

Writing Retreat Facilitator Guide



“ I got started on tackling revisions for a manuscript that had got pushed to the side lines for months. The writing workshop gave me the structured space to work on the manuscript revisions without distractions and to finish a task which was long overdue.”

Writing Retreat Facilitator Guide

This is a brief guide for leading Writing Retreats based on academic research and participant feedback from past events.

What is a writing retreat, and why do people come?

- The aim of a structured writing retreat is to give dedicated writing time to participants for the purpose of progressing their writing projects in a supportive, non-surveillance environment. It allows participants a distraction free setting to write, as well as the opportunity to speak to and seek feedback from other writers.

What is my role as facilitator?

- As a facilitator it is your job to both arrange and manage the writing retreat. This begins with finding a venue, choosing a schedule and speaking to potential participants, right up to running things on the day, by keeping participants within the timetable and providing assistance and encouragement to everyone taking part.

Before the retreat

- Provide basic information to the participants including the set-up, structure and purpose of the writing retreat.
- Select a venue that you feel is appropriate for the retreat – much of the feedback has favoured a location that is outwith the city centre, in a calmer environment.
- Provide advice on how participants can prepare for the event, such as by deciding on a specific writing project, as well as completing the reading and preparation for their project – participants who are at a drafting stage appear to make the most progress.
- Remind participants to bring all their notes, plans and other resources that they need.
- An example participant information form is included as an appendix

Structure of the retreat

- Begin with a brief introduction and some warm-up exercises.
- Allow participants to set their own goals and plan their work.
- Plan for a series of writing slots divided by breaks to allow for reflection and peer review.
- After longer breaks such as lunch another planning and goal setting session could take place to readjust the participants' previous targets.
- A tight structure is most conducive to a productive day for the participants, so try to stick strictly to the schedule.

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Examples of Schedules

One Day Retreat

9:30am - 10:00am	Introductions, writing warm up, setting goals, planning
10:00am - 11:15am	Writing
11:15am - 11:45am	Break and review
11:45am - 1:15pm	Writing
1:15pm - 2:00pm	Lunch and re-evaluating goals
2:00pm - 3:00pm	Writing
3:00pm - 3:15pm	Break and review
3:15pm - 4:30pm	Writing
4:30pm - 5:00pm	Wrap up

Night Before and Full Day Retreat

Friday

5:15pm - 5:45pm	Introductions, writing warm up, setting goals, planning
5:45pm - 6:45pm	Writing
7:30pm - 9:00pm	Dinner

Saturday

9:00am - 9:30am	Planning, writing warm up, setting goals
9:30am - 11:00am	Writing
11:00am - 11:30am	Break and review
11:30am - 12:30pm	Writing
12:30pm - 1:00pm	Lunch and re-evaluating goals
1:30pm - 3:00pm	Writing
3:00pm - 3:30pm	Break and review
3:30pm - 5:30pm	Writing
5:30pm - 5:45pm	Wrap up

Full Weekend Retreat

Friday

6:30pm - 7:00pm	Introductions, writing warm up, setting goals, planning
7:00pm - 7:45pm	Writing
8:00pm	Dinner

Saturday

9:15am - 9:30am	Planning, writing warm up, setting goals
9:30am - 10:45am	Writing
10:45am - 11:00am	Discussion
11:00am - 11:30am	Break
11:30am - 12:30pm	Writing
12:30pm - 1:45pm	Lunch
1:45pm - 3:15pm	Writing
3:15pm - 3:45pm	Break
3:45pm - 5:00pm	Writing
5:00pm - 5:15pm	Discussion
7:00pm	Dinner

Sunday

9:15am - 9:30am	Planning, writing warm up, setting goals
9:30am - 11:00am	Writing
11:00am - 11:30am	Break
11:30am - 12:30pm	Writing
12:30pm - 1:30pm	Lunch
1:30pm - 3:00pm	Writing
3:00pm - 3:30pm	Discussion about next steps and wrap up

Half Day Retreat

9:00am - 9:30am	Introductions, writing warm up, setting goals, planning
9:30am - 10:45am	Writing
10:45am - 11:15am	Break and review
11:15am - 12:30pm	Writing
12:30pm - 1:00pm	Wrap up

Lunchtime Retreat

1:00pm - 1:15pm	Introductions, writing warm up, setting goals
1:15pm - 2:15pm	Writing
2:15pm - 2:30pm	Wrap up



“ I tend to put off writing in favour of other research-related activities, and having an environment where there’s strong pressure to just sit down and write was very useful.”

On the day set-up and introduction

- Make sure the venue is set up with one large table for all participants to sit at together; this makes for a supportive and inclusive environment.
“Writing together around a large board table was ideal; although space was tight at times, it really gave a sense of momentum and a “we’re all in this together” atmosphere” – Evaluation from a past participant.
- Check that there are enough power sockets for participants to plug in their laptops or other electronic devices.
- Begin by welcoming everyone to the retreat followed by asking everyone to introduce themselves with their name and department.
- Notify everyone of where the toilets and fire exits are.
- At this stage, make sure everyone understands they are not allowed to use the internet or check emails during the session.
- Outline the schedule for the day ahead.

