2009). Get together to write. *Academe*, 95(1).
- Sonnad, S.S., Goldsack, J., & McGowan, K. L. (2011). A writing group for female assistant professors. *Journal of the National Medical Association*, 103(9), 805-809.