



How Can I Create and Facilitate Student Writing Groups

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Background

The quality of undergraduate writing has been a concern to both instructors and employees of college graduates.¹ In 2002, the Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates in California issued a report concerning literacy that stated, “only 1/3 of entering college students are sufficiently prepared for the two most frequently assigned writing tasks: analyzing information or arguments and synthesizing information from several sources...”² The Committee also asserted that, “faculty assign writing to get to know how students think, to help students engage critically and thoughtfully with course readings, to demonstrate what students understand from lecturers, to structure and guide their inquiry, to encourage students’ independent thinking, and to invite them into the on-going intellectual dialogue that characterizes higher education.”³

Writing groups have been around a while. Literary societies produced works in colleges in the 18th century. The Romantic writers, Lord Byron, Mary Shelly, and Percy Shelly, and the legendary members of the Algonquin Roundtable, including Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley, Edna Ferber, and Alexander Woollcott shared ideas and criticism in formal and informal ways. Undergraduate writing groups increased their numbers in the 1960s and 1970s, as the concept of student-centered learning gained currency in higher education.⁴

Purpose

Writers’ groups can play several roles in the development of students’ writing. Writing groups provide a venue for peer evaluations of works in progress, wherein students may get advice about how to organize or articulate words and passages. They can also be much more. They can be activated to help students explore important matters long before they begin their compositions. Writing groups can assist students with thinking through their intentions, goals, and requirements for writing projects, so that they can be thorough and mindful in their research, and clear about how to organize and craft academic discussion.

Preliminary Planning

Integrating writing groups into courses requires instructors to think through a number of decisions:

1. Identify specific learning outcomes for the groups and how you will to access students’ progress
2. Design the course schedule so that sufficient time may be devoted to writing group work
3. Include in your syllabus a statement about writing groups and your expectations regarding them
4. Determine whether students choice or grouping by topic will occur
5. Prepare some “rules of engagement” and allow students to add to them, as to build trust and openness
6. Prepare rubrics that might be helpful in peer critiques

¹ Hart and Associate. (2015). *Falling Short? College Learning and Career Success*. Washington, D.C. p.4.

² Intersegmental committee of the Academic Senates of the California Community Colleges, the California State University, and the he University of California. (2002). *Academic Literacy: A statement of competencies expected of students entering California’s public colleges and universities*. Sacramento, CA. p. 4.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴ Geer, A. R. (1987). *Writing groups: History, Theory, and Implications*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Strategies for Creating and Sustaining Writing Groups

Focus on Outcomes. Help students stay engaged by posting specific asks or outcomes for their sessions. Any session may be accompanied by a guide or rubric. Here are some ideas:⁵

- **Clarifying Session:** Group meets to share their thoughts on how to begin a research project, and the meeting is followed by class time in which anyone may ask questions to clarify requirements and procedures.
- **Building the Thesis Session:** Group meets to review each other's work in progress. It is an opportunity for students to read introductions, ask clarifying questions about the thesis and purpose of the composition, and to explore the strengths and weaknesses in the students' research to date. The goal of this session is to improve the way students are *thinking about what they know and whether their work is moving toward high standards of academic achievement*. This may also be a good time to examine outlines and discuss the logic or the paper's organization.
- **Critiquing the Prose Session:** Group meets to read or listen to students read their work. This provides the occasion to review preliminary drafts before they are submitted for a summative grade. Students may critique the essays for clarity, accuracy, proper use of citations, grammar, spelling, word choice, tone, sufficiency of evidence, syntax, and proper applications of style (such as APA, Chicago manual of Style and MLA).
- **Proofing the Re-Writes:** This session may help students understand that the best compositions have several incarnations before they reach the point where it represents the best work possible. To be fair, these sessions should not introduce students to new criteria, but embody those elements of the composition that have already been reviewed and discussed.

Create Groups that Work. Limit group size to a maximum of five as to ensure that everyone will have the opportunity to share their compositions and receive suggestions or questions from their classmates. Consider a class exercise that will build and illuminate the need for trust and respect in group work. Treat designated time for group work as fixed and not something that gets dropped if "there is no time left." *Group work can be a dimension of course content.*

Monitor Group Work. In circulating among groups, the instructor may help to keep groups focused on their work. The instructor may also wish to assist students who have questions. Encouraging groups to meet outside class is a good thing to do. There is, however, an advantage to having groups meet in class, even if it means less time for other activities. In class, there is the presence of an expert, the instructor, who is there to resolve conflicts about expectations, and to provide professional advice about how to move forward.

Provide Samples. Group sessions are a good time for students to read and comment on examples of compositions that represent proficient writing. Students may compare and contrast samples, for instance, that essentially say the same thing, but in different ways, each way academically sound.

Clarify Collaboration. There are differences in the procedures for producing a group paper and an individual paper. If students are working on a group paper, provide requirements and guidelines that help students meet their collaborative obligations.

Pair the Focus of Sessions with Instruction: Discussions writing groups may "get more mileage" if they are preceded by lessons on the topics that the group session will address.

⁵ Fulwiler, T. (2002). *College Writing*, 3rd edition. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers.