# OU Writing Accountability Group Guide

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## About This Guide

The OU Writing Center can help you set up a writing accountability group that can provide you with the feedback and support you need to accomplish your writing goals. This guide offers advice for starting your own group, including important considerations to take into account.

## Table of Contents

# What are writing groups?

Writing groups:
- Include a specific group of graduate students
- Meet regularly
- Agree to group norms, such as attendance requirements
- Focus on the process of writing, not the product or content

Writing researchers suggest that writing groups establish a goal of building sustainable writing habits for their members (Skarupski, 2018; Skarupski & Foucher, 2018). Strategies for building sustainable writing habits within a group starts with the structure. We recommend creating a group that includes four to eight graduate students in the same or related fields. This way, the group will have a shared foundation of genre expectations and conventions within their department.

We also recommend group members decide how frequently they will meet and where. For example, group members could decide to meet once per week, twice a month, or once per semester at a coffee shop or on Zoom.

Another strategy can include establishing norms for the group. For example, group members could agree that everyone will strive to attend at at least eight of 10 scheduled meetings in a semester. Or, each member must provide a verbal update of their project progress at the beginning of a session. Establishing norms in a formal writing group can help members avoid the common writing group problem of devolving into complaint sessions where actual writing, accountability, and growth go to die (Silvia, 2018).

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# How do I get started?

To get a group started, there are a few initial options:
1. **Start your own group:** If you're in a class with several people you know who want to work together to support one another, you can email them and suggest forming a group. Then, use a tool like Doodle Poll or When2Meet to set up a mutually agreeable time to meet, either via Zoom or in person. This option may be best suited for you if you're still in classes and know your colleagues well enough to establish a group.

2. **Contact the Writing Center:** Fill out the registration form provided on the Writing Center's website, and we'll pair you with a writing group. You can then work together to find a time that works for everyone in the group. This option may be best suited for you if you're just starting your graduate journey or are no longer taking classes.

3. **Join an existing group:** Are there existing writing groups within your department? Or, does a club or organization you're part of offers a support group? Look around for pre-existing groups that you could join. The Writing Center also may offer faculty-led writing groups at different times throughout the semester. Check out website for details.

If you choose to create a group, let the Writing Center know by filling out the form on our website. Although we won't be able to facilitate every meeting, we can check in with your group once or twice a month to help troubleshoot any issues that have come up and offer suggestions for keeping the group running effectively. You can also email writingcenter@ou.edu at any time with specific questions.

# The Building Blocks of a Writing Group

## Types of Writing Groups

There are three main types of writing groups that students often find useful: accountability groups, feedback groups, and support groups. Each type of group is described below. In addition, we've provided a sample agenda for each group.

### 1. Accountability groups.

These groups typically focus on creating time and space to write together, either physically or virtually. Members of these groups can hold each other accountable by showing up for the meetings and expecting other members of the group to do the same.

### 2. Feedback groups.

These groups commonly focus on creating time and space to provide feedback on member's drafts. While these groups are often composed of members within the same discipline, they can be interdisciplinary. In the former case, members can provide each other content-based feedback. In the latter case, members can provide feedback on how well ideas are expressed in ways that outsiders can understand. Interdisciplinary groups that include more than one person from each discipline represented can fulfill both roles.

### 3. Support groups.

These groups generally focus on creating time and space to discuss the experience of writing. This can include discussing solutions for challenges members are facing, sharing strategies that have worked for members, and providing each other with emotional support, particularly through long projects like a thesis or dissertation.

## Group Timing and Sample Agendas

We recommend that any writing group stick to a predetermined schedule to help all members stay on task; it can be easy to shift into gossip, complaining, or other non-productive discussions in high-stress environments. This may be especially true if the members of the group know each other prior to joining the group. (Note: While venting can be useful, finding other venues outside of the meeting time and space can ensure that the group maintains its productivity.)

