

STUDY AND LEARNING CENTRE

Handbook for Facilitators of Research Writing Groups



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1. Introduction

Welcome to the Facilitators' Handbook for Research Writing Groups (RWGs). Thank you for taking on the important role of facilitating and maintaining a RWG. This handbook offers useful resources to support collective and collegial work on research writing.

You don't need to be a writing teacher or understand grammar to facilitate a writing group. When we read, we often understand *implicitly* when a text is well written or poorly written but find it difficult to say why this is the case; the task of all members in a RWG is to *make explicit* what works well in a text and what could be improved. To support you in your role as facilitator, the RWG kit has many resources you can use in writing sessions. These resources represent the most common issues emerging from RWGs facilitated by the Study and Learning Centre. If you come across a topic or issue not covered by these resources, contact the SLC postgraduate team. We will be happy to provide input, discussion, resources or a workshop for the group.

The general aim of this resource is to promote and support the development and maintenance of quality research writing groups (RWGs) across RMIT University. The SLC has developed this handbook to support facilitators of RWGs and also offers facilitator training sessions and ongoing facilitator support.

The main objective of the handbook is to provide facilitators with information and resources to enable them to successfully facilitate a RWG.

Specific objectives are to increase facilitator knowledge and awareness about:

- setting up and maintaining a group
- the role of the facilitator
- writing group approaches

If you have questions about any aspect of the handbook or suggestions for improvement, please contact the SLC: studyandlearningcentre@rmit.edu.au

We wish you well in your endeavours.

Dr Judy Maxwell
Study and Learning Centre
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Prepared by Judy Maxwell, Jen Anderson and other staff from the Study and Learning Centre

2. Setting up and maintaining a RWG

2.1 How do writing groups work?

See: *Beginning a Research Writing Group* PowerPoint in the RWG kit.

Day 1 for facilitators:

1. Meet and greet members.
2. Introduce yourself; the group introduces themselves. For example: study program, research topic, research stage, three reasons for joining a research writing group.
3. Pass around a list—ask for student names, email addresses, contact numbers (see Section 2.5).
4. Introduce the basic functions of a research writing group (play the *Beginning a Research Writing Group* PowerPoint).
5. As you go through the presentation, decide the rules for group operation. Invite a member to take notes—‘the draft rules’, and write up later on the template in Section 2.5.
6. Discuss the basic approach—ways of disseminating information (see Section 3 below).
7. Members fill in **a needs analysis** (see example in Section 2.5).
8. Members decide who will be the first to present a piece of text—the facilitator can go first if others do not volunteer.
9. Send an email with:
 - the draft of the rules, for member approval
 - a summary/analysis of needs identified in the needs analysis
 - names of members who will present writing in the next session and a timeframe for emailing the text to others etc.

2.2 Coordinating the Group

The facilitator is responsible for ensuring that the group is organised. The facilitator may delegate certain duties, but will always know who is doing what and will make sure they are comfortable and effective in the fulfilment of the tasks.

Some of the duties include:

- Meeting and greeting
- Maintaining and disseminating a contacts list (see Section 2.5)
- Contacting members about session time, place, and text presenter information (see Section 2.5 for a draft email)
- Keeping track of attendance (see template in Section 2.5)
- Ongoing negotiation regarding rules and conventions—do this as part of regular evaluation of group satisfaction
- Reminding group members of their rights and responsibilities (see Section 2.5)
- Negotiating and introducing the schedule for each session
- Negotiating methods of text dissemination and feedback ‘capture’
- Checking that group members are comfortable with proceedings—recording remarks and inviting suggestions for improving group performance
- Orienting new members
- Contacting guest speakers for workshops on topics related to research writing
- Evaluating member satisfaction with group dynamics and operation (see Section 2.5).

2.3 Managing group dynamics

2.3.1 Group observation

The facilitator not only participates in the feedback session; they observe the behaviours of the group members and respond as necessary.

