

# Research Rituals – Finding the value of writing accountability groups

*Academia, especially at PhD and Post-Doctoral level, is often associated with individual work and isolation. Reflecting on her experience of designing, facilitating, and working in writing accountability groups, Ann Gillian Chu discusses how to forge effective writing groups and the value they offer in relation to building academic community.*

---

When I was preparing for my International Baccalaureate (IB) exams as a teenager, a normal day would be to go to the local library to study with classmates. We stayed until the library closed, ate all our meals together, and, despite the hard work, had an enjoyable time. Subsequently, it has been rare for me to study with others in quite the same way. I prepared for professional accounting exams as a lone wolf and while I may have learned as much, I did not find it to be a healthy or holistic form of growth.

Undertaking a doctoral degree, I rediscovered how I enjoyed this process of writing and learning together, by participating in writing retreats and writing accountability groups. I found these groups provided a structured time that allowed me to plan my writing and prepare myself to be productive. Working with others in the same space, toward a similar goal, built a sort of camaraderie and led to friendships as well.

Thinking of my own research field (Theological Ethics), there is also a curious liturgical element to these kinds of writing groups. I investigate how Hong Kong Christians make sense of their faith and civic identity. In this context participants who are able to interact with others and live their faith in community, bring a ritualistic element to their faith that is distinct from those who are isolated, or ‘closet’ Christians. [James K. A. Smith](#) also emphasises how learning is connected to what humans do together through practiced formation, not just ideas and information. By cultivating a constant practice of writing together, academics in a sense can train through conditioning their bodies to become researchers who build knowledge while grounded in a community. From a different perspective, [Rowena Murray and Mary Newton](#) similarly argue for writing retreats as a way to create dedicated writing time and build collegiality. This points to how we should be mindful about writing together, creating practices that suit our collective desired goals, rather than one size fits all solutions.

## Crafting an effective writing group

### **Format**

In general, there are two approaches to writing groups: asynchronous and synchronous. Both can occur either online or in person. The choice between the two depends on what is most helpful for the group. In an asynchronous writing accountability group, participants agree to meet at set times to discuss their writing progress since the last meeting. They discuss what went well and what needs to be improved to meet their writing goals. In synchronous writing accountability groups, people meet at the appointed time and everyone writes in a supportive and ideally non-surveillance environment.

### **Community**

The next thing to consider is who should take part. Effective groups are supportive and available for each other. Group members must be willing to plan around each other’s needs and be understanding and flexible. With many groups already available, it may make sense to join an existing group rather than create a new one. After trying different formats to gain a sense of what works, crafting a customised group may be the next step. I have created Trello boards as resources to [establish writing accountability groups](#) and [organise writing retreats](#).

### **Timings**

Another important thing is to be prepared for the writing time. By reading, taking notes, or outlining before the group meets, this protected writing time will be more fruitful. Tasks that are more distracting can be left for a different, non-writing time. This focused time is what Cathy Mazak calls the '[Soar State](#)', a time in the day when one is most creative, energetic, and able to produce high-quality work. This is not the time to be answering emails. How do prolific writers figure out their routine? [Mason Currey](#) collated how renowned authors, artists, and other celebrated figures spend their time. Even great minds do not work 24/7. What is important is finding a rhythm, a balance of work and leisure, that works.

### **Starting and Finishing**

Starting a writing session with writing prompts can also be helpful, such as Murray's '[Page-98 Paper](#),' Robert Brown's '[8 Questions](#),' or Nicole Janz's '[Happy Goal Setting](#).' Goals need to be written down and specific enough to provide a sense of accountability and achievement. Likewise, it will help prepare for next writing session to finish each meeting with a 'shutdown ritual', such as writing down achievements, feelings, and the task to start with for the next writing session. This ritual is a good signal to leave the work behind for the day and transition to other facets of life.



Image Credit: Harvesting letters, detail from the Heures de Marguerite d'Orléans, Bibliothèque nationale de France (Public Domain).

It is not only being there with other people, but to borrow a theological concept, the liturgy, or the structure and repetition of activities, that matters in the success of a group. Writing groups generally list their schedule in advance, and seasoned participants know exactly what will happen and what they are expected to bring to the table. I find that travelling to a familiar location and working together is precisely what contributes to the success of writing groups. It creates a routine that is not commonly found in academia, with its various ad-hoc duties such as meetings, conferences, and peer reviews.

These routines reflect the origins of western scholarship in monastic communities and their systematic work writing and transcribing texts. An echo of these practices exists today in the idea of 'scriptorium' as a regular writing accountability group has come about in Cambridge, Oxford, Edinburgh, and St Andrews. Scriptorium starts with dedicating the time to the pursuit of knowledge in the transcendent through prayer and goal setting, writing together, lunch and socialising, more writing, and ends with prayer and reflection. This kind of routine, making space for meditation and reflection, gives life to those who participate. For my own research into Christian communities, being able to write collectively is especially helpful in providing me with a context to contemplate what it means 'to do life together' for those I research.

## When Writing Groups Stop Working

Though I sing their praises, writing groups do not (and should not) work all the time. Fruitful writing groups end simply because one or several of the members finished up a stage in their lives, such as completing a thesis, changing careers, or moving to a different time zone. Moreover, writing groups do not work for everyone. I know many who balk at the concept, especially the [Pomodoro](#) (timer) technique. One friend reflected to me that he likes to think for hours and write nothing but then, when he does write, it flows maniacally. Writing with others works for me because I write in small chunks and have a hard time concentrating for long periods. Our differences are what Murray calls '[snack](#)' and '[binge](#)' writing. We all have our own writing rituals.

Writing accountability groups are not the magical cure for all academic woes. But, it is helpful to find those who have similar working styles to work together as academics in community. In [The Passionate Intellect](#), Norman Klassen and Jens Zimmermann lament the current state of modern university, being seen as an apprenticeship or trade school. Instead, they argue that the university should be a place for 'producing exemplary human beings, good citizens of character, wisdom, and discernment [...] for a better society.' Writing groups can be a place to bring the communal, humanistic aspect back to what can be seen as solitary, technical work. We should think carefully about how we bring them into being.

---

*The content generated on this blog is for information purposes only. This Article gives the views and opinions of the authors and does not reflect the views and opinions of the Impact of Social Science blog (the blog), nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

*Image Credit: Detail from the [Heures de Marguerite d'Orléans](#), Bibliothèque nationale de France (Public Domain).*

---