The meetings below start with 15 minutes during which each member has the opportunity to provide updates on their writing and set goals for the session, followed by 90 minutes of collaborative or communal writing (or other productive work based on the type and needs of the group), and 15 minutes of reflection and closing remarks.

| Sample Agenda #1 | |
|---|---|
| 15 minutes | Updates and goals |
| 90 minutes | Communal writing |
| 15 minutes | Reflection and closing remarks |

| Sample Agenda #2 | |
|---|---|
| 15 minutes | Updates and feedback goals (bless, press, address) |
| 60-90 minutes | Share writing with whole group or breakout groups |
| 15 minutes | Reflection and closing remarks |

| Sample Agenda #3 | |
|---|---|
| 15 minutes | Updates and goals |
| 90 minutes | Presentation(s), Q&As, or breakout rooms |
| 15 minutes | Reflection and closing remarks |

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## Guiding Questions for Writing Accountability Groups

Initiating a writing group can be an incredibly fruitful endeavor, aiding in maintaining momentum and focus during the monumental task of writing a thesis or dissertation. Here are six guiding questions that graduate students should consider while setting up such groups:

**What are our individual and collective goals?**
Begin by clearly defining what each member hopes to achieve individually and what the group aims to achieve collectively. Understand the milestones each member has in their writing processes and strategize how the group can support reaching these milestones effectively.

### How will we structurally organize our group?

Will the group function more like a writing workshop, with periodic reviews of each other's work, or will it be a space to set and check in on writing goals? Determine how structured or flexible the group meetings will be, considering aspects like frequency of meetings, duration, and format (virtual or in-person). Consider the types of meetings elucidated earlier in this guide.

### What are our expectations regarding feedback?

Establishing clear guidelines on how feedback will be given and received is vital. Discuss the level of feedback expected — whether it's a broad overview or a detailed critique — and consider establishing a respectful and constructive feedback culture that encourages growth and development. One method of managing feedback expectations is called bless, press or address. Writers can ask group members to bless (talk about what works only) their text, press (talk about anything, strengths or weaknesses) in the text, or address (talk only about a specific issue the writer wants reviewed) the text.

### How will we handle confidentiality and intellectual property?

Address any concerns about confidentiality and intellectual property upfront to build a trustworthy environment. Ensure members feel secure sharing their work without fearing misuse or plagiarism. The OU Writing Center consultants have a policy of deleting any files they download on a regular basis. Groups may consider a policy of deleting emails and sensitive files on a regular basis to ensure confidentiality and academic integrity among their members. Or members can use Google Docs, which enables writers to give and revoke suggesting or commenting mode, as needed.

### What are our plans for maintaining motivation and momentum?

Discuss strategies for keeping the group motivated and maintaining momentum over a sustained period. Consider incorporating elements like writing retreats, regular check-ins, and even small rewards to celebrate milestones reached.

### How will we address conflicts or issues that arise?

It's important to acknowledge that conflicts may arise, given the stress and pressures of graduate work. Discuss how the group will handle conflicts or issues — whether it's through open dialogue, a mediator, or some other method — to ensure the group remains a supportive and positive space for all members.

Remember that a writing accountability group has the potential not only to foster productivity but also to create a community of support and encouragement during the challenging thesis or dissertation processes. Addressing these questions openly and collaboratively will set a solid foundation for a successful and productive group.

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## Set the Tone and Find a Space

Writing groups are becoming popular both in person on college campuses and virtually. These groups can offer a relaxed and welcoming environment for students to come together and write.

In these groups, students can break free from the rigid standards often upheld in formal academic settings. The only rule is comfort, which fosters a space for creativity. Ultimately, it is up to the members of the group to create and uphold this environment.

Writing groups can:
- Foster a comforting and nurturing atmosphere enhanced with personal comfort items to stimulate a productive and organic flow of ideas.
- Feature an informal and respectful setting that encourages camaraderie and allow for the free growth and development of ideas without fear of judgment.
- Be built on mutual respect and understanding that encourages open sharing of progress and collective growth in a safe, empathetic environment.
- Maintain a strong sense of accountability, providing support during creative lulls and fostering a space where ideas can develop into rich narratives through shared experiences and wisdom.

