

Writing Group 101

This free resource is provided by **The Literary Consultancy** and was originally created for members of TLC's **Being A Writer** platform, an online community for writers that seeks to focus away from publication outputs and instead on how writers can cultivate creativity and boost emotional resilience.

This resource, on setting up a writing group, is in two parts.

The first part focusses on how to set up a writing group.

The second focusses on how to give and receive (peer) feedback.

It's important to remember that there are no hard and fast rules, but based on 26 years of working with writers as the UK's longest-established editorial consultancy, we hope that these tips can offer a starting point, if you're thinking about setting up, or joining, a writing group or context where peer feedback is given.

Being A Writer is planning a research project around how to hold space as creative writing facilitators in a more safe and trauma-informed way, and it is possible that this guidance will be updated in due course, in line with the results of that research. Please do sign up to our newsletter to find out more, and to hear about our other activities. At TLC, we meet writers on the page: **we hope to see you there.**

Part One:

How to Set Up A Writing Group

1

Find your members, and understand why you are a group

Finding like-minded writers with a shared objective is vital in creating an effective writing group. It's worth trying to understand what you all want out of the writing group, so that the group is all on the same page.

Some writing groups are formed by writers writing within the same genre (e.g., historical fiction or crime and thriller), others more generally (fiction, non fiction, life writing), by target readership (writing for adults; writing for children) or by stage of writing career (unpublished writers; published writers). Some groups might have a large membership, with regular meetings attended by whoever wants to join on the day. Others might stick to a smaller core group whose members commit to showing up at each meeting, and build a closer relationship over time.

2

Establish a methodology

It can be very useful to establish how each session will run and communicate this to your writing group members in advance, so that everyone is clear about what's expected. Will the meeting run once a month, or once quarterly? How long are sessions? And what does the rough structure of the session look like in terms of who shares what, when, and how? Is it one person with one piece of writing per session for close reading, sending work in advance, or a more general discussion on the day about how you are all doing with your individual projects? Do writers take turns sharing for feedback, and if so is there a roster to make sure everyone gets a turn? And when you do discuss a particular piece of text within the session, is the writer expected to stay silent while the group feeds back, or are they OK to be part of the discussion from the get-go?

Getting the logistics sorted means that everyone is able to manage their expectations, you eliminate as much anxiety as possible, and you can spend the session focusing on the important part: the writing.

3

Remember that peer feedback is not 'editing'

Understand you are a peer support group, not an editing service for each other. You are beta reading for peers, out of a sense of generosity, encouragement and community. Professional editing is a skill, and a service that editors charge a fair fee for. It is also governed by various editing principles which come from a professional sphere, either set by their in-house publishing workplace frameworks, or by editing guidelines set by, for example, a consultancy like TLC (TLC issues regularly-refreshed Guidelines to its editors, and has a set of Reading Principles that all editors agree to abide by).

It's true that professional editing can often take a 'tough love' approach that prioritises objectivity and commercial context, whereas you may wish to set a more collaborative tone in a writing group. In a writing group, you are principally writers supporting writers.

4

Establish Principles of Engagement

In order for everyone to get the most out of a writing group (or workshop), it can be useful to establish basic principles of engagement. These principles can either be set by a leader/tutor/facilitator, or you can have a group meeting to decide on some collectively. These principles are then shared or read out at the beginning of each meeting. Always remember to review your principles of engagement periodically, as they may change as the group membership changes, or as new priorities emerge.

Here are some examples of some basic principles of engagement:

HONESTY

Please share honestly. We are not here to judge anyone, and we would like to create a space where it feels safe to be open. Do note however, you do not have to disclose any information that is private or personal, and this is not a designated therapeutic space.

PRIVACY

We ask all writers to respect the privacy of others, and the fact that everyone is bringing their own intellectual property to the group. Ideas cannot be subject to copyright under UK law, however we expect all writers to respect original storylines that might be discussed, in particular for works still in progress, in this writing group. If you are writing something similar to someone in the group, please feel that you are able to disclose this safely.

RESPECT

Please be mindful of, and respect, that we will all have different experiences, and all be working at different levels of writing ability. Everyone's voice is valid in this group, and every voice is equal.

KINDNESS

Please be kind to others in this writing group. It can take a lot of courage to ask a question in a group format, and chances are, if you're thinking it, others are too. So please feel free to ask your questions, knowing that others will be kind.

CELEBRATION

We are here to learn and to celebrate our writing and our achievements, not to worry about what we haven't yet done. Let us abandon the idea of 'critiquing' writing, instead focussing on how we can provide constructive peer support. We would like to dispel any kind of negativity, including negative voices about ourselves, and ask you to please refrain from disclaimers like 'this isn't any good, but...'. Let's try to celebrate and learn together.

You may wish to add to these, or create some that are entirely your own and suitable to your writing group. A writing group can be a really wonderful way to help you build a network, and feel supported in the process. We really recommend giving it a try.

Part Two:

How to Give and Receive Feedback

Giving Feedback

The below is an edited version of **TLC's Editing Tips** by TLC Associate Editor Anna South. TLC has a separate, distinct set of recommendations for its professional editors, called our **Reading Principles**, which form part of TLC's **Reader Guidelines**. Our Reading Principles are issued to all of our editors alongside training and support, to underpin our commercial services for writers which you can find on our website.

