

## Ten Rules of a Creative Writing Group: Get it together

by Chazda Albright -

<http://greatstorybook.com/creative-writing-group-howto/>

If you are a writer, or someone who very much wants to be a writer, chances are good that you've been at least dabbling in the craft of writing for a good number of years. Oftentimes people who [start writing](#) later in life have a past speckled with poetry writing, [personal notebooks](#) filled with observations, and perhaps the short story we had to get onto paper.

**Whether you are already writing fiction professionally or have only now decided you are ready to take your writing career seriously, I recommend establishing a creative writing group.**

For many years, I was extremely reluctant to get involved in a creative writing group, but I've come to find that working solo all the time, as a writer generally does, isn't very good for the psyche or the soul. It's important to be around people in general – because humans are social animals. For a writer, it's vitally important to not just listen and observe others, but to interact with them. When we shut out the world, we tend to lose grasp on what really drives people, and if there's anything a writer needs, it is to understand human behavior.

The need for a writing group though is more than just friendly company. If the group is put together right, it can be one of the best and most formidable writing tools you have for any sort of writing task. By this I do not mean that you need to get the right people together, but rather you need to establish the foundations for what your group is all about – correctly.

For anyone who has considered organizing or joining a creative writing group, there are some serious points to pin down right from the beginning. In fact: ten things. If you are already in a writing group and have not gone over these important points, do so right away.

**1. Define the group.** Make sure everyone agrees what the purpose of your group really is. Different people have different needs – and different expectations. Some writers might want regular writing exercises, some may want to schedule writing deadlines and reading assignments. Some might just want accountability, a support group, and a way of creating a sense of needing to get things done at a regular clip. On your first meet, make sure that everyone shares exactly what it is they would like the group to do, because “creative writing group” can cover a lot of different things. If the needs don't match-up, be clear that it is o.k. to split the group, or to compromise and take turns prioritizing group activities month to month.

**2. About Copyright.** Make it quite clear that whoever writes a final manuscript is the sole owner of that manuscript, and that anyone in the group who helped support that writer in any way is in no way whatsoever partial owner to the rights of that final manuscript. While I've been lucky to never have this happen to me, I've heard nightmare stories about other writers who got seriously burned by someone in a

creative writing group who demanded to get “either a co-authorship or editing credit,” which is ludicrous.

The point of a group is to help each other [write better](#), and no writing or editing credits should ever be an issue. If there is someone in your group who seems to think that helping someone finish their work entitles them to certain credits, send them to me. I’ll set them straight. Spell checking, grammar points, plot structure, some [cool aspect of the character](#), even the [character name](#) – none of these things establish grounds for any sort of writing or editing credit.

Be very happy and gracious if you are remembered in the Appreciation. (Think about it: if I name my child after you, does that make you the co-parent? No. Does it mean I have to make you the godparent? No. Does it mean I have to keep on liking you after you claim you should have some say over where my child goes to school? Go away.) People who make some sort of claim like this are indeed selfish, but also very naïve. So just be clear from the beginning: the writer is the sole owner of their work, and that goes for everyone in the group.

**3. Do not make it about the food or the drink.** Some groups fall into a habitual pattern where the main event is really more about what snacks or desserts everyone is bringing, or what fabulous wines everyone will be able to sample. When that happens, it’s no longer a writing group. It may well be a group of writers having a great time together, getting tipsy, getting full, and chatting about how hard writing is, but it isn’t going to get your actual writing career any further. Be aware of this, and – though this may sound harsh – make drinking water and maybe coffee or tea the only thing on the table. Keep food out of it, and definitely keep alcohol out of it. If you want to drink wine together, form a wine tasting club instead.

**4. Equality in the group.** Different writers are at different levels of expertise, experience, education, and ambitions. Some feel that members of a writing group should be en par with each other in all these regards. I hold a different opinion. In fact, it could be said I hold the opposite opinion. Groups tend to work out more effectively if the people in it are more variable, because this creates better balance. I do think everyone should be treated equally, and that means that ego should be parked outside the door.