Warm up prompt

- Set a warm-up prompt question for participants to answer individually in five minutes. This will not be read by anyone else but can be discussed in pairs or groups afterwards.
- Ask participants to write in sentences for this task, not bullet points or note form.

Examples include:

- What writing for publication have you done, and what do you want to do in the long, medium and short term?
- How will you feel when you leave the writing retreat?
- What series of choices have you made to bring you here today?

Goal-setting and planning

- Emphasise the importance to the group of having specific goals for each writing slot and making a plan which covers the content or purpose of what they will be writing. Prompt participants to consider the length of what they will be able to achieve in the time that they have to write. For Example:
“By the end of this slot, I want to write a 250-word draft of my conclusion.” “During this 90 minutes I intend to identify 3 problems with argument x and write a few sentences on each.” “...in the next slot, I’m going to tidy up this section and reduce it from 700 to 500 words.”
- Get participants to talk the person sitting next to them, first of all by introducing their project and how they have broken it down into specific goals, then by asking them to give feedback to each other on how they could be more detailed in their planning.
- Verbalising writing goals to peers, peer review and feedback is extremely valuable in clarifying what writers hope to achieve so make sure to stimulate discussion between pairs if necessary.
- Encourage participants to continually reflect on whether they have achieved their goals and adjust their future estimations based on what they have accomplished. Goal-setting and planning can be done again after longer breaks such as lunch, to allow participants to reassess what they wish to achieve.
- Furthermore, inspire the group to learn from each other to boost their own writing progress and become more confident in assessing how long their projects will take to complete and how they will do this.

Writing slots

- Start and end the writing sessions on time so as to keep on schedule and give a five minute warning before the end of each session so participants can begin to round up their writing.
- Ensure a quiet and peaceful environment so that everyone can focus and get the most out of their writing time as many people attend these events to be free of all other distractions.

Breaks and reviewing progress

- Ask the group to discuss with each other, preferably those they have not spoken to yet, about how the writing session went. This will give them the opportunity to seek feedback and advice from others and reflect on their own writing practices.
“...the retreat was an eye opener for everyone, because it taught certain methods that can be put to use in the future. In other words, it didn't merely provide a nicely structured environment in which to get work done, it gave people some resources that they could use back in Edinburgh.” – An evaluation from a past participant
- Make sure by the end of the break that everyone is ready to get started again for the next writing session.

Final wrap up and discussion

- Get participants to discuss how the day went with each other and review their own progress.
- As a group discuss how the retreat went for them and seek feedback, for example:
Any useful advice or suggestions to pass on?
What will they take away from the retreat?
- Ask what their future writing plans are and invite them back if they have found the retreat useful.

Common pitfalls and possible solutions

- People start chatting and the timetable slips: Get their permission to be strict.
- Perhaps some members are not as confident and find it more challenging to speak to other members of the group. Remember to be welcoming and give them some encouragement to partake with this, explaining why it might be useful.
- Participants feel like they are not reaching their goals. Suggest that they recalculate how long certain tasks will take them and make a more achievable timeframe.

Additional information:

The programme is based on retreats run by Professor Rowena Murray, University of West of Scotland. Rowena has published extensively on academic writing and is a very experienced facilitator. Rowena's research indicates that writing retreats can result in significant outcomes in terms of research-orientated interactions and relationships, building confidence in writing and research and creating cross-disciplinary research conversations.

Murray R and Newton M (2009) 'Writing retreat as a structured intervention: margin or mainstream?' Higher Education Research and Development, 28(5):527 – 39

Appendix 1: Example Participant Information Form

About writing retreats

The aim of a structured writing retreat is to use dedicated writing time to progress our writing projects in a supportive, non-surveillance environment. Example projects include book chapters, journal articles, research proposals and reports.

We use most of the time for writing, all of us in the same room. Brief scheduled discussions between writing slots often generate solutions to writing problems, develop drafts, lead to research-orientated conversations and provide feedback on writing in-progress.

Retreat works best when you:

- Focus exclusively on writing
- Agree not to use internet in the writing room
- Define specific goals and sub-goals i.e. sections of a paper/ chapter, number of words
- Define and discuss content and structure for writing sub-goals
- Take stock of your achievements of these goals throughout the programme
- Discuss your writing-in-progress - mutual peer support

To prepare for the retreat:

- Decide on a writing project
- Read the Murray and Newton (2009) article
- Review the retreat programme: begin to plan writing tasks for timeslots in each day
- Do as much of the reading and other preparation as you can
- Gather necessary notes, plans, outlines etc. Outline the structure of your project
- Download what you need

What to bring

- Laptop, power cable, any relevant papers or notes, memory stick

Schedule:

[Include Writing Retreat Schedule Here]

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