



How to Form a *Writing Community*

Recommendations for developing
writing partnerships and groups

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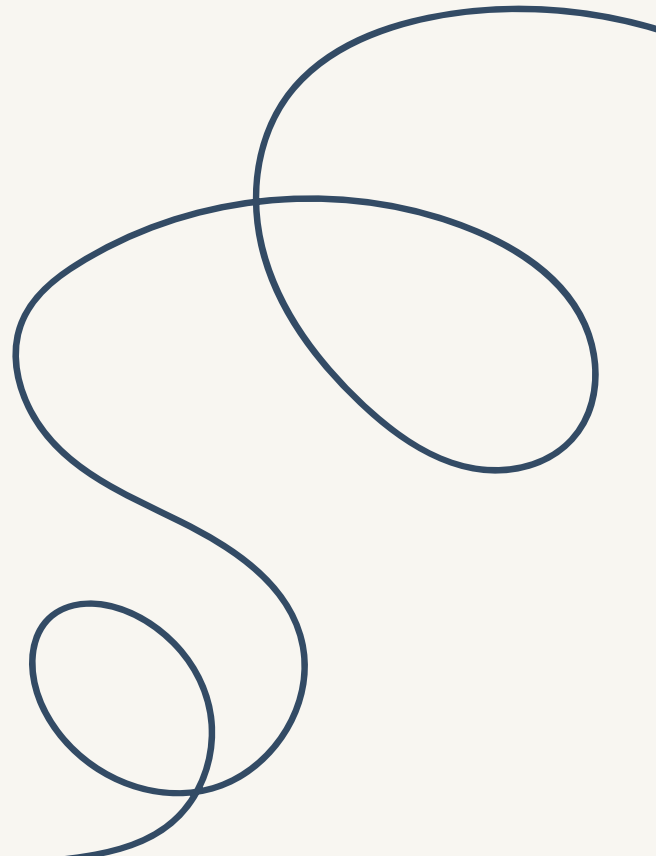
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Why find writing colleagues?



Art-making and spiritual practice both require solitude. But if either are to deepen and become a sustainable source of personal connection and growth, we also need community.

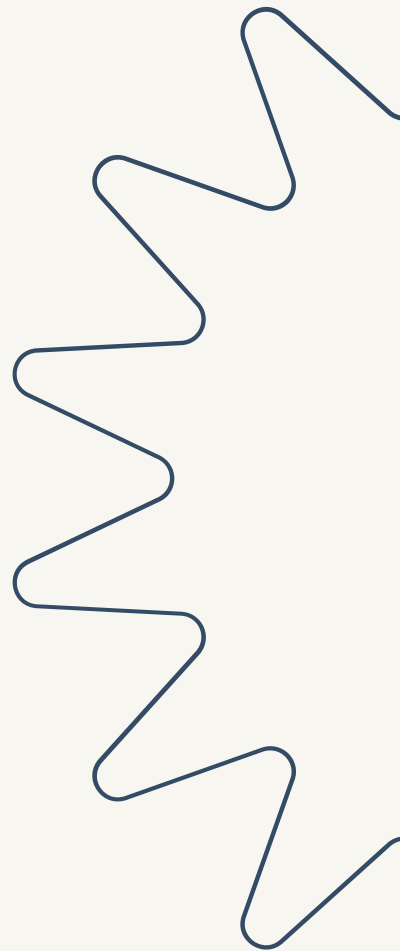
A writing community gives the writer inspiration, perspective, other viewpoints, support, accountability, feedback, and collegiality. Fellow writers can be early readers, giving writers a trustworthy test audience for their work. Writing communities also broaden a writer's exposure to new literature and to literary opportunities.

Where can I find writing colleagues?

Writers often first find community in classes. To sustain us and challenge us to develop our skills over the long haul, however, we need to look beyond short-term connections and foster ongoing relationships.

The writing partnerships and groups that endure form organically. When you attend classes, identify those writers you feel affinity toward, whose work you enjoy reading, and in whom you sense a similar commitment. Reach out to these people not as friends but as writing colleagues. If they become friends, wonderful—but take heed. Socializing can interfere with the difficult, ongoing work of writing. Too many writing groups dissolve into happy but unproductive gab fests.

For those living in the Twin Cities, there are many open and drop-in writing groups. If reaching out to individuals is difficult for you, these groups are viable options.