**5. Be clear about reading crits.** It should be noted that just because partial manuscripts are exchanged within the group, that doesn’t necessarily mean that the writer wants you to read it for criticism or help with spelling. More often than not, people want a fixed deadline, and the writing group can give them that. If the deadline isn’t met, “you’ve got some explaining to do.” Everyone in the group should promise to achieve some amount of writing by a certain day of the week, each week. Yes, each week. You should be writing daily, so a weekly assignment should be within reach.

**6. Be kind and don’t nitpick.** If someone in the group does need and want a serious critical read of their work, be [nice about your crits](#) and prioritize them. If you loved it, great. Easy. If you found the work to be a wreaking wacky mess and you don’t know where to start, give two serious crits and at least one thing you really liked about the writing. How to decide what to pick? Easy: if the writer tends to make a certain type of mistake repeatedly, tell them about it. They will likely thank you for it. Make sure that your dislikes are in fact writerly problems and not a matter of taste or interest. If a fellow writer has written a genre story of a type you despise, be honest with them and let them know you aren’t their demographic. Know your limitations as a reader, and you’ll be able to provide much better criticism.

**7. Throw ego out. Really.** If anyone’s ego is so large that they either dominate the discussion or they

cannot take constructive criticism with style, then be open and honest about it. If someone is dominating, say, “Hold on a minute Joan. Let’s see what Matt has to say, he so rarely takes the floor.” If someone gets defensive about a criticism, remind them not to ego-react. Be blunt. A writing group is no place for tip-toeing. When that happens, the group will wither away as people silently decide to just not come back, most usually making up some kind of polite excuse about why it’s no longer feasible for them to actively participate in the group. Don’t let that happen by being overly polite. While you don’t want to cut into people, you also don’t want to ostrich. Find the balance in an open sense of trust within the group. You can only build that trust if ego is absent and everyone is there to support everyone.

**8. Location, location, location.** Where you meet depends a lot on what kind of activities you want to do during that meet. If you all just want to sit down as a group and silently type away on your laptops, meet at a café or local library. If you want to sit and talk about how to best tackle the first turning point in a story, it’s probably best to meet at someone’s house or apartment. Agree to meet at least once a week. Every two weeks? You need to ask yourself how seriously you take your writing. Meet at least once a week with the understanding that everyone in the group should zip off a quick text message to the group when they’re on their way to Jojo’s Café for a couple hours of focused writing time. Whoever can join in, joins in. Make writing and sharing your writing so habitual that you begin to wonder how you ever managed to exist without your fellow writers.

**9. Size matters.** Not more than five is the [ideal size](#) for a writing group. If more people are frequently unavailable because of work or travel, more can be added to account for their unpredictable presence. But keep the group a small one. It’s best that way because establishing trust in the group is really important. You can’t really do that with people who are barely there, and you can’t really do that with a group of fifteen. Between 2 and 5 people. And yes, when it comes to writing, two is enough for a group.

**10. Joint Projects.** Some writing groups write manuscripts together. If you do, write a contract first so that there is absolutely no dispute about copyrights after the fact. Be sure the entire team of writers is fully aware of the scope of the project and the scope of their ownership to that project. It should also be agreed what will happen to the project once it is done. Also: what should happen to the project if the group breaks up before it is finished? What should happen if someone dies or falls very ill? Cover all the legalese before you start. The reason for this is twofold: you will all protect yourselves from feeling hurt in the future, and you will all go into the venture knowing exactly what you are doing.

These are the things to keep in mind. May seem like a lot of trouble for something as simple as a creative writing group, but it isn’t any trouble at all, really. This type of group is one of the more emotionally driven, more passionate, and potentially legal-crazy types of groups you could ever join. All you need to do is get everything lined up right from the start, and from there it’s just a matter of sitting yourself down to write, write, write!

Are you in a creative writing group? Tell us about it. Are you looking for a creative writing group? Let us know. We’ll do our best to help you build one.

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