Appendix A:
Organizing a Writing Group

In her book *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications*, Anne Ruggles Gere shares some interesting information about writing groups as an American cultural and historical phenomenon, both within and outside academic institutions. "As the history of writing groups in this country illustrates," she says, "there is no one 'right' way to proceed" (p. 99).

> Groups range in size from three to forty.... Some groups exchange written drafts and receive verbal or written comments, while some read aloud and receive oral response. Some shift the procedure to suit the material (reading long essays or poems and listening to shorter prose selections, for example). Groups observe differing codes for response. Some intervene directly in members' writing—helping generate ideas or telling the writer what to do next—while others restrict responses to what has already been written. [Gere, 1987, p. 1]

Although each writing group has its own purposes and necessarily reflects its members' interests and personalities, it may be useful to see a detailed example of how one kind of academic writing group works. For that reason I include here a description of the basic plan we have followed in the faculty and graduate student writing groups

I have worked with over the years. My purpose is not to suggest that this pattern works best for academic and professional writers or that it is appropriate—or even desirable—in all situations. Rather, my purpose is to offer some ideas to work from—ideas you can adopt, adapt, revise, or reject if you are planning a group of your own.

Basic Structure

Our writing groups all begin with a core group of people (generally between six and twelve) who commit to meeting for an hour once a week for a full fifteen-week semester. At the beginning of the semester we all bring our calendars, and each of us signs up for one or two dates. The week before our date we send out to each member of the group a piece of our writing in progress, along with a cover sheet explaining the context and asking particular questions. When the group meets, we go through a regular routine, giving the writer spoken feedback on the work. At the end of the session we may also hand over our written comments, depending on whether or not we think they will be useful to the writer.

Membership

When our writing groups first began, they were part of a grant-funded Writing Across the Curriculum program. At that time faculty had to apply and get their dean's recommendation to participate. The idea behind this was that faculty would be more likely to honor a commitment to the group if they felt that the dean was aware of their participation, and in some cases we know this strategy worked.

These days, however, our approach tends to be less formal. Early in the semester we post a notice in the university newsletter and send a mailing to all faculty, announcing the time of this semester's faculty writing group and inviting expressions of interest. The meeting time is usually the deciding factor. We rarely find a time when more than ten to twelve faculty are free.

In some cases writing groups have continued past the one-semester term. One group I currently belong to has been in existence for over six years, its membership shifting occasionally as someone leaves and a new person is drafted to join us. In this case the decision about who to invite is a group decision. Given the longevity of this group, it's important that anyone new "fit in."

Meetings

We meet every week at the same time. Or at least we commit to that schedule. Sometimes, especially with smaller groups, we may skip a week if no one has a piece of writing to bring, but over the years we have found that having an alternate-week schedule or varying our meeting day and time just creates confusion for us. It's easier to know that every Tuesday at 4:00 P.M. is writing group time, and making a commitment to that time helps us all make a commitment to the group.

Even with the regular meeting time, we have found it useful to send reminders to everyone the day before the group meets. Usually that is the leader's responsibility, but if we have a voice-mail or e-mail list set up for the group, anyone can post a message to the rest of the group.

When we start out, our groups meet in classrooms—preferably seminar rooms where we can all gather around a common table. This academic atmosphere makes us take our work seriously, and it gives us the quiet we need to do our work. In the six-year-old continuing group, we are all comfortable with each other now, so we have moved to a campus coffee shop where there is a quiet side room we can use at the end of the day.

Leadership

It is important that each group have a leader who will be responsible for setting up the schedule, keeping people informed of changes, and most important, keeping the group on schedule.

discussed. I've always argued that it doesn't matter whether the leader is a "writing person" or not. In some cases "writing people" can really inhibit a group. What is most important is that the leader is well organized, good humored, and firm but flexible in his or her determination to keep the group on track. It's easy to err on either side of this firm-to-flexible continuum. If the leader is too flexible, the group may lose its sense of purpose along with its structure. If he or she is too firm, the structure can actually get in the way of the group.

Routine

Because time is of the essence, we always follow a simple routine that keeps us focused on our work. When a group is forming, I generally explain this routine, distribute a handout that explains the writer's role and the readers' role (see Exhibits 1 and 2), and suggest that we try it for a couple of weeks to see what we think. Usually we continue to follow the routine throughout the semester, though we may make adaptations as we go along.