Group members should also consider physical comfort when choosing a meeting space. While some individuals may prefer to write in a relaxed environment like a coffee shop or a local restaurant, others may feel more productive in a quiet classroom or library space. Look around your campus for a meeting location that fits the needs of your group. Most campuses offer free rental of classrooms and library spaces to enrolled students. You may also be able to utilize specialty spaces, like a writing center or learning commons, outside of normal business hours.

The University of Oklahoma offers several common areas that graduate students can use to meet in writing groups. Each college building on campus may also have locations that are conducive to group meetings. Be sure to check the requirements regarding room reservations for each individual space.
- OU Writing Center in Wagner Hall may be available for your group. Availability depends on our consulting schedule. Reach out to writingcenter@ou.edu.
- Wagner Hall provides several small study rooms on the second floor.
- The Zarrow Family Faculty & Graduate Student Center is located on lower level two of the Bizzell Memorial Library. You can reserve a meeting room up to a month in advance. These spaces have different features, such as projectors or white boards, depending upon your needs. Note: Rooms in the Zarrow suite are accessible only with an OU graduate student or faculty ID.
- The Bizzell Memorial Library features several informal spaces that can be used for small group meetings on a first come, first serve basis.
- The Jeannine Rainbolt College of Education features an open meeting room with a table on the third floor and a lounge area with a couch and two chairs on the second floor, and a workspace in the foyer of the first floor. These three spaces are first come, first serve, so you may need to make alternate plans.
- Haystack Coffee is a coffee shop near campus at Elm Avenue, just south of Elmwood Street.
- Not Your Average Joe is a coffee shop near campus on Elm Avenue between West Lindsey Street and Hoover Street.

Off campus meeting spaces include:
- Second Wind Coffeehouse on Buchanan Avenue, north of West Boyd Street
- Starbucks at the corner of Boyd and Asp may work for smaller groups meeting during "off" hours. This location can be busy and because it is a smaller site, may not have room during peak coffee-drinking hours.
- The Yellow Dog Coffee Company on South Porter Avenue is a larger space and features several seating areas, including one that can accommodate a larger group.
- All About Cha on West Main Street just west of 36th Ave NW, features large tables, comfortable seating, and a relatively quiet dining room conducive to studying.
- Starbucks on Main and Flood is a good option as long as you avoid busy traffic times for the high school across the street. This includes before school, lunch time, and after school.
- Starbucks at Classen and Highway 9 is nearby and good for smaller groups. It can be busy and noisy though.
- Norman has several public library options. You can find more information on the [library website](#).

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# Set SMART Goals

Graduate students are required to juggle numerous writing assignments and research projects. One invaluable tool that can guide a writing group towards success is the implementation of SMART goals. Below, we delve into each element that comprises SMART goals and how they can be implemented in each type of writing group. Since the purpose of a writing group is to create time and space for writing, the goals need to reflect that overall purpose.

### Specific
To foster a focused and motivated mindset, every member of the writing group can set one to two well-defined goals writing goals with clear directives. For instance, shifting from a broad intention like "working on a dissertation" to a well-defined goal, like "write 500 words of a literature review introduction" can significantly increase one's ability to achieve one's purpose.

### Measurable
Keeping track of progress is vital, and this is facilitated by setting measurable goals. Encourage each member to define success in quantifiable terms. For example, instead of setting a goal to "write some of my literature review," it may be more productive to set a goal that can be measured in word count or some other quantifiable method. Sharing these measurable milestones within the group creates a culture of accountability and a collaborative spirit where each success, no matter how small, is celebrated.

Additionally, when members don't meet that goal, it can lead to reflective conversations that can help members make changes to improve their success. For example, a writer who gets bogged down in searching for sources when they need to be writing their literature review may need to develop a system of placeholders to remind them to go back and do the research later.

