

The How's of a Writing Group

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How to create a successful writing group that will improve your writing skills

Now that I am a member of a writing group, it is hard for me to imagine the lot of writers who do not have this support. A writing group, a good writing group that is, can help you learn the craft of writing at a much faster pace than you would pounding away on your own. They also provide the emotional support for a lonely and frustrating trade. They give you honest yet supportive feedback on your work and discuss your story in a way that sheds new light on the characters, plot and theme.

So how do you find just such a group? I put an ad up on Craigslist.com, a free online service, but you can also hang notices at libraries, universities, and bookstores. In the near future I am hoping that this site will act as a conduit for writers who wish to meet with other writers. For now, you are on your own to gather a group of like-minded literati. I recommend saying up front what your expectations are for the group. If you want serious writers, who meet every week, then say so. This will hopefully scare away the "Oh, this might be kind of fun, people. Or if you want those people than make that clear.

In the interest of a successfully functioning group I also suggest that you require each interested member to submit a piece of his or her writing before becoming a member. When I made this request I got to see the level of each writer and more importantly, if the person had any existing writing (many did not). This gives you an idea of the person's commitment level.

Once you have identified several people who seem eager and committed, you should meet before agreeing to form a group. If you are going to be meeting these people regularly and letting them read your work, it is important that you feel comfortable interacting. Trust plays a big role in a writing group.

When my current writing group lost a member, we posted an ad. When people responded, I explained that we were looking for one more member and that we were going to meet with several people to see who would fit best with our current group. After meeting with a person, the group would discuss whether or not we felt that he or she would be a good addition. If they were not, then I emailed the person and said that we had found a member whose schedule and style worked best for us.

Once you have a sufficient number of members, you will need to decide how to organize the writing group. Different methods, of course, work best for different people. In my group of six, two people submit a piece each week. We then have around about five days to read the two submissions. We print out and read each story two times, marking comments on the manuscript itself. We have also created a checklist of

things to look for, such as complex characterization, dialogue tags, telling instead of showing etc. At the meeting, each person takes a turn making comments about one of the submissions. At the end, the author gets to ask questions and he or she takes home all the edited copies of his or her work. There is also a de facto leader that is responsible for emailing the group about any modifications to the schedule, reminding people when it is their turn to submit and organizing any changes in meeting times.

Of course there are times when group members submit late, only read other's submissions once, or sometimes don't show up at all. But on the whole this process works well for us. You will have to figure out a system that fits for your group.