



How to Run a Writers' Circle

Time needed per meeting: 2 – 3 hours

Venue: members' homes on rotation basis. Host to provide simple refreshments. Alternatively, you could hold the meetings in a quiet café.

Frequency: once or twice a month

Ideal number of members: 3-10

Meeting Plan

Schedule

- Welcome, refreshments and general chat (10-30 mins)
- Speedwriting
- Comment
- Task
- Feedback
- Sharing of prepared work/homework
- Setting assignments for following meeting

1. WELCOME

The members of a writers' circle share a lot, some of it personal, so it is likely that everyone will become firm friends. A writers' circle becomes a place of safety for its members and it is necessary you all agree to keep what you learn in the group private. Good friends want to chat first! So use this time to serve refreshments.

2. SPEEDWRITING

WHAT IS SPEEDWRITING AND HOW TO DO IT

Natalie Goldberg, who wrote *Writing Down the Bones*, says: "Shake the apple tree and you get oranges."

Writing with pen and paper, fast, will allow you to bypass many of your distracting thoughts (Goldberg calls this 'monkey mind') particularly if you let your pen move at the same speed as your mind. Do not worry about perfection. This is about stream of consciousness writing, getting close to your subconscious.

Do not stop your hand moving. You do not have to write fast. Just keep it moving and write down whatever comes into your head, even if your conscious mind accuses you of going off topic. Go with the flow. Go where your mind takes you. If you really can't think what to write then write the name of the topic over and over. Do not sit in silence, thinking, waiting for the muse to descend. Write immediately.

In general, you will cover at least three pages of an A5 notebook in 10 minutes. If you find a member is covering just one page or less this is a sign they are doing too much thinking and hence censoring what they write before putting it to paper. Try to avoid this.

After 10 minutes the *magic* will have started to happen. You may surprise yourself. By the way, if you can do this first thing in the morning, just after you wake up, speedwriting becomes a kind of meditation. Many professional writers do this to limber up every day.

A NOTE ON PAYING ATTENTION

If you want to use speedwriting more regularly, as a therapy or as writing practice, then Julia Cameron, author of *The Artist's Way*, recommends you also take a 20 minute 'Artist's Date' once a week. It is really easy to do once you make time for it. So, when you go out, preferably outside, just look at things, notice things, listen, smell, use your senses and pay attention to what is going on around you. No mobile phone, no music, just you, alone. The more you do this the more you will start to live the life of a writer and be inspired by what you have around you.

CONDUCTING THE SPEEDWRITING TASK

The host chooses a random topic on which everyone speedwrites for 10 minutes, without stopping. The topic is not announced until everyone has pen and paper at the ready. Ideas for topics may include:

- Take something at random from your wallet or handbag
- A food item, maybe one provided that day for refreshment
- An ornament at the host's home
- Something completely random the host noticed that morning, such as a discarded flip-flop, palm trees, underwear advertisement, a puddle, litter, a river, traffic jam
- The box
- Lost socks
- Farewell
- Concrete
- Hot men
- I wish
- I do not love
- If I had a year to live
- If I could live my life again
- Green fingers

The person who decides the topic sets a timer for 10 minutes and then everyone writes in silence.

3. COMMENT

After the speedwriting exercise writers are invited to share their work in open forum. This can be very inspiring when you discover where other people went with their thought process. Of course this is unpolished writing, so do not judge the writing, simply praise the things you liked best and share what resonated with you.

SHARING AND FEEDBACK

As the speedwriting task is not designed to be polished writing, it is not helpful to critique the members' work. However, there is much to be gained by sharing your work. No one expects it to be perfect, so don't worry about that. Instead, you will find everyone is inspired by the ideas other people have had. Sometimes they will be moved and an idea will merit further discussion. Go ahead. You are all writers and will benefit from thinking like writers. Some people will find it easy to follow their own grasshopper mind. Some will find it easy to stay on topic. Listening to the work of others helps everyone to grow as a writer.

