



Setting up a Writing Group

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Writing is a solitary occupation, but for most writers, the time comes when the dual dynamic of encouragement and constructive critical feedback becomes essential. Bearing that in mind, where do writing groups come from? Their initial starting point may spring from a notice board in a shopping centre, your library or local newspaper or emerge at the tail-end of adult education courses. Sometimes a vibrant book club will nurture a latent desire to write - after all, reading is the other side of the writing coin.

Venue

Whatever the origins, a writing group's first port of call is securing a meeting place that's warm, friendly, not too noisy and with minimum rent (or none at all). Art Centres, libraries, the cosy corners of bars, coffee shops, hotel lobbies; they each have possibilities - and pitfalls. The homely clatter of teacups/glasses and a constant gallery of interesting characters in passing can soon pall if a fledgling writer has to shout to be heard! Or if each time the door opens, a breeze scatters the pages and a roar of traffic interrupts the flow.

Libraries are wonderful support networks. There's usually a seminar room tucked away specifically to accommodate local requirements. Over the years, I've worked a lot with library groups. In 2003 I was lucky enough to be invited to form and facilitate a new group in Lucan Library. We met on Saturday mornings, had our own space away from the library's main thoroughfare and it was a runaway success. The library provided a warm welcome, photocopying, cups of tea and when the group's first anthology came out (*Caught in Amber*), it could announce itself as a library publication. After a fabulous launch, the book went straight into the library catalogue, another advantage.

Extended library opening hours mean that afternoon and evening slots are also available. Evening groups can work just as well as early morning ones. The first step in forming a library group is to make contact with the Branch Head Librarian who'll advise on booking availability and library protocol. A group may begin small (number wise) and gradually grow or indeed this trend can be reversed. Library activities are open to the public but in my experience, numbers generally settle down and a core group of dedicated writers emerge. If rent is being paid, then the group call the shots and can limit membership from the outset. Platform One, a group I'm currently a member of, meet in Rua Red, an Arts Centre in Tallaght. For us, this is a lovely environment because if there's an Open House event, Platform One are often called upon to read work to the public. There's also a small, comfortable theatre on site which is available (for a reasonable fee) for putting on readings. The building itself is modern, warm and choc full of artists from other disciplines. Being part of such a thriving artistic community can be very beneficial.

The Numbers Game

Ten to twelve writers is a manageable number for most writing groups. The timeframe of a get together is usually two to two and a half hours. Unless the members are already functioning as a committed writing group (a continuation of a structured adult education course), there'll usually be a drop off in numbers in the first six months or so. New writers may discover quickly that the idea of writing appeals more from a romanticised notion of the task rather than the gritty realism of a disciplined approach. Writing on a regular basis is, after all, the first commandment of writing.

If a group has already gone through a facilitation process with established writers, they will know how to progress a meeting. The quality of the writing will generally have reached a certain standard. However, if the group is new to writing and wishes to avoid drop offs/floundering in the dark, I would thoroughly recommend that a facilitator with a good track record guide the group through one session at least (usually over ten weeks). Understanding the nuts and bolts of the business of writing will strengthen resolve, improve the work and increase the chances of the group staying together. Yet, no matter how long a group have been together, a shaking up every now and then is necessary. Bringing in outside facilitators/guest speakers on a fairly regular basis is always a good idea.

Holding it together

Some ground rules are necessary, otherwise, what should be a productive, energising session, can become a struggle for survival. It's worthwhile at the outset to consider how the allotted time should be spent.

Remember, not every writer is engaging with a novel. Writers working with shorter forms (poetry, personal essays, radio pieces etc.) can be squeezed out if most of the evening is given over to ploughing through whole chapters.

Setting word limitations is a sensible solution. Each time the group meet, someone should take the chair, keeping time, making sure that all the work on the table gets a hearing.

Some groups email the work to each other prior to meeting so that the reading element is already completed. This frees up a lot of time. Poetry and radio work certainly requires a listening process so that rhythms and cadences can be enjoyed ...or indeed, jarring notes 'heard'.