A facilitator takes note of:

Participation	Too little; too much; off topic; interrupting; challenging; unhelpful feedback; difficulty speaking; hard to hear
Time	Session and feedback timespans; agenda management; housekeeping
Member needs	Type of feedback and support required; possible 1:1 time to establish rapport or seek information about needs; attention spans
Body language cues	Comfort; anxiety; interest; understanding; note-taking; dissatisfaction

2.3.2 Facilitating group dynamics: interventions

Ask yourself what is happening to the energy in the group? Has focus been lost? What is the mood of the group? You may need to do the following:

1. Move the group along

Sorry to interrupt, but I think we're getting bogged down in the detail here. Let's make a note to get some expert advice, and then move on.

2. Restate feedback or questions

*So basically, you've made a really clear summary of Wang's research, but we're not really sure what **you** want to say about that research. How does it fit with your own research?*

So we're asking: Why did you use the past tense to refer to that theory? Is it now obsolete?

3. Seek clarification for self or others

I understand the overall meaning of the text, but I'm not sure what you mean in this sentence here?

4. Invite questions from the group—direct them to question types for practice

Can we have some ideas from the group? What are you thinking about the text? If we're stuck we can refer to the handout on critical questioning.

5. Elicit responses from group members about aspects of text or content

So, Thea, would you like to add anything about the linking words? Do they help you to follow the meaning?

6. Encourage participation

Some students are shy or need time to process information before they speak. As a facilitator, you should:

- observe these students and work out what they are doing
- invite them to contribute in each session
- allow them to be silent if they want to be
- encourage them in private after each session

7. Be 'a guide on the side'

- Refer the group to questioning skills resources
- Delegate specific learning tasks to group members and ask them to report back
- Ask members to guide the group on their areas of expertise.
- Remind members of appropriate language for giving and receiving feedback

(see: *Feedback on writing* in the RWG kit)

2.4 Trouble-shooting FAQs

1. *Nobody in our group has good English grammar. Will this mean we can't work well as a writing group?*

Not at all. Writing is more than just grammar. The important thing about research writing is how well it tells the story of the research. This includes focusing on a range of writing elements such as the structure, paragraph development, the writer's 'voice', logical argument development and a whole lot more. Along the way, you'll probably find that each person's grammar improves.

2. *One of our members always comes to the group when we're giving feedback on his writing; but when we are giving feedback on another member's writing, he never turns up.*

This problem highlights the importance of setting group 'rules' early on. For example, each member commits to giving and receiving feedback. As the facilitator, you can then speak to this person and remind them of their obligations to the group.

3. *Our facilitator went to do field research and the group folded. What should we do?*

If the group wants to stay together, you'll need to select another facilitator, at least until the original facilitator returns. Don't forget, you can share the load by sharing the duties or having a rotating facilitator role. If needed, the SLC can attend one of your meetings to help you do this.

4. *Can a group work effectively if the members come from different fields or disciplines?*

Yes. The SLC has facilitated groups with members from different disciplines and also with members from the same program. We find they can all be effective. The advantages of having texts from different disciplines are that you can get some fresh insights and test your ability to explain yourself to people outside your field.

The advantage of having all members from the same discipline is that you have a tight focus on developing expertise in the specific writing conventions of the discipline. So, the decision may depend on time and geography. And, of course, you can always invite other groups to run mixed sessions!

5. *We've discussed our colleague's writing and we know something is missing, but none of us can work out what it is. What should we do?*

You should contact the SLC and organise to meet with a learning adviser. Bring the sample of text with you. If it's a simple issue, the SLC adviser may identify on the text what the issue is and give you advice to pass on to the group. If it's a more major issue, the SLC adviser can come to your group and run a mini-workshop.

6. *In our group one particular member always dominates the discussion. What strategies can we use to make sure we all get to talk?*

It's important that all group members have time to talk, so you'll need to manage this. You could try these:

Interrupt at an opportune moment, and say 'Thank you for that feedback; would anyone else like to contribute?'

If he/she persists, be firm: 'I think it's time to hear from someone else now – it's important that everyone has time to discuss'

7. *One of our members asked: What writing can I bring if I haven't started writing yet?*

ANY writing! Writing should be encouraged throughout the time of the research candidature. At the very least, the member could bring along a summary of a research article, or a mind-map or outline of the structure of a section of text for feedback.