What forms might a writing community take?

Writing colleagues can meet in partnerships or groups, online, on the phone, or in person.

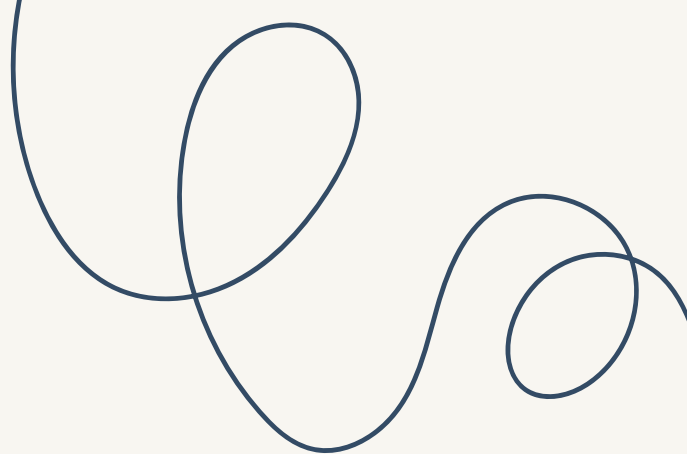
They can meet regularly, providing deadlines and reliable companionship, or irregularly, accommodating the needs of longer projects and busy schedules. I recommend irregular meetings only for established groups.

Groups can be facilitated by a paid or volunteer writer; the facilitator role can rotate through the group's membership; or the group can be unfacilitated.

Groups can be closed, permeable with qualifications, or open to newcomers.

What might happen in a writing community?

- Check-in.
 - Because time to connect with one another has a propensity to sprawl, perhaps the riskiest part of a writing group is check-in—yet community never forms without it. Take a few minutes to share what’s happening in your personal and literary lives before getting to work. Choose a time-keeper if anyone in the group has trouble self-monitoring.
- Writing.
 - A member or the facilitator can introduce writing exercises.
 - The group can work through exercises, from a writing text or self-generated.
 - Members can work on their individual projects, in silent company.



- Discussion of writing exercises.
 - Don't share writing aloud; instead share your experiences with the exercises. A discussion of the writing process helps familiarize new writers with the ups and downs of writing.
 - Take turns reading aloud. I suggest not critiquing spontaneous writing. Instead, either have the writer share any surprises or struggles in the writing process or have the group respond positively with what struck them most. Open-ended questions asked of a piece can also motivate a writer to pursue a topic.

- Reading a common text.
 - Choose a writing text to read and discuss.
 - Choose a literary work to read, discuss its craft, or use as inspiration for writing exercises.

- Attend literary events together.

- Socialize outside of writing meetings.

Recommendations

- Honor confidentiality.
- Meet at a regular space and time, especially at first. I recommend monthly.
- Meet for 1½ to 2 hours. Start on time and end promptly.
- Food and hot drinks build community.
- Begin and end meetings with a ritual—lighting a candle, doing a short reading, sharing a moment of silence.

How do we get started?

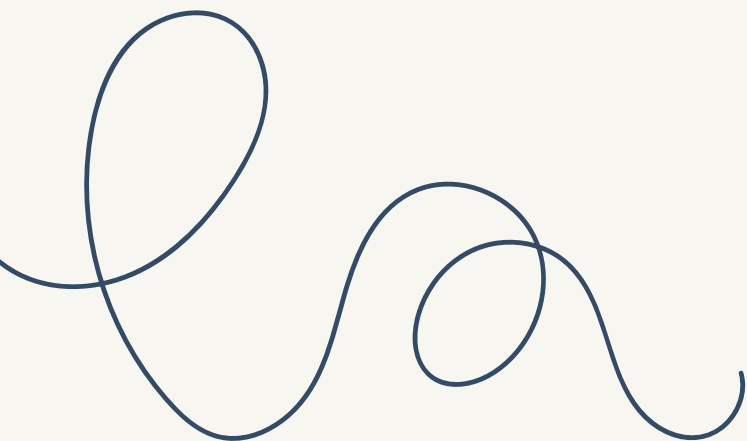
Begin with a frank conversation about participants' needs, desires, and expectations. Work through clear guidelines, putting them into writing for clarity and for members who might join the group later. Try a model for three-to-five meetings, then evaluate openly what is and isn't working.