After the task, invite everyone to read their work and allow the listeners to share positive comments about what they have heard. Maybe the work of one writer will move others to tears or make them laugh. This shows the writer was writing authentically and is to be commended.

If someone does not want to read aloud for any reason, that is fine and to be respected. However, the value of the meeting increases considerably when members are willing to share work, however emotional or imperfect.

4. TASK

At our writers' café in Kuala Lumpur we take it in turns to set a task for completion at the meeting. Although we have up to 12 members, only three of us have ever set tasks, so all members need not feel obliged to devise them. However, one group member needs to be responsible for ensuring one does get set each time.

The idea of doing a task shows members they can work quickly, in a very short period of time and produce something of value.

Usually, 15-20 minutes is allocated for the task. After this, everyone reads out their work and feedback is given (see below).

If someone does not want to read aloud for any reason, that is fine. There is never any pressure to read aloud.

CONDUCTING THE TASK

The person in charge of the task explains how it will work and maybe shares some prompts, tools, notes or illustrations, ensures everyone has understood, sets a timer and everyone completes the task.

After the timer goes, give people a few more seconds to finish their sentence and then begin to share.

5. FEEDBACK

It can be very beneficial for a writer to learn which parts of their work are praiseworthy. Even if you just share what you liked best, this is very helpful.

It can be more helpful to learn where people felt they wanted to know more or have some more information, more SPICE (specifics, place, incident, character, emotion) perhaps?

It can give a new writer a real boost to hear what potential the others consider their work has – this could be a poem, a blog, an article for a website, or a memoir, for example.

- What you liked
- Where you would like to know more
- How it could be improved
- Whether you think this is the writer's natural voice
- What markets you think there may be for it
- Whether you think it merits extra work

TWELVE IDEAS FOR TASKS

These ideas lead writers to write for 15-30 minutes. The results are then shared with the class.

Four words

Close your eyes, use a pencil and randomly pick words from a book on a certain theme. If you are in Tuscany, for example, then a book about Tuscany would be good. If you are all mothers, maybe a book about mothering would be inspiring. Pick a book on nature or travel, maybe, or simply use a novel. You will need to pick four random words per attendee. Write these words on to separate pieces of paper and put them in a hat. Attendees take four each and can write anything they like as long as they include all four words.

Postcards

Supply a random selection of postcards. Postcards of artworks are good, particularly those by Edward Hopper or others that tell a story. Turn the cards over and invite the attendees to pick a card and then write whatever they like inspired by the picture.

Fairy story

Ask everyone to think of a well-known fairy story and then write a piece of fiction from the point of view of either a lesser character or an inanimate object. You could be Cinderella's broom, for example, or Red Riding Hood's basket or maybe the Sleepy dwarf from Snow White.

Yesterday

Write a story about something you did yesterday, however mundane.

Your story, the wrong way

Think of something that happened to you when you were a child. Now write the story again from the point of view of another character. If you were a 12-year-old girl living in Paris, why not be an adult male living in London?

Images of home

Take some photos of normal things in your own home and print them. A pair of shoes, the fridge door, a chair, the view out of the window, a dress, a mug, a packet of rice. Ensure you have one per person with a few over. Turn the photos over and ask everyone to pick one and then write anything.

Mixed up

Cut some photographs from a magazine. A green field, a flower, a baby, a car, whatever. Now write some names onto separate pieces of paper. A male and a female for each writer. The names can be from fact or fiction. Put them into two separate 'hats' – one for male one for female. Ask everyone to pick a photo and then randomly pick a female and a male name and write anything they like based on that.

Poem to prose

Print out copies of one of your favourite poems. Now write the story behind the poem, write what the poem means to you, or write anything you like inspired by the poem.

Prose to poem

Print out copies of a piece of well-known writing, from a novel ideally. The piece should be no more than two pages long. Now write a poem inspired by it. It can be a haiku, a rap, a sonnet, anything.