8. *What if one person never brings writing?*

As the facilitator, you can ask the group what their feelings are. If the member is happy to critique the writing of others, perhaps it doesn't matter. If they do this for a time, they might eventually build up the confidence to contribute their own writing. However, the facilitator must take care to understand why members are not contributing.

9. *Can a group work effectively with only two members?*

It might be better to call this a 'critical friendship'. A greater number of members will allow critique from multiple perspectives.

10. *One member creates bad feeling in the group by being very judgemental and critiquing the person, not the text. How should I handle this?*

It's important that you deal with this quickly: if group morale suffers, members won't continue to attend. Take the person aside and let them know the effect of this behaviour on the group. If it's more than one member, invite the SLC to run a session modelling some basic activities. Use these phrases such as these to model feedback aimed at the text, not the person:

'I think you've done a great job here, but have you thought of doing this...'

'Perhaps it would improve the flow if you moved this section to the end '

'What about changing this heading to...'

11. *One person in our group with English as an additional language often wants the group to focus on his grammar. However, although we can identify the errors, most of us don't know the rules and can't say why it's wrong.*

Unless the whole group wants to focus on grammar issues, it's usually more productive for everyone to focus on other elements of language involved in telling the 'research story', such as how well an argument is developed, whether paragraphs are well linked, etc. The SLC is best-placed to work with the person on grammar issues; refer them to the SLC website for information about drop-in centres and other forms of SLC support.

12. *What happens if the facilitator talks too much?*

Some facilitators want to 'teach' rather than be the 'guide on the side'. This can happen to all of us. However, writing groups are exploratory spaces, not declaratory spaces, and exploration requires everyone's voices to be heard in equal measure.

Facilitators beware! Are you talking too much? Use a talking stick and pass it on! Using a talking stick can be an effective way of noticing who's doing all the talking.

Participants! You have a right and a responsibility to contribute and to remind the facilitator of their primary role, which is to make sure *you* have a chance to speak. You may have to interrupt the facilitator. Say: 'Sorry X, but it seems that others haven't had much of a chance to talk yet. Perhaps you could invite someone else to speak'.

2.5 Coordination templates and resources

The following templates and resources are provided to get you started. Please customise them to suit your group.

- Writing group procedures agreement
- Rights and responsibilities
- Writing group contacts list
- Contacting members about session time, place, and text presenter information
- Writing group attendance list
- Needs analysis
- Evaluation form

Writing group procedures agreement

1. Who is the facilitator? Is he/she constant, rotating, or on secondment for a set time?	
2. How often will the group meet, at what time, and where?	
3. How big will the group be, and who can attend?	
4. How will you communicate, and share resources?	
5. What sort of writing will you look at? How much?	
6. How and when will you disseminate it?	
7. How will you give feedback? verbal and written? Just verbal?	
8. What do you do if you cannot submit text when promised?	

Research Writing Group Rights and Responsibilities

Here are some basic rights and responsibilities for discussion and agreement by your group:

Rights

All group members have the right to:

- respect from the group
- expect that all members will follow guidelines, procedures and activities agreed to by the group
- attend and contribute texts (their own or model samples), and give feedback on the texts of others
- receive constructive, supportive feedback on their texts

As a **facilitator**, you have the right to:

- change the way you are supporting the group (e.g. call for a group member to volunteer to take over the role or divide the tasks among group members)
- contact the SLC at any time to discuss facilitation and/or activities of the RWG.

Responsibilities

The responsibilities of **group members** are to:

- commit to regular attendance
- contribute text on a rotational basis
- ensure text is distributed in time for other members to read and comment
- read and comment on other group members' text and be ready to discuss
- discuss text using effective communication strategies
- be willing to act as facilitator when necessary
- carry out allocated roles (in consultation with facilitator, e.g. note-taking, sending out reminder emails).

As a **facilitator**, your responsibilities include:

- leading initial discussions, ensuring guidelines, procedures and activities are freely debated and agreed to by all group members
- encouraging members to read this Handbook, and the wider website on Research Writing Groups
- adhering to the agreed guidelines, procedures and activities
- getting consensus from the group if procedures need to change
- ensuring effective communication strategies are followed at each group meeting
- organising a group member to facilitate a session if you are absent
- requesting mini-workshops on writing issues from the SLC
- finding solutions to any problems that arise
- contacting the SLC and other services for support and assistance when required.

