

Writers' groups – finding (or creating) the right one for you

After the Saskatoon Writers' Coop's November 13, 2008 Open Mike, a number of Coop members and friends sat down with four members of the Coop board to take a first look at writers' groups—who might want them and why, what these groups do, and how the Coop might help. Most of those present were current or previous participants in writers' groups, so discussion moved quickly and productively across a broad range of topics. The following is a report based on that discussion.

What does a writers' group do?

Put simply, a writers' group supports and encourages its members in their writing. Thus, the question could be asked another way: what do the group's members want it to do? Needs as diverse as information, fellowship, pep-talks, motivational exercises, skill-building sessions, critiquing, public exposure via readings or publications, external deadlines, or even just time and space to write uninterrupted can all be met, in some measure at least, by a writers' group under the right circumstances and with the right combination of people as members.

In a smaller centre with only a small nucleus of writers, a group could find itself taking on a fairly large and diverse set of roles, in providing a common-interest umbrella to all writers or potential writers regardless of background. It could hold members-only sharing or critiquing sessions either for all members or for common-interest subgroups, offer public readings, organize workshops or writers' retreats, sponsor or adjudicate writing competitions, invite outside experts as guest speakers or facilitators, publish chapbooks or engage in other special projects.

In a larger centre, a group could potentially try to do all these things as well. But in a place the size of Saskatoon, where writers number in the hundreds, at all levels of skill, experience, publication success, field of interest and genre, more limited options are possible, because more external resources exist. Many writer-focused activities, classes and workshops are available on a regular or occasional basis through umbrella organizations and agencies like the Writers' Coop, the Writers Guild, the University, the Public Library, the City's Leisure Services Branch, or even commercial enterprises such as bookstores. Others opportunities are available through periodic conferences or festivals. Still other writer-focused events may be sponsored on an occasional or one-off basis by existing writers' groups and opened up to non-members—sometimes as a way of recruiting new members. The availability of such alternatives means that a city writers' group may find it unnecessary to take on a particularly broad range of activities to satisfy its members' unmet needs.

Thus, a group could be as simple as a collection of two or three writer friends or colleagues with similar interests who listen to, or read, each other's current writing projects and offer encouragement and possibly feedback on work presented. Or it could

be a formalized meeting with motivational or warming-up writing exercises followed by free-writing time and feedback. Or a regular event where each member is expected to bring new work-in-progress each time and present it to the group for either oral or written critiquing, or possibly for no critiquing at all. Or a larger collective where members' work passes through a critiquing and revision process of varied length and formality, and then may become part of a publication (regular or occasional) under the group's masthead, or of a regular public presentation. Groups embodying each of these alternatives, or combinations thereof, exist in Saskatoon, and their continued operation suggests they have been successful in meeting their members' needs.

What are the membership criteria for a writers' group?

Some groups admit anyone willing to commit to active involvement in the group's traditional activities; in some cases there is an annual fee, in others not. Some groups are closed, or operate on a by-personal-invitation-only basis. Some require a submission of samples of current writing, which are examined by members to see if they fit with the topic, genre, skill level, or other commonalities of the existing group. Some may have a probation or trial period before a potential member is admitted on a permanent basis.

If a new writers' group is to form from a collection of interested individuals, members must be prepared to work their way through these potential problems and issues if the group is to survive.

How often does a writers' group meet?

Most groups meet either once or twice a month. A very few meet weekly, or at short intervals only when a major project is in process. The size of the group and the level of member commitment are major factors in determining the frequency of meetings.

How big should a writers' group be?

A group can be as small as two or three, or can grow to a dozen or more. The larger the group, of course, the less likely all members will be able to attend every session, while the more restricted (or costly) the possible meeting locations will be. Most groups fluctuate, from about four to ten members—some people leave for awhile for personal reasons, some move away, some find the group is no longer a good fit for their writing needs at a particular time. Some just stop writing, for one reason or another. Group size fluctuations make the prospect of admitting new members one that most writers' groups have to deal with at one time or another.

What are some things that make a writers' group successful?

The more the group members have in common as writers, the more likely the group will survive over the long term. Familiarity leads to comfort and trust while sharing or critiquing current work. No one in the group feels out of place in topic, or genre, or ability. This requires a certain level of flexibility and tolerance on everyone's part, of course, but as long as everyone feels they are getting something out of the group's meetings (even if not necessarily totally in the area of writing), and equally important, that they are contributing something to the group and to its members, the group is likely to be successful.

Two other factors in group success, though, are the emergence of leadership, preferably as a shared or rotating responsibility; and non-exclusivity, in the sense of a willingness to admit new members to replace those who have left the group, and an agreed-upon strategy for allowing this to happen.

Nothing lasts forever, and there may come a time when the group is faced with disbanding. If this possibility has been discussed openly and the conditions agreed upon, it can take place in such a way that the members can still remember their group experience as a success.

What are some things that can make a writers' group fail?

Many writers' groups have relatively brief existences. Sometimes personality conflicts or personal beliefs or sensitivities can lead to dissent and member loss. Sometimes the diversity of interests or genres leaves the members with so little by way of common interest or experience that little meaningful sharing can take place. Sometimes the writerly needs of one or more group members cannot be met by the others (perhaps due to being at different stages of development as writers), and they come to feel they are giving but not receiving, or vice-versa. Sometimes personal needs begin to hijack the agenda, to the detriment of the group's primary focus. Sometimes one or two people get stuck with doing all the work to keep the group operating, or feel that this is the case. Sometimes it's as simple as not being able to find a common time to meet.

Is a writers' group good for everyone?

It's important to recognize that not every writer can make good use of a writers' group. Sometimes individual writers' needs or expectations are too specific or too intense for a group environment. For such individuals, it is possible that a formal class, or a mentorship program, or one-on-one sessions with a writer-in-residence, would be more appropriate to their needs.

Other writers are well into a project of their own, or working on a specific topic or area. For such people it may be unrealistic to expect a group to adapt to their needs. And

sometimes, these people, upon reflection, may realize they are just looking for a quiet time and space to get on with their writing. More power to them, but they would probably not be a good fit for a writers' group, nor it for them.

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Areas for further development, not discussed at the meeting:

1. Where do writers' groups meet?
2. What are some first steps in finding or organizing a writers' group?
3. What might a sample agenda or list of topics for a writers' group organizational meeting look like?
4. What might a sample agenda or order of events for a writers' group regular meeting look like?
5. What are some useful writing warm-up exercises and motivational techniques?
6. How can a constructive critique of someone else's writing be given comfortably for both parties?
7. What about funding—where can it be obtained, what are the conditions, and why might it be required? (E.g. rental of meeting space if the group is large; production of a newsletter, or chapbook or other publication; honoraria for speakers, adjudicators, and workshop leaders; expenses of holding an annual retreat, conference, program, public reading, or AGM; member recruitment and promotional activities; group memberships in umbrella organizations; out-of-pocket expenses such as postage and stationery, coffee and cookies, printing and photocopying....)
8. List of current writers' groups, and information about them: how to contact them; whether they are open or closed or otherwise restricted, and why; admission criteria and membership requirements; current size; agreed maximum and minimum size; area(s) of interest or focus; regulations and by-laws....