It's history

Read about a piece of history or discuss a well-known period. Now write something as if you lived at that time.

Letter to a place

Think of a place you either love or hate. Now write a letter to that place in which you make your feelings clear.

Colour

If I mention the word 'colour' what does it mean to you?

6. SHARING OF PREPARED WORK/ HOMEWORK

Some writers' circles like to run on more formal lines and encourage members to prepare work in advance. It is good discipline for writers to get used to writing to a deadline.

Here you have a choice:

- For a more informal approach leave it up to the members whether they want to write anything in preparation for the meeting.

- For a more serious approach, the host of the previous meeting can set a task for the members to complete as homework before the next meeting.

- 1. Informal**

If any of the members want critique on a piece of work they brought with them then count up the number of people who want to share and divide the time remaining by that number. The host acts as time-keeper as each reads their work and is given feedback for the time allocated.

- 2. Formal**

In this case, it is advised that the members complete their 'homework' one week prior to the meeting and email to the other members so they can read and critique it at their leisure. Simply highlighting the passages they like best may be all that is needed. Again, count up the number of people who want to share and divide the time remaining by that number. The host acts as time-keeper as each reads their work and is given feedback for the time allocated.

Handouts

It can be beneficial if those who want critique bring extra copies of their work. While they read the other writers may underline passages they really like. In addition, anyone can ask the other members to take their printed work away with them and reflect on it further.

7. SETTING ASSIGNMENTS FOR FOLLOWING MEETING

Some groups favour the setting of homework for discussion at the next meeting over doing a set task within the meeting. It is unlikely you will have time for both in the two to three hours allocated.

If you choose to set a homework task, then I suggest a topic or title is given and the members can choose whether they write fiction or non-fiction on that topic. It is a good idea to set a word count limit too, because if anyone writes more than 1,000 words it may be difficult to find time to read and critique during a meeting.

A challenge is always good, and whether you set homework or not is up to the group.

I suggest the meeting host sets the homework task, if any.

RECOMMENDED READING

- *Writing Down the Bones*, Natalie Goldberg
- *The Artist's Way*, Julia Cameron
- *On Writing*, Stephen King
- *Bird by Bird*, Ann Lamott
- *Writing in a New Convertible with the Top Down*, Christi Killien and Sheila Bender
- *The Treehouse*, Naomi Wolf
- *Becoming a Writer*, Dorothea Brande
- *Writing From the Body*, John Lee
- *Naked, Drunk and Writing*, Adair Lara
- *Old Friend From Far Away*, Natalie Goldberg

PROMOTING YOUR WRITERS' CIRCLE AND ATTRACTING MEMBERS

When I first ran a writers' circle this was before the Internet and email. In order to find members I produced a few simple posters asking for people to get in touch if they would like to join an informal monthly meeting. I put them all up on supermarket noticeboards.

Today, it is recommended that while you can still do posters for distribution in schools, clubs and supermarket noticeboards, you can also use Facebook effectively. Over the 25 years and six locations I have been running a circle I have used all of the methods below, usually all at once.

Facebook page

Why not create a Facebook page and encourage members to *Like* the page so they receive posts about future meetings and maybe add links to their own work?

Facebook event

Set up a Facebook event for each meeting.

Email list

Create an email list of all those people who attend a meeting and stay in touch by email.

Informal talks

Do a talk at a club or school or association about writing, or get a local author to come and do it. After the talk you could ask people to put their email address on a sheet so you can connect with them afterwards.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Over the years I have set up, run, hosted, managed and promoted all my groups myself. However, more recently, I have asked regular members to help out sharing promotion, task-setting and hosting.

I suggest you allocate one member to be the host for each meeting and ask them to:

- Promote the meeting via the Facebook page
- Set up a Facebook event
- Email the group with a reminder of the date, venue and timings
- Set the speedwriting task
- Ensure a Task is set
- Be responsible for time-keeping
- Set a piece of homework for the next meeting if you decide to go down this route