When critical feedback is given, it is essential that each writer provides a positive response before they focus on what doesn't work so well.

Again, whoever is in the chair ensures that every voice is heard and that it's 'one voice' at a time. Insisting on this protocol at the very outset can eliminate a lot of frustration further down the line. Respect for everyone's work and a willingness to listen to every voice is the foundation stone that keeps a group solid. Photocopying and distributing the work, if it's being read at the meeting, is an absolute must. It means that comments can be written down in the margins by each writer present (these comments can prove very worthwhile and can be explored at leisure later on). It's also a signal that emits the presence of a professional approach to the work.

Mixing it up

The best writing groups are the ones that offer creative freedom, the ones the members can't wait to get to, will give up an evening in front of the fire for, will write for (no matter what pressures life throws their way). The best writing groups are not elitist, ageist or biased.

Remembering that the 'I' of the writer is NOT the 'I' of the character - this is a crucial step in being non judgemental.

The worst thing that can befall a group is to grow stale. Following the same format week after week after week (reading and critiquing) can lead the group down the slippery slope. Empty chairs speak volumes.

It's always good to mix it up, introduce elements which keep the adrenalin flowing where it should, down the arm and into that pen. Facilitators/guest speakers are a lifeline, but not always possible (in economic or practical terms). If a group is meeting every week then there's certainly scope for what I call 'productive slots'...slices of the time devoted to activities other than reading/critiquing – such as:

- Designated writers (on a rotational basis) are asked to provide a short piece of writing (a paragraph) by favourite writers they could make a case for (why it is so admired). This is a way of honing critical faculties through work that is already acknowledged as having a high standard. Responding to that work can become a writing exercise for the following week, if so desired.
- Writing in the moment (using writing triggers, prompts) is worthwhile on an occasional basis. Writing in a group is a completely different experience to writing alone. Not every writer wants to write 'on the spot' but it's a great way of getting rid of pre-conceptions about the art of writing itself and the availability of the 'writing muse'. A writer should be able to write under any circumstance! Writing well means not being 'precious' and understanding that the writer is always a writer and not just for certain times of the week.
- Allotting time to share writing news or competition deadlines. Writing competitions are not for every writer but if they're free (the better ones generally are), why not? Anything that opens up the idea factory is worthwhile. Bringing in magazines/journals that could be possible publication outlets is a way towards expanding publication expectations. Indeed, the sources for bringing in new and inventive writing triggers are endless.
- Working towards a definite end. Putting together a group anthology, at some stage, needn't be such an onerous task. With print on demand so cheaply done nowadays, there's no reason why, after a certain length of time, the group shouldn't put their work together. Initially, this can be directed towards friends and family and it's a great learning curve.

- Writers are individuals for sure, but when it comes to building up a successful group, a team spirit should prevail. Natural leaders always emerge but it's important that when 'slices of time' are being allocated, no-one gets left out. Interviewing each other on a regular basis can provide astonishing information and is good training for interviewing fictional characters.
- Putting on a sensual writing event is an enjoyable, fun way to realise that characters don't just experience the world through sight. Bringing in scents, sounds, tastes, textures, colours is a treat for the senses.
- Every now and then, excursions to a painting exhibition, concert, film, author reading/signing can be a social outing that binds the group together and which can generate discussion/writing exercises.
- Genre events are hugely enjoyable. Crime, romance, memoir, literary fiction etc. can be attempted. Who knows what might emerge? A poet may realise that he/she is really a thriller writer at heart and vice versa. Poetry itself can also be energised through experimentation. Spicing up with genre can certainly throw the dice in new ways.

That a writing group is only as good as its last meeting is a truism that every group should adopt. The value of a writing group that is genuinely interested in being the best group they can be, is immeasurable, both to themselves and to the writing community in general.

The writing group I began in Lucan, started in 2003 and is still going strong. It has produced writers who are now household names, writers who have been nominated for awards such as the Irish Book Awards, and who are the bestsellers of the future.

To view The National Emerging Writer Programme online go to www.writing.ie.
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