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FIRST PERSON**Writing Group as Sanctuary**

Forming an academic community beyond your field and institution brings more benefits than merely to your writing

By [LISA BOTSHON](#) and [EVE RAIMON](#)

Join a writing group, and you, too, can succeed as a college professor. Not only do you get help with your writing, but you learn such useful lines for advising students as: "That must be very difficult for you" and "I'm sorry; that's impossible."

A member of our writing group was once told — tongue-in-cheek — that those two lines were vital for every faculty member to know. They also exemplify what our group, now in its 10th year, affords its seven participants.

On one level, of course, the lines are comical, illustrating the humorous respite that the writing group provides from the stress of our jobs as teachers, administrators, committee members, and researchers. But on a more thoughtful level, those handy lines indicate how we lend each other support in thorny situations — whether with students, colleagues, or editors. Of course, our writing group is also a place to dish gossip. And that's not even to mention the declared goal of the gathering: to critique one another's scholarly writing. We've been successful at that as well. Since the group's inception in 1998, all of us have published monographs or edited collections — or both — in addition to articles too many in number to readily count.

Our group began at the suggestion of a former graduate adviser. A supportive scholarly community, she counseled, was not necessarily found in your academic department, or even in your institution. She said you could forge your own community of people with common interests and goals. She herself had been part of a writing group and had found it productive.

As many graduate students know, banding together during the hazing period of dissertation writing provides a ready collective of supportive and informed readers. Unfortunately, few of those groups seem to survive after their members leave graduate school and find gainful employment. The notion of solitary scholarship is nearly nonexistent in the sciences, which depend upon collegial collaboration. Yet the fact remains that, in the humanities, we're largely on our own. A writing group can supply a welcome antidote to professional isolation.

The path to the creation of our group was indirect, and yet, by now, it feels as though it has always existed. It began, quite casually, at a series of statewide women's studies meetings in Maine, where a

few of us, new to our jobs and to the state, realized that a small writing group might be a productive way to make connections with other scholars and further our own work.

None of us knew many other people yet, and the formation of the group began as much as a way to expand our social circles as it was to find scholarly readers for our work. During its first few years, the group waxed and waned; some members changed jobs; others left the region altogether; new members arrived. In that initial stage, meetings were infrequent, and the overall commitment to the group had yet to solidify. However, in 2000, a founding member landed in a new department with several like-minded young colleagues. Two of them eventually joined our writing group, and we coalesced into our current configuration.

We all received our Ph.D.'s within the same five-year period, but have secured positions at different kinds of institutions: liberal-arts colleges, small regional institutions, and large universities. The heterogeneity of our jobs provides each of us with insights into how different institutions work, and how certain factors — such as department size and whether an institution is public or private — can affect our work and our personal lives.

Mostly, though, having an academic community external to our particular fields and campuses allows us a certain freedom to express ourselves and encourage one another on projects.

Over the years, the group has developed its own informal, yet consistent rhythm with respect to the structure and pace of each gathering. Since we come from different places geographically as well as institutionally, we vary our meeting sites among the three campuses that are most centrally located — even if that means some of us have to drive two hours to get there. Of course, homemade food is a staple. The work is sandwiched in between talk of departments, politics, and family. Updates on ongoing dramas are essential.

Yet when we begin the editorial work, we are serious. The tone turns decidedly rigorous, yet always constructive. The comments, whether written in advance or in conversation — or both — are reliably penetrating and helpful. It has become a cliché for academics to write in acknowledgments that they could not have completed their undertaking without colleagues' help. However, the collective, simultaneous, thorough critique that our group's sessions provide makes that cliché genuine. After at least an hour spent scouring a colleague's writing, we finish up with seconds of something delicious and some final exchanges about personal goings-on. Then we set a date for the next month's meeting.

We are firm about meeting regularly throughout the year, even during the summer months, since that's when we have more time for research. Whoever has an upcoming deadline, or has work to distribute, asks if it can be reviewed at the next meeting. Some members have more writing to circulate than others, but that doesn't seem to matter. And some members attend more regularly than others, and that's OK, too.

What the group offers, finally, is much more than another opportunity for colleagues to tell each other how they can do better. Instead, it constitutes a kind of sanctuary, a refuge for intellectual and material sustenance that, after so many years together, we regard as a necessity of our professional lives.

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