Creating Support Groups for Dissertation and Thesis Writing

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Why we need a writing circle

Writing can be very solitary—

We need to reach out for many reasons.

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How I learned to write in a circle

Las Comadres Writing Circle

♦ Chicana faculty from Liberal Arts
♦ In our 12th year (as of 2012-2013)
♦ Our size has ranged from 2-6 over the years
How I learned to write in a circle

Las Comadres Writing Circle is key not only to our survival in the academy, but to our thriving.
What we learned from writing in a circle

“We have learned that we have much in common and can inform each others’ work in concrete and sometimes intriguing ways. We have learned that spending a few minutes ‘checking in’ allows us to discuss the most pressing challenges that week—whether it be how to be productive scholars along with ‘good’ family members, how to phrase a request to an administrator, and how to deal with students who challenge our authority in the classroom. We have learned that spending social time together, at meals particularly, strengthens our ties to each other. We also have learned that accountability to each other, as comadres and Chicana scholars, is an important component of our academic and personal lives.”

From “Chicanas Thriving in the Academy”
We’ve supported each other

Meredith Abarca’s award-winning book (2006)


My tenure celebration
What the writing circle does for us

The circle enhances our ability to achieve a balance between the demands of teaching, research, service, and our personal life’s responsibilities. Through the circle, we gain knowledge and build collective networks of support that are essential tools of empowerment to succeed in academia.

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Mentoring by Building Community

Las Comadres Writing Circle’s definition of mentoring: Helping colleagues realize their potential, make career choices, and elect the direction that is best for them. Mentoring within our group is both informal (the day to day conversations and advice) and formal (reading each other’s work and providing concrete models). It is ongoing, consistent, and constructive.
Interdisciplinarity and the circle

The circle allows us to participate in collective conversation. We mutually challenge one another to reach beyond the boundaries, and perhaps blindfolds, inscribed within our respective fields of study.

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Strategies for building a writing circle

Keep the writing circle relatively small, between two to five people at most.
Strategies for building a writing circle

Be realistic about the commitment of time spent for each writing session.
Strategies for building a writing circle

- Meet in the same place (we meet on campus).

- Schedule meetings at the beginning of the semester for a specific date and time.
Strategies for building a writing circle

Commit to attending the writing sessions with the same seriousness, responsibility and commitment with which you accept attending classes or any other academic responsibility.
Logistics of the writing circle meeting

- Each person brings enough copies of her/his work for all the participants.

- Begin the session by selecting which paper the circle the group will read first.

- The author says a few words to contextualize what ideas come before and after the few pages the circle are about to read.
Then we proceed to silently read the pages of such author, while seeking to identify key sentences in each paragraph we read. The author also reads her own work. We allow each other approximately 10-15 minutes to read and write comments on the margins. After we are done reading, we allow ourselves 5-10 minutes to exchange our ideas of the pages just read. This process is repeated until all the members’ work has been read.
The dialogue about each other’s work begins by finding out if we all came up with the same key sentence for each paragraph. (Based on Tara Gray’s work.)

If yes, we move on.

If not, we discuss the paragraph in detail.
Logistics of the writing circle meeting

Providing guided feedback helps support the individual writers’ goals.
Logistics of the writing circle meeting

Provide praise and positive feedback on each other’s writing.

We write something positive on a Post-It and attach it to the draft.
Because writing is such a personal and intimate act, art and/or science, it is crucial not to assume that trust is an automatic given within members of a writing circle.

Trust has to be earned, over time.
What I’ve learned about writing

- Write everyday.
- Write whether you like it or not.
- Write whether you’re in the mood or not.
- Rejoice when the words are flowing.
- Be patient when the words are not flowing.
- Read other people’s writing.

- Read your own writing.
- Write everyday.
- Writing is a process.
- Always keep an eye out for publication opportunities.
- Reward yourself for writing.
- Be generous in your critiques- what did you do well?
More things I’ve learned about writing

- Be honest in your critiques—what do you need to strengthen?
- Do the same for others as you critique their writing.
- Write everyday.
- Make time to write.
- Know that writing is a priority.
- Write so that you know what you think.
- Have fun!
- Don’t be defensive.
- Everyone writes “shitty first drafts” to use the words of Anne Lamott.
- Write everyday.
- Write everyday— I can’t say this enough!
More things I’ve learned about writing

If “life happens” and you stop writing, don’t be hard on yourself…

Just start writing again!!
Hello, welcome to a little thing called 750 Words

★ What is this site about?

I've long been inspired by an idea I first learned about in The Artist's Way called morning pages. Morning pages are three pages of writing done every day, typically encouraged to be in "long hand", typically done in the morning, that can be about anything and everything that comes into your head. It's about getting it all out of your head, and is not supposed to be edited or censored in any way. The idea is that if you can get in the habit of writing three pages a day, that it will help clear your mind and get the ideas flowing for the rest of the day. Unlike many of the other exercises in that book, I found that this one actually worked and was really really useful.
Recommended Books


V. A. Howard and J. H. Barton, *Thinking on Paper*

Sanford Kaye, *Writing under Pressure: The Quick Writing Process*
More recommended books

Henriette Anne Klauser, *Writing on Both Sides of the Brain*.

Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*

Richard Marius, *A Short Guide to Writing about History*

Gabriele Lusser Rico, *Writing the Natural Way*


Key sentences

- A key sentence is not necessarily a topic sentence.

- “A key sentence is to a paragraph like a street sign is to a street” - it tells us where we are. (Tara Gray)

- It covers what is in the paragraph, but nothing more.

- It includes the key words.

- Every sentence in the paragraph should help support the key sentence.
Key sentences

- Key sentences help you check the logic and flow of your paragraph.
- Key sentences help you check the logic and flow of your paper.
- Key sentences may be used to create an abstract.
Two great resources

Tara Gray, *Publish and Flourish: Become a Prolific Scholar*.

Also, check out Tomorrow’s Professor Mailing List through the Stanford Center for Teaching and Learning. Msg #661 has a great summary of her book.