### Attainable

While it's beneficial to challenge oneself, that's not exactly the purpose of an accountability group. Instead, it's more effective to set goals that are attainable, ones that blend ambition with feasibility. Group members should engage in honest self-assessments to outline goals that stretch their capabilities without straying into the realm of the unachievable. In other words, instead of setting a goal to write for six straight hours in one day, members might set a goal to write in 30-minute sprints, including one sprint during your group time.

### Relevant

Maintaining relevant expectations is a cornerstone in the SMART goal framework. It involves staying focused on your goal and not getting distracted by other projects, conversations, or ideas. So a group member who struggles with getting side-tracked by multiple theories related to their dissertation topic could, for example, create a goal to write for 30 minutes on just one specific theory. Naturally, there are other ways to make sure the goals your group members set are relevant to what they're attempting to accomplish.

### Time-Bound

Introducing a time element into goal setting introduces a sense of urgency and purpose. Guided by the principle that "a goal without a deadline is just a wish," group members should allocate appropriate timelines for each goal, spurring them into steadfast action and reducing tendencies to procrastinate. Setting clear deadlines instills a vibrant dynamic energy, motivating each individual to remain on track and focused on the endpoint.

By cultivating SMART goals grounded in specificity, measurability, attainability, realism, and timely execution, a writing accountability group can flourish. Such a structured approach not only enhances productivity but also elevates the quality of academic writing, steering group members towards a path characterized by academic success and camaraderie. It is a pathway carved with clarity, mutual support, and well-articulated objectives guiding each step towards success.

Below are example SMART Goals for each type of group:
- **Accountability groups:** Draft the first 500 words of a literature review introduction in 30 minutes.
- **Feedback groups:** Comment on two strengths and one area for improvement (if applicable) on the first three pages of a literature review.
- **Support groups:** Improve the quality of discussion by contributing one thoughtful, well-informed response to each topic.

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## Materials

Generally speaking, the only material a writing accountability group needs is people who are interested in writing together and space — either physical or virtual. Writing groups might meet on campus in open areas such as the big table in the foyer of Collings Hall or one of the group

tables in the entryway of Wagner Hall. Group members might also meet at a local coffee shop or at a table in the Oklahoma Memorial Union.

For increased member comfort and convenience, particularly for non-traditional students, meeting virtually may better serve the group's needs. While there may be other software, Zoom seems to be the go-to meeting vendor of choice. Members will then need to find a comfortable place at home, on campus, at the library, or in a local coffee shop that has reliable internet and a quiet environment.

During meetings, writers will need to bring either a written or digital copy of their texts — either to continue writing or to share with their accountability partner. If writers are meeting in person, they may need to bring writing utensils, paper, snacks, water, and perhaps a caffeinated beverage. Writing groups meeting online may use tools like Google Docs for its suggestion mode and commenting features, which enable real-time collaboration and tools that empower writers to control what is done to their texts.
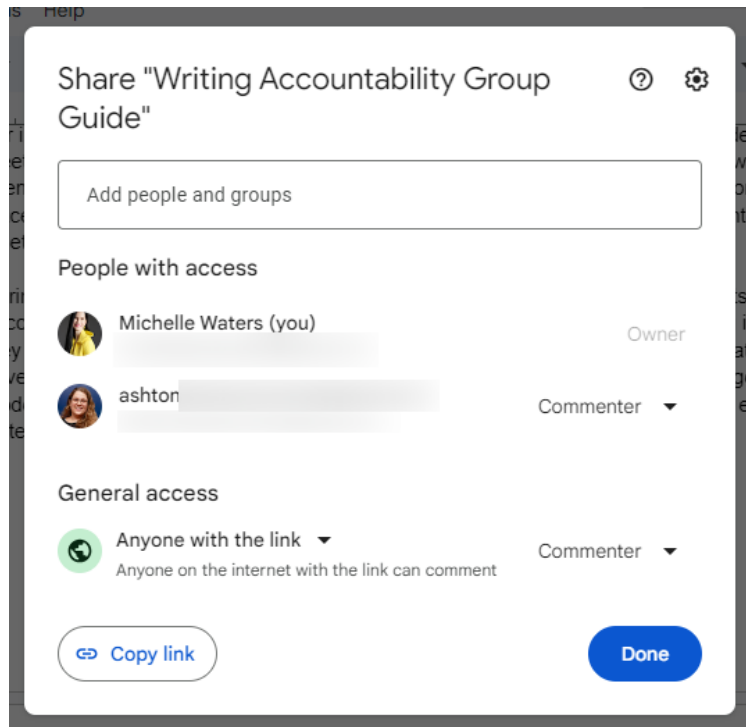
## Procedure

