

# How to run an academic writing retreat and bring the campus back together

*Since it started in 2011, Academic Writing Month has seen a growth of workshops and initiatives aimed at helping researchers to prioritise writing projects. In 2020, as many researchers are in lockdown and working from home, there are new challenges for concentrating on and completing writing. In this post, **Andy Tattersall** outlines his experience running online writing retreats. He finds that they not enable researchers to be productive in lockdown but also bring back a sense of academic community, which the closure of campuses has compromised.*

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As academics will testify, every month is a writing month. However, that core function has become harder for many since leaving the familiarity of their office spaces to work at home. This makes having a dedicated Academic Writing Month- November- even more valuable.

The initiative was originally started by [PhD2Published](#) founder Charlotte Frost in 2011 and has grown in popularity since then. Along with colleagues Lucy Lee, Kay Guccione (now at Glasgow Caledonian University) and myself have been involved in running our own iteration at Sheffield for the last few years with notable success. The month is full of writing retreats and workshops that are often full to capacity, mostly with PhD students but also researchers at all levels.

However, this year we have had to adapt, as campuses have been scattered far and wide and there is no scope for cramming 30 or so writers into a seminar room for a day's worth of writing.

## Writing in lockdown

It was obvious as my campus closed down that a lot of my colleagues and students were going to struggle more than ever to write. The disruption of suddenly finding yourself thrust into a new working space that is a makeshift office on a kitchen table with laptop and poor wifi connection. Add to that the issue of young children being at home and a fractured, anxiety-induced working day, the ability to write becomes even more impaired and requires a strategy to deal with it.

Writing difficulties have been exacerbated by the isolation and inability for many to feel that they are working in a cohesive, supportive environment. Realising the problem of disruption on writing activities back in March, I decided to start my own online writing retreat from my department. I had experience of this having launched a weekly writing retreat in 2015 as I needed to finish an edited book and realised that the only way I would do it would be to have other focused writers in the room with me. I started Write Club and styled it on a popular film of a similar name: "The first rule of Write Club is that you do not talk at Write Club. The second rule of Write Club is that you do not talk at Write Club". It worked and I finished the book, and seeing how popular the sessions were, I decided to keep running them, whether I was writing or not.

## How to run an online writing retreat?

I have run over 40 retreats over the last eight months with often 20 staff and students in attendance. The method for running these sessions is simple and does not require much organisation or planning. I have ensured that the sessions are open to all, regardless of position or department. I think the more people who attend, the better the session will be, the greater the community feel.

The sessions are based on the [Pomodoro Technique](#) which works on the model of short productivity chunks with regular breaks. Most sessions I run are two hours in duration which means they comprise of four x 25 minute Pomodoros, or I run a monthly longer (Boot Camp) session that has eight x 25 minute Pomodoros with a one hour lunch break in the middle.

In the breaks, attendees are encouraged to stretch their legs, get a drink, stay and talk over the microphone or use the chat function. Sessions are run in Blackboard Collaborate using the same virtual classroom which is open 24 hours a day, so attendees could run their own session if they wished to. Participation with a microphone is low, but chat conversations are often lively, so as the host I read out messages and share information and advice.

Sessions are run across different times with equal amounts timetabled for the morning, afternoon and in the evening as not everyone is able to focus on working in the daytime, especially if they have caring responsibilities. Staff and students sign up via a Google Form, which is attached to a spreadsheet with attendees names and emails. A colleague sends a Google Calendar invite, although there is no pressure to attend or be on time, it does help attendees remember upcoming sessions. So far I have had attendees from at least six different countries and different time zones.

I start the session by asking what everyone is working on and what they hope to achieve. The answer varies from working on their PhD, to data analysis and that perennial problem of the long, unfinished paper. I also share videos in the breaks of productivity meditations and desk yoga sessions, which are really well received. Occasionally at the longer Boot Camp sessions I'm joined by my colleague Anju keetharuth to deliver a calming meditation or invigorating yoga session to start things off. It is important to remind attendees that what they put into the session, they will get out more. I tell attendees to leave phones in another room, close down any social media and subconsciously think that we're all in the same room. That subtle peer pressure hopefully adds an extra 10 percent effort. For those who might struggle to shut out distraction, it is worth noting tools like the brilliant [Forest App](#) which helps block out disruptive email, social media and news platforms. I use a Tibetan singing bowl to chime when the breaks happen which was gifted to me by an ex-colleague and a big fan of the Write Clubs.

There is no pressure to write in the sessions, some may do other activities, read, analyse data, create a poster. There is also no pressure to compete, if someone writes 1000 words – great, if they write 100 words and are really happy, then that's great too. I always ask for honesty and appreciate it when occasionally someone confesses to not having a good session – sometimes it's not meant to be. Whatever happens, the vast majority of those who attend find they have produced more than if they hadn't attended. I have managed to capture useful feedback formally and through the chat which has highlighted the importance of these sessions for academics and students. I believe that more students and researchers could benefit by attending them.

For those contemplating running their own retreats, whether for Academic Writing Month or afterwards, it is unlikely the majority of us will be back on campus before Spring; so just a few winter months of retreats could prove to be beneficial, not just for productivity, but also harmony. Once you get into the flow running them, they are not much work, but they do make a positive impact on a virtual campus. It has been interesting to hear conversations in the chat between PGRs and staff from different departments, there is a real collegial feel about some of the sessions. I plan to keep running them for the next few months and will be involved in my [Sheffield's Academic Writing Month](#) and hope that even more staff and students will attend. They do bring a sense of academic community and are a productive and worthwhile activity for those who attend and can highlight that not all online meetings are a waste of time.

*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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