- Start with a clear sense of the writer's expectations and an understanding of the parameters of ambition within which they've been working. It's a case of dealing with both fact (what you've been told when they have introduced the work to your writing group) and editorial intuition (what you can pick up on while reading the text in hand). In order to be able to do this in a group setting, you may wish to introduce a system that allows anyone who will be receiving feedback to indicate what the number one thing is they are hoping to get today (e.g., Be Brutally Honest/ I Need Validation Today/ Help I'm Fragile/ I'm Stuck On This One Plot Point).
- While constructive criticism will account for some of your feedback, remember the need to accentuate the positive. Just as an author should be clear about areas of weakness in their work, so too should they have a well-defined sense of its triumphs. Every manuscript will offer opportunities for praise of one kind or another. In a writing group setting, it will be particularly useful to lead with the positives.
- A professional editor must hold in mind the primacy of frankness when it comes to assessing the quality of a piece of writing, and its likely commercial potential. When providing professional editorial services, readers must remember not to mislead an author by creating unrealistic expectations about market viability. But in a writing group setting, you may wish to create a space that bears the competitive market in mind without

making it the focus of the feedback. You are after all a group of writers supporting each other. You are not expected in a writing group setting to have detailed knowledge of the publishing industry, and a more useful focus might be celebrating each other's achievements, at the same time as encouraging each other to make progress.

- Acuity of editorial feedback is vital, but so too is it important to project objectivity through a lens of respect and empathy. A complete novel represents a huge commitment of time (years, sometimes) and emotional energy, and for many authors it represents a leap of courage to seek feedback on their work, whether this be from peers, beta readers or professional editors. Be empathetic, always.
- Being an attentive reader is central to producing feedback informed by clarity of thought and expression. Try to think about what you want to say before you say it. Remember, in a writing group setting you will not have the advantage of a carefully prepared and articulated letter or reader's report, and it's very easy when speaking to say something accidentally clumsy. It's OK to admit when you don't have an opinion or don't know how to give feedback. Not everyone is everyone else's best reader! Consider allowing for instances where feedback is not forthcoming, and that being OK within your writing group setting.
- It can be helpful to have an inventory of key areas of focus dealing with both the bigger picture, and more line by line detail. For example, if you are the writing group leader, you may wish to group feedback into the following categories, to give your members some prompts about what they can feed back on: form, structure, pace, characterisation, plot, tension, voice, dialogue and general prose style. Remember that each writer's needs will be different. The benefit of a writing group is that if you stay true to the feedback you believe to be most helpful, instead of being led by the rest of the group or by trying to be all-encompassing, you can provide a holistic consideration of the organic whole. You never know what a writer might find useful, so be brave and speak up!
- When it comes to constructive criticism or what we at TLC call 'areas for development', or if you're struggling to find something useful to say, try to think about asking open questions rather than challenging how a writer has written something. It can be much easier for a writer to find a way in to a solution that is their own if they are asked to explain something in their own words. Questions also feel much more open-ended than pronouncements. For example, 'Can you tell me why you chose to end the novel with this scene?' is more likely to lead to a discussion than 'I don't like the ending. It just didn't convince me,' which leaves the writer with nowhere to go. A writing group can quickly identify problem areas, because consensus generally means there's an issue that needs dealing with, even if there are differing practical solutions suggested. This also helps give the writer more ownership over the editing process.

Receiving Feedback

The below is an edited version of The Literary Consultancy's '*What to Expect*' and '*Next Steps*' documents which we provide to writers before and after receiving our editorial services.

IN THE MOMENT

It can be challenging in a writing group when there isn't time to ruminate on the feedback, which is given 'in the moment'. This is fine providing the group has solid principles of engagement (see *Part One*), so that there is a clear sense of uplifting each other. It can be helpful to make notes while others are giving you feedback, firstly so you remember what is being said about your writing, but also because it gives you some time to think before responding. You may also choose not to respond, and should feel empowered to reserve this right. When making notes, try not to filter out anything you don't instinctively agree with, as you may find it helpful to have a record of everything being said, rather than just the bits you want to listen to, when coming back to your notes later in a more objective and critical frame of mind.

OBJECTIVE DISTANCE

It is vital to establish a critical distance from the feedback in the days and weeks after it has been given, to facilitate the switch from reading-as-writer, to reading-as-reader. We recommend reading through your feedback notes once without doing anything except acknowledging them. You may find when you go back a day or a few days later that you discover new nuances, or things that initially felt useless that now feel valid. This also gives you time to work through the feedback on a subconscious level.

IMPLEMENTING THE FEEDBACK

How you plan your next steps is up to you, but we have found that advising writers to make a list of the positive feedback, then a list of the areas for development, can be clarifying. You remind yourself that there is merit in your work, but you can also begin to examine the areas for development more critically. Does anything in particular stand out for you? How did the feedback make you feel? Why might you feel this way?

From here, you can begin to make plans to implement the feedback. You may wish to start a new page or create a document noting the key areas you intend to address, and the order in which you intend to address them. Then, think about how you might tackle each area in a practical way. Sometimes the solutions present themselves during the process of editing, so don't worry too much if you don't have a complete step-by-step yet.

FEEDBACK AS STARTING-POINT, NOT END-POINT

Do see any feedback you receive as a starting-point or jumping-off point; a way to embolden you to be a better critical reader of your own work, and to support the development of your craft.

At TLC we often position feedback as a pivot; a moment in time with the potential to change the direction of your writing. You may find you agree with the suggestions made,

you may not. A sense of your own creative vision is essential, and it's a good sign if you are feeling resistant to some things. This usually indicates that you have a clear sense of what you are trying to communicate. If the feedback suggests something isn't working, consider it an interrogation of the execution of your ideas, not necessarily the ideas themselves. Ask: how might I communicate this differently, deploying my skills as a writer to keep a reader engaged, at the level of the text (sentence, syntax, style) and story (plot, emotional resonance)?

We hope this resource has been helpful.

We'd love to hear from you if you end up using it – please do drop us a line at any time.

info@literaryconsultancy.co.uk