[illegible]

Research writing group–email template

Dear group members,

I hope you're having a good week.

As discussed at our last session, the following students will be presenting next on *day, date, time, place*:

1. Name: Topic
2. Name: Topic

They have agreed to email their text to you on *day, date*. X will bring a poster presentation to the session – it is only 300 words in length, so there is no need for you to read before the session.

If you have time, please read and think about the other texts before our next session.

Looking forward to seeing you all there. If you cannot attend, please let me know ASAP.

I've also invited Prof. Y to come along to the second part of the session to talk about publishing and peer-review processes.

Best regards/Cheers

Research writing group–attendance list

Date

Writing contributed by:

1.

2.

General topic/issues for discussion:

Also attended:

What did we learn? What's next? What do we need?	

Research writing group needs analysis

Facilitators: Use this template to collate data, then share it with the group.
This will help to set priorities. (Don't forget that you can customise this template.)

Name: _____ Date: _____

Number the items in order of importance. 1 = extremely important. 5 = not at all important

<i>A. Group function</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Improve confidence					
Discuss issues & ideas (sharing)					
Get feedback on writing (ours and others)					
Give feedback on writing (ours and others)					
Improve writing					
Do exercises/activities					
Continuity – regular practice					
Work as a team					
Motivate me to write					
Share resources					
Write together					
Reading and discussing					
<i>B. Writing and other needs</i>					
Write for thesis, article, conference – Lit review & voice – Methodology chapters of the thesis – Justifying processes – Results – presenting w/out repetition – Discussion of findings – Hypothesis development – Methods of data processing – Writing in relation to your project					

<i>Writing and other needs (cont'd)</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Academic style (disciplinary)					
Structural issues					
Matching content to purpose					
Referencing—link to work of others (incl. paraphrasing)					
Developing the writer's voice					
Organise thoughts and ideas					
Critical analysis					
Vocab development and word choice					
Constructing the argument					
Grammar: - Verb tenses in different sections - Subject-verb agreement - Linking in/between sentences and paragraphs Spelling					
Reading skills					
Presentation skills					
Web searches					
Format and layout (illustrations, tables etc.)					
Editing and proofreading					
Other:					

Research writing group evaluation

1. Comment on our progress as a group. (For example: Are we on track? Are we following the guidelines?)
2. Comment on the feedback you receive from the group: Is it satisfying your needs?
3. Comment on group facilitation (be gentle!):
4. What did you learn from giving and receiving feedback?
5. List any topics or activities you want to explore next (do you need to access support services e.g. SLC or 'expert' researcher):
6. General comments:

3. Writing group approaches

One of the main reasons writers join writing groups is to get some constructive feedback on aspects of their work. We've outlined a set of basic principles and the basic session plan used by many RWGs. There's also a link to other writing activities your group might want to try.

3.1 Basic principles

Research writing groups involve:

1. Collaborative learning
2. Noticing
3. An iterative, active learning process
4. Exploring writing in a systematic way.

1. Collaborative learning

Group members need to feel comfortable to explore each other's writing without fear of negative judgement. We recommend a dialogic learning group approach, which means that you focus on asking genuine questions about texts in order to develop deeper understanding of the writer's perspective and intention.

Along the way, opportunities for identifying criteria for self-assessment occur and are applied through a range of circumstances. This self-reflexive element of assessment is part of lifelong learning (Boud 2000).

Reading theory in practice through dialogue:

Adapted from Suda (2007)

David Bohm (1992) has highlighted the importance of dialogue as a collaborative approach to achieve common ground as compared to the traditional forms of debate, where one person seeks to convince another of the rightness of their position. Dialogue, he argues, involves listening to understand the others position rather than finding flaws in their argument; enlarging one's position; remaining open; living with complexity by not seeking 'rightness' or 'wrongness'; and, most importantly, seeking to reach a common understanding. The concept of egalitarian dialogue can thus be understood and described in a variety of ways, but its purpose is very clear in developing a community of learners who trust, respect and listen to the other.