Some models of working groups:

- For years my friend Christine and I met up, walked to a nearby café, checked in briefly about our lives, and then reported to each other what we would work on over the following hour. We wrote silently. Then we either read aloud what we'd written or shared more broadly what we'd done in our writing time before simply enjoying each others' company.
- A group of my students meets weekly. They rotate leadership. The leader comes with three writing prompts, and together the group chooses one. They write for 45 minutes, then read their work aloud, giving each other only positive responses.

- My writing group (of 20 years!) meets only when a member has a draft ready for discussion. At times we've waited more than a year between meetings. At times we've read up to two book-length drafts within a month. We begin with check-in (which takes about 30 minutes), then dedicate 1-2 hours to (usually a single) work in progress.
- The St. Paul JCC's writing group is weekly, open to drop-ins, and facilitated by a professional writing teacher. Members who want their work critiqued arrive 15 minutes early; a secretary photocopies up to 2 pages per person to distribute to the group. The facilitator divvies up the ninety minutes according to the number of pieces to be discussed. Participants read their work aloud and request the level of feedback they'd like. The facilitator steers the conversation, manages the time, and concludes by offering a writing prompt for participants to work on during the week.



Groups to Try: Mpls-St. Paul

At the **St. Paul Jewish Community Center**, the facilitated creative writing group meets every Monday from 10:30-noon.

The **Loft Literary Center** in Minneapolis sponsors a number of facilitated writing groups, including “50+ And Writing,” “Black Lines Matter,” “Somali Literature and Language Circle,” “Finote Tibeb Literary Group,” “Open Voices Writing Group,” “Peace and Social Justice Writing Group,” and “TGI Frybread Native American Writers Group.” The Loft also hosts a “Community Postings” page where writers and writing groups around the country can connect with one another.

The **Midtown Writers Meet-Up Group** meets every Saturday at 9 a.m. at the Midtown Global Market.

The **Minneapolis Free Association Writer’s Circle** is open to ALL writers, no matter your background or experience. Free Association Writing, which may also be described as Stream-of-Consciousness writing, asks you to set your ego aside for a moment and write freely. A stark contrast to more structured writing groups or workshops, at MplsFAWC, they only ask that you arrive prepared to get creative with your words: unrestricted, uncensored, free. They aim to provide a safe space where writers can let their minds unleash whatever powerful, mundane, unusual or even unexpected thoughts that decide to pop up. Their hope is to break apart your writer’s block, shake loose your thoughts, and give you a little bit of freedom to play with your words in a creative & energized space.

Writing Out of the Presence

Here are other lists of writing groups around the country and state:

→ WRITERS' RELIEF

→ LAKE SUPERIOR WRITERS

→ MEET-UP GROUPS

→ POETS & WRITERS GROUPS

Guidance for discussing work-in-progress:

Before your group begins:

- Create a rotation for sharing work.
- Create a schedule for the distribution of work that allows enough time for participants to read.
- Agree to page limits, if necessary.

Recommendations for distributing work:

- Choose a piece that:
 - You're invested in. Don't waste others' time on writing you don't care about.
 - Is still in process. Only work you're interested in developing further is worth offering up for conversation.
 - You have serious, unanswered questions about.
- Be professional and respectful in the presentation of your manuscript.
- Always put your name on the first page, either at the top or in the footer.
- Honor manuscript form: 12 point readable font (Times New Roman), double spaced, with at least 1" margins. Manuscript form is easy to read, leaves room for the reader's comments, and equalizes words on the page.
- Number your pages and put your name on them. If sharing a longer manuscript, include a table of contents.
- Proofread and spell-check.
- Distribute your work with enough lead-time to honor the busy lives of your readers.

Recommendations for reading work:

- Respond according to the writer's request. If the writer wants developmental feedback, don't copy edit. If the writer only wants questions, don't give suggestions.
- Give written feedback, both in the form of marginal comments and in a final letter to the writer. Sign your name.
- Back up your comments with examples from the text.
- Be honest, encouraging, and positive.
- Note what in the manuscript hooked you or what is working for you.
- Answer the questions asked by the writer.
- Ask questions that came to you while reading, especially "gateway" questions that open the text up for the writer's further exploration.
- Try to summarize for the writer what you think this piece is centrally about—what I call the piece's heartbeat. What give it life? What unifies it?
- If you miss the group's conversation, read the work regardless and send your comments in promptly.
- Honor confidentiality. Don't share pages with others without the writer's permission.
- Be a learner. New writers sometimes feel reading others' work is a waste of time. It's not. Every manuscript-in-process is an opportunity for you to learn vicariously about the craft. Imagine that you've written this piece. What might you learn from its gifts and flaws?