The routine that has evolved over the years has four basic parts. First, we see if anyone has questions about the purpose, intended audience, and context of the piece. Although we ask the writer to explain this on the cover sheet, we often need to clear up additional questions.

Then we move to the all-important "positive comments round" in which each member of the group, in turn, makes one specific, positive comment on the piece. We have found this to be absolutely essential for building trust. Academics tend to be critical by nature, and if we leap to critical comments without first acknowledging what we like about a piece of writing, we risk losing that important sense of trust.

After the positive comments round we turn to the questions the writer has raised about the piece. This too is very important. In most cases the writer has a good sense of what problems need to be ad-dressed. But even when the writer seems to be asking the wrong

---

Exhibit 1. Writer's Responsibilities

1. As the writer, your first responsibility is to give us a readable draft. Since our time is limited, and since we are all from different fields, we can't really handle book manuscripts or full-length articles in technical fields, but if we are adequately prepared by the writer, we can probably deal reasonably with opening chapters or short sections of difficult material—and we may be able to handle somewhat longer pieces of work intended for more general audiences. Some people may bring very early draft work and others bring near-final drafts. As long as we know what we're reading, we can give useful responses.

2. When you prepare your draft, be sure to attach a cover sheet in which you explain what the piece of writing is, what audience it is intended for, what your format constraints are, what draft stage it's in, and what *particular questions* you would like us to address. It's important to be as specific as possible here in order to focus our attention on the issues you see as most important. Remember that we don't know your field or its research and publishing conventions. If you use specialized terms in the paper, and if it's not too much trouble, it might be a good idea to briefly define key terms on your cover sheet.

3. Have your draft ready to distribute to the group *the week before* your sign-up date. You can always tell us a little about the piece when you hand it out, but we'll still need the cover sheet to refer to later. If any group members are missing when you distribute your paper, be sure to send them a copy in intercampus mail.

4. When we're discussing your work, your role will be primarily to listen and take notes. This isn't always easy. You may want to explain, argue, defend your choices rather than simply absorb responses. (And you may find that we get so interested in your topic that we all get "off task.") That's okay from time to time, but usually, it's best to listen more than you talk. Remember: it's *your* work and *you* are the final arbiter. No one will ask you to bring in your next version and reveal which comments you used and which you ignored. (If you *want* to bring in a revised version, however, either to have us read again or just to share with us, that's fine.)

University Writing Program
University of North Dakota

Exhibit 2. Readers' Responsibilities

1. Our first responsibility as readers is to take time to read carefully and generously. Our purpose is to help the writer prepare this piece of writing for its intended audience, so it's important to read the cover sheet and keep the writer's audience in mind as we read and respond.

It's also a good idea to read with a hierarchy of concerns in mind. If it's an early draft, don't get hung-up on sentence-level editorial suggestions; if it's a final draft going in the mail next week, don't suggest starting over with a whole new approach. [See Exhibit 3 for more on this.]

2. For the most part, our comments will be made orally, in the group meeting. However, if you made written comments on your copy of the draft that you think might be useful to the writer, feel free to hand those over at the end of the meeting. (And if you have to miss a meeting, that's a good way to give the writer your responses to his/her work.)

3. We'll start each session with a *clarification round*. This is a chance to clear up any general questions we might have before going on to focus on the particulars of the piece. (For instance, we might need to ask something about the intended audience or make sure we understand the meaning of a key term or concept.)

4. Next comes the *positive comment round*. Because it's so easy to feel defensive about work we've invested a lot of time and energy in, we always begin by asking each person to comment specifically on one thing they liked or admired about the piece. Positive comments may be on content, organization, voice, style—any aspect of the writing that you care to single out. *Do try to be relatively specific*, though. "I liked it—it's good" doesn't tell the writer much about what she or he is doing well. Don't worry if you are the last to be called on and your comment has already been noted by someone else. If more than one person likes the same thing, that's especially powerful reinforcement.

5. After positive comments from everyone, we turn to *the writer's questions*. On the cover sheet, the writer will have posed some questions that he or she would particularly like us to respond to, for example: "Is the transition from section I to section II too abrupt?" "Have I explained antidisestablishmentarianism thoroughly enough?" "Do I sound

defensive?" Even if you think other questions are more central, try to have something brief to say about the questions the writer has raised.