Procedures can vary based on what stage a group is at in setting up a writing accountability group, but the following steps can be taken setup and maintain a group (University of Notre Dame, 2015).

1. Identify the type of accountability group you wish to create.
2. Contact potential members via email or in person to suggest the concept. Members do not have to be in your field and may be at varying levels of their graduate student journey.
3. If needed, use a tool like Doodle Poll to establish the best time and day of the week for your group to meet.
4. Discuss the expectations and working styles of group members. What does it mean to be on time? How frequently do group members need to attend? What are the goals of the group, as a whole?
5. Determine whether your group will meet in person or online. If in person, decide on what the best location for everyone.
6. In your first meeting, discuss group expectations and requirements. One person may be nominated to take notes and write down the agreements made by the group.

# OU Writing Center Support

Need help starting or managing your group? Contact the Writing Center!

- Email: writingcenter@ou.edu
- Website: write.ou.edu
- Phone: (405) 325-2936
- Schedule: ou.mywconline.net
- Social Media: @OUWrites

If you need more focused feedback on your work, or someone outside of your field with writing expertise to review and provide feedback on your process or a draft of your work, schedule a consultation at ou.mywconline.net.

# References

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# Appendix 1: Writing Accountability Group Ground Rules Formation and Agreement

The following is a list of questions to help establish the ground rules of a writing accountability group (University of Notre Dame, 2015).

- **How often will your group meet?** You might consider weekly meetings, bi-weekly meetings, or monthly meetings, depending on the needs of your group.
- **How long will each meeting last?** Will you meet for an hour, an hour and a half, two hours?
- **Where will your group meet?** Would it be more convenient for your group to meet online (Zoom), or better meet your needs to convene in a coffee shop or a study room on campus?
- **What guidelines do you have for group membership?** Do members need to be in the same course? The same department? At similar points on their graduate school journey?
- **What is the function of your group?** Are you an accountability, feedback, or support group?
- **What format will your group meetings follow?** Check the "Types of Writing Accountability Groups" section of this document for example formats.
- **What formal roles will group members have?** A *facilitator* keeps discussions on task, while a *timekeeper* monitors the group's time during meetings. The *secretary* sends out meeting reminders, ensures that locations are scheduled and available, and keeps a copy of the ground rules.
- **If your group reads work, what kind can group members bring?** Can members bring their notes, rough drafts, edited works? Are readings limited to those from just one course, only academic classwork, thesis or dissertation drafts?
- **If your group reads work, what are the rules related to submissions for feedback?** How often can members submit work to be read by the group? How many days ahead of the meeting? How much work (word count?) can be sent at once?
- **What are the feedback expectations for your group?** Will feedback be written — comments on a Google Doc, handwritten notes on a paper copy, in person discussion? How much time are readers expected to spend on providing feedback?
- **What is the initial time commitment before revisiting the group structure?** A new group will need time to settle in and find a rhythm. After an initial period of time has passed, group members should discuss how the group is functioning and determine if any changes need to be made.

# Appendix 2: Additional Readings

- "[15 Tips for Successful Writing Groups](#)" by Joe Massucci
- "[On Academic Writing Groups and Other Support](#)" by Sarah Beetham
- "[Working with Graduate Student Writers](#)" by Purdue Writing Lab