Facilitator role

The facilitator needs to constantly reinforce the principles of dialogic learning, and needs to remain open to the views of others rather than impose an idea. Setting and reinforcing such ground rules is essential to effective and productive dialogue that builds a sense of community.

For the dialogue to be smooth, free flowing and natural, facilitators must ensure that:

- the basic dialogic principles (ground rules) are adhered to
- anyone who wants to speak is able to
- everyone is aware of the content of the readings
- the topic/text is referred to in order to maintain coherence of content
- the discussion stays on topic, without imposing or breaking the flow of conversation
- they do not impose a particular reading of the text or their own ideas
- they mediate any conflict within the group
- they sustain and redirect conversation when it flags by referring back to the text
- they draw out those who may be shy to speak
- all views are treated with respect
- no individual dominates proceedings.

Given these guidelines, the facilitator must therefore understand *some* of the issues in the text in order to make the necessary connections.

Experienced facilitators agree that:

- Facilitation is a learned skill
- Teachers often find it harder than non-teachers to facilitate without imposing or seeking resolution to the discussion
- Open-ended dialogue without too much direction or structure creates a stronger sense of solidarity among participants; *the text and what it says* should provide the structure and flow of the dialogue. The facilitator must try to resist the urge to draw grand conclusions to the discussion
- The learning happens on an individual level within a collaborative environment; dialogue is a dynamic process of relationship-building, and through the exploration of ideas, meaning and understanding is created that can lead to transformation in one's actions and view of the world
- Facilitator training is important for the success of learning circle models; the best training is to be a participant in a circle and observe and reflect on the process. Discussions with other facilitators also help to tease out issues that might block a free-flowing egalitarian dialogue. In a professional learning context, one could argue for an explicit structured training program for facilitators.

2. Noticing

The idea of noticing is borrowed from the language acquisition research of Schmidt and Frota (1986), and Schmidt (1990). By becoming conscious about how language is used in particular contexts, we can **notice** how language is used in specific texts and then apply it to our own writing and speaking. This process is termed **discourse analysis**. The way towards deciding on a structure and a writing voice is to **notice** how others do it, evaluate their success and measure the structural 'fit' with our own research writing.

Check out **Text Analysis: Noticing** in the *Approaches and activities* section of the RWG kit.

3. Iterative active learning process

We learn by repeated observation and application; we learn by observation and application in different settings; we learn by 'testing out' ideas and skills in a range of contexts.

Be patient with yourself and with other group members. Be prepared to meet the same issue over and over again as if it were the first time.

Be prepared to remind group members about conventions you have already discussed in detail. Where possible, don't just talk about an idea or a writing convention – DO it. APPLY it.

Do not be surprised if certain skills take a long time to acquire. NOTICE what is happening, again...and again.

4. Exploring writing in a systematic way

If we are to **notice** how text works to tell the story, we need a system to help us focus on various writing elements. A useful system for this is to see text at three levels:

Macro level focuses on the 'big picture' — the broad organisation of the text.

Middle level focuses on how the paragraphs function to let the reader see the 'big picture'

Micro level focuses on the smaller elements such as sentence structure, style and grammar.

When we're critiquing or revising our writing, it's usually more effective to focus on the macro level first because that's where we can fine-tune our ideas. Polishing writing at the micro level is pointless if it doesn't adequately tell the story of your research.

The following page lists some specific elements your group could focus on.

Macro	Overall structure: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the purpose of the writing? • Does the writing structure match the purpose (the genre, e.g. thesis chapter, research article, etc.) • Does the title reflect the content of the writing? • Is the overall argument clear? Are there gaps in the argument? • Are the sections and sub-sections logically organised? • What is each section trying to achieve? • How is it doing this/not doing this?
Middle	Paragraphs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there clear topic sentences in each paragraph? • Do supporting sentences all relate to the topic sentence? • Is there enough support for the topic sentence (eg evidence, examples)? • Is there clear linking within and between paragraphs? • Does the purpose of each paragraph clearly relate to the overall section? • Do any paragraphs need to be moved or deleted?
Micro	Sentences and style: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the style appropriate (e.g. 'academic'; concise; not too much passive language)? • Are all sentences well-written and easy to understand? • Is the writer's 'voice' coming through when discussing the literature? • Are all tables and figures labelled appropriately? Has the text referred to tables? Has the text discussed salient points from the tables, not just repeated the information in them? • Is punctuation used appropriately?