6. Once we've responded to the writer's questions, we'll go on to mention *other comments, questions, suggestions* we have for the writer. As always, we'll want to keep a positive tone and make sure the writer knows that even critical comments are delivered in the spirit of helpful feedback.

University Writing Program
University of North Dakota

questions, addressing those questions first shows that we respect the writer's ownership of the work.

After we have addressed the questions the writer raises, we are free to bring up other issues. Generally speaking, we try to keep these to a minimum unless those other issues are really crucial or there is plenty of time left over to talk. Unless we're careful, we can overwhelm the writer with too much feedback coming from too many directions.

Levels of Response

In addition to the basic routine, I also bring to each new group some suggestions about what to focus on when we read each other's drafts (see Exhibit 3). These suggestions grow out of my own experience as a writing teacher and as a supervisor of graduate teaching assistants who are just learning to read and respond to student writing.

In all of these situations, readers can find themselves zeroing in on what we call sentence-level aspects of writing, often at the expense of deeper and more complex rhetorical issues. What I try to do with this handout is to sketch out three different levels at which we may approach a piece of writing. Even though all three levels

Exhibit 3. Reading Drafts in Progress: Levels of Response

It is often useful, when responding to drafts, to think in terms of a hierarchy of concerns, beginning with large-scale matters like focus and overall tone and moving toward sentence-level editing and proofreading. If a draft is in early form, the writer will probably want to focus on large-scale concerns first. If it's in a late draft stage, it may be ready for sentence-level editing. Be sure to notice what stage the draft is in (it will be noted on the cover sheet) and offer feedback appropriately.

I. Large-scale concerns

Is the purpose of the piece clear?
Does it seem to be appropriate for its intended audience?
Are the ideas explained fully enough?
Is the form consistent with expected professional/academic guidelines?
Are the overall voice and tone appropriate (e.g., neither too formal nor too casual)?

II. Mid-level concerns

Is the order of ideas logical? Does anything seem to be out of place?
Are section and paragraph breaks logical and appropriate?
Are the transitions between sections or ideas smooth?
Are there enough signposts and subheadings to help the reader through the piece?

III. Sentence-level concerns

Are sentences clear and mechanically correct?
Any misused words or awkward phrases?
Is punctuation used appropriately and effectively?
Could the language be made more concise or precise?
Could the language be made more active and lively?

University Writing Program
University of North Dakota

are important, it is usually best not to try to address them all at once. Rather, we need to consider what stage of the writing process the writer is in and what kind of feedback is most needed at this point. If the writer is still in the early stages of figuring out what he or she wants to say, there is little use in offering suggestions on wording or sentence structure. By the same token if the piece has to go in the mail tomorrow, it's probably not the time to suggest a major reconceptualization.

Talk

One semester when I was on leave, a colleague volunteered to lead a new faculty writing group. To build in some accountability, she set it up so that everyone had to submit at least one revised version of an earlier draft the group had read. Otherwise she ran the group pretty much as it had been done before.

When I saw her the next semester, she wanted to talk about the experience. "It was a disaster!" she said. The group had started with ten but by the end of the semester, only three or four were still meeting. What had she done wrong?

Probably she had done nothing wrong. Sometimes a group just doesn't click, and there may be nothing you can do to save it. Still, I found myself wondering about that revision expectation. Could it have made the faculty want to avoid returning to the group?

As a writing teacher, I've seen this happen with students: if the teacher comes on too strong, reading a draft one way and pushing it in a certain direction, the student may balk and back away from it. If the teacher does that all semester long, the student may back away for good.

When we read our colleagues' writing, the same thing can happen. We may sometimes get so caught up in a piece that we come on too strong, telling our colleague what to do instead of offering helpful observations and suggestions. In the groups I work with, no one is obligated to show us their revision, and that seems to work

out well. People feel free to pick and choose the comments they find most helpful, and no one's feelings are hurt because their own suggestions weren't used in the next draft.

At the same time we also work on couching our critical comments in language the writer can hear. Here's a sample of what I mean:

I wonder if you've considered . . . .

I realize I'm not your intended audience here, but . . . .

Here's one suggestion. I don't know if it would work, but it might be worth a try.

If this were my essay—and I realize that it isn't—I might . . . .

You're going to hate me for saying this, but . . . .

It's possible that I've misread this, but . . . .

When the writer is particularly sensitive or when everyone is tiptoeing around a problem, it's especially hard but just as important to offer helpful critical comments. In those situations I often find myself taking a deep breath and saying, "OK, I'll be the bad guy today" or "Shall I offer a minority report?"