Recommendations for discussing work:

- Divide the meeting time by the number of manuscripts to discuss. Choose a time-keeper.
- Draw clear boundaries between useful commentary and distracting or discouraging commentary. For example, commentary should support the author's own intention and not request material that simply satisfies the reader's curiosity or tastes. Commentary should aid the development of craft or expand the possibilities of the content. Commentary should focus on the work at hand and not divert attention to the commenter's personal stories, viewpoints, or writing struggles—unless they are truly relevant and helpful.
- Generally I suggest that in-depth, developmental conversations about a work in progress follow this order:
 - Participants share what hooked them about the piece—what drew them in or what's working for them.
 - Participants discuss what they believe to be the piece's heartbeat. What is this really about? What gives this piece vitality and unity? What's the interior story that gives the outer story depth and meaning?

- If everyone agrees, do triage. Discuss two or three of the biggest elements not working in the piece. Why aren't they working? What are multiple possibilities for fixing these problems? Only discuss global issues. Do not share small corrections or suggestions, as these are better addressed in written comments.
 - Participants answer any questions the writer has.
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Readers:

- Take responsibility for keeping the discussion balanced by pausing between comments to allow others to make theirs.
- Use discussion time efficiently by nodding or saying "me, too" rather than repeating comments that others have already made.
- Remember that even if the work at hand is tragic, disturbing, controversial, or distasteful, you show the greatest respect for one another's efforts by offering comments that help improve the quality of the writing and its content.



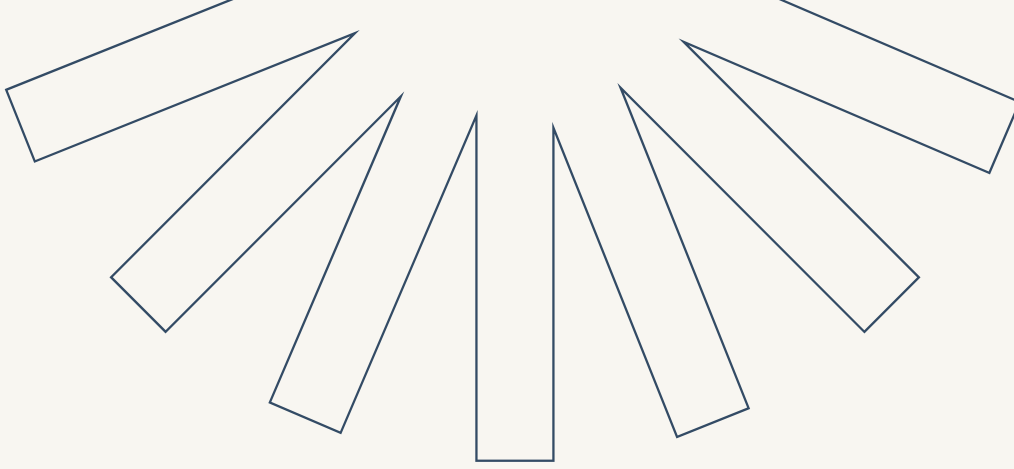
Writers:

- Avoid defending or explaining your manuscript, which may spoil the environment of constructive conversation.
- Remember that feedback matures with time; our initial emotional response to a comment may not be the most accurate. For this reason, record others' comments and give them time before you decide how to respond. If you find note-taking distracting, ask someone else to take notes for you or request permission to record the conversation.
- When evaluating comments, be sure to listen to your inner tuning fork. Which comments ring true? Which don't?
- Be sure to digest positive comments—don't let them just bounce off—because these teach you your strengths as a writer.
- Remember that others' voices seem fresh and lively simply because they're not yours. Your voice is similarly fresh and lively.
- Questions are asked of the writing, not the writer. Note others' questions to ponder later.

Thanks to Cheri Register for many of these guidelines.

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