Check out RMIT Learning Lab for many resources on organisational structures, paragraphing and style that you can use with your group.

3.2 The basic model

Now we're together, what do we do?

- The key focus of the group is writing. You need a routine, especially if you are meeting fortnightly or monthly.
- The group negotiates the approach and techniques that will ensure productive writing and discussion. Be open to any suggestions for changes in session format during the year.
- This **base model** works well with most groups.
- Your group can supplement this with other techniques that are presented here.
- If your group uses a technique that is not described here, please let us know. You can share it with other groups by adding it to the kit.

A basic session plan

1. Students email pieces of writing (no more than one or two pages) to each other one week in advance.
2. Students read each other's work and think about it, making comments or writing questions in the margin (Printouts: Big margins, wide spacing between lines for comments; on PC: use Track Changes with Comments).
3. At the face-to-face session, students discuss the pieces. They ask genuine questions and make suggestions or explain their interpretation of the text's meaning.
4. Writers listen carefully to suggestions and take notes. They explain and re-explain what they mean.
5. Allow for a few minutes of reflective writing at the end of the session. Members document the things they learned or found interesting in the session.
6. After the session, the writers consider the feedback and edit their texts. They can email the revised versions to group members for more feedback. Some writers may wish to bring the revised text to the next session, especially if the ideas and the relationships between the ideas are complex.

3.3 Other activities for writing group sessions

There will be times when text promised for a session doesn't eventuate, and perhaps other times when the group would like to try something different.

We've provided a range of other activities that you can use in your sessions:

- **Confidence builders**
 - Three-minute monologues
 - Morning pages (at home)
- **Show and tell—sharing information**
- **Organise your mind: mind-mapping**
- **Text analysis—noticing**
- **In-group writing**
 - 'Shut up and write'
 - Write-respond activities
 - Read-Discuss-Write
- **Reflective practices**
 - Reflective journal
 - Drawing and writing
- **Questioning techniques**
 - Guided peer questioning
 - Probing questions
 - Questioning for critical thinking
 - The question formulation technique

All resources are in the RWG kit section: *Approaches and activities*.

4. Networking and sources of support

Part of being a researcher is identifying networks. As a group, you have a greater likelihood of making connections with many networks. Here are some possible starting places. As we say: ask around.

4.1 The Study and Learning Centre (SLC)

Apart from the information in the RWG kit, the SLC can support you in a range of ways:

Initial support:

- Facilitator orientation and training
- Support to set up a writing group, including attending the first session

Ongoing support:

- Ongoing facilitator support, eg trouble-shooting problems
- Customised mini-workshop presentations in writing group sessions
- Ongoing resource development.

Don't forget about other SLC resources such as Learning Lab. Check out the SLC website:

<http://www.rmit.edu.au/studyandlearningcentre>

4.2 The School of Graduate Research (SGR)

The SGR is an essential source of support for research degree administration (for example, information about the submission process) and student and supervisor training. Their website has information about a range of support available, including:

- On Track workshops
- The Thesis Whisperer blog
- Visiting Professors.

Find the website here:

<http://www.rmit.edu.au/browse/Research%2FSchool%20of%20Graduate%20Research/>

4.3 In-house experts

You'll find a range of expertise among RMIT staff. You could invite supervisors to talk about their research writing processes or discuss a particular issue. Perhaps you could identify an expert on writing up a particular methodology or using particular writing software (e.g. Scrivener).

4.4 Visiting experts

One of your group may know of an expert outside of RMIT who would be willing to talk in a writing group session.

4.5 Cross-RWG conferences

One exciting method of networking is to occasionally organise a joint session with other writing groups. You could share writing from some participants of each group, or each group could share writing activities and strategies that have worked for them. You could even set some themes to discuss or debate, e.g. five common writing problems and some solutions for them.

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