Finally, learning to laugh at ourselves, both as writers and readers, is one of the most important things we can do to make the feedback process productive. The leader of the group can set an important tone here, bringing in his or her own work and responding with good humor to the comments that are made.

Progress Reports

Although we don't expect writers to bring their revised drafts to the group, we are all interested in hearing follow-up reports of what has happened to a piece of writing since we last saw it. For that reason we occasionally set aside time for progress reports—a few minutes at the beginning of a session when everyone reports on what they

have done with their writing since we last saw it. If someone has had a piece accepted for publication or perhaps has just broken through a particularly frustrating writing block, we have a chance to celebrate. If the report is less positive—if an article, for example, has been rejected or set aside or if the writer is feeling discouraged about it—we use the occasion to offer encouragement and support.

In our continuing groups the first meeting of a new semester is a good time for these progress reports. Usually we don't have a piece to read yet, so we use that meeting to sign up for dates and catch up on what everyone is doing.

Special Topics

Although most of our writing groups are cross-disciplinary and specifically designed for people working on different kinds of writing, we have occasionally offered a special-topic writing group that followed the same basic model. One semester I worked with a colleague in microbiology to lead a graduate student group on science writing; another time I worked with a proposal-writing group that was cosponsored by our office of research and grants. My colleague Joan Hawthorne has led a cross-disciplinary case-writing group, as well as a faculty and grad student writing group in the College of Education and Human Development.

All these special-topic groups have required some modification of our basic structure and routine. If the group is small, it may not meet every week. If the group focuses on one type of writing, it may want to spend some of its time reading examples of that kind of writing. If the members are in a specialized field, the group may need co-leaders, one of whom would know more about the subject and the other about writing.

It's also possible for a general purpose group to decide to devote part of its time to a special topic. One group I was working with decided to spend a session on writing letters of recommendation. Everyone brought a recommendation they had written (with identifying

information changed or deleted), and we read each other's letters and compared notes. In another group we realized that several of us were writing or editing newsletters for our departments or professional organizations. Bringing copies of our newsletters to the group enabled us to share ideas with each other and talk about what makes an effective newsletter.

Social and Collegial Aspects

Although it is possible for a group to work well together without becoming friends, we have found that the social aspects of our writing groups are as important as the work. In evaluations collected at the end of a new group's first semester, faculty always report that they have enjoyed getting to know people in other disciplines in a more relaxed and collegial setting than the typical department or committee meeting.

To some extent the social aspects develop naturally as the group goes along. People learn to joke with each other, to bring food to pass around, to make time for occasional "digressions" onto topics having to do with our families, current events, or campus politics. With continuing groups there usually comes a time when someone suggests getting off campus and having a purely social gathering such as a pot-luck dinner at someone's house or a Friday afternoon at a nearby pub. One group that called itself "The Writing Group That Wouldn't Die" had regular reunion meetings at the end of every semester, and those who had dropped out of the group for some reason were invited back for a celebratory drink.

In some cases the social aspects of these groups may be more important than the writing, especially for faculty who are new to campus or who feel isolated or alienated from their own departments. But the social aspects also help us work better together. Once we have shared a pot-luck dinner, it is easier to be honest with each other, and that is a key component of any successful group.

Benefits of Participating

When I was working on this book project, I asked my own writing group to review this section and to add comments of their own about the benefits of working with a writing group. Here is what some of them had to say:

> "It stretches the mind to read work from other disciplines—gets us out of our normal routine."

> "The obligation to others makes us more likely to get work done."

> "The synergy in an effective group can become very powerful."

> "It's a valuable experience if you are asked to review articles for professional journals."

> "This is one of the few places I get to hear about nonscience disciplines."

> "You benefit so much more than from just the one day your paper is read."

> "The intellectual stimulation is wonderful!"

> "Even on days when I was a slacker and didn't get the piece read, I wanted to come to the group. It's always interesting to hear what people say."

> "We end up discussing not just the paper but writing-related issues and other tangents, like the structure of different disciplines."

> "I've never once come away without being surprised by someone's idea."

Although these comments were culled from just one group—in this case a particularly successful, long-running group—they are very similar to the comments we hear from every group. It may not hap-

pen in every group, or even in every meeting of a successful group, but as one member of our group said, "Something definitely *happens* in a group that is working well."