



EBERLY WRITING STUDIO: THESIS AND DISSERTATION SUPPORT GROUPS

A thesis or dissertation support group is comprised of individuals who are all working on an extended writing project. Ideally, the group will ward off the isolation that often accompanies serious writing. It is also meant to provide an encouraging atmosphere for discussing and troubleshooting the dissertation and its associated processes. What follows is adapted from Joan Bolker's *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day*.*

Why You Might Consider a Dissertation Group:

- ✓ Structure: A dissertation group can provide much needed structure during your dissertation writing process. Established, regular meeting times and group deadlines may prove helpful in your writing process.
- ✓ Support: The right group of individuals creates a supportive atmosphere. The group knows you and your work and can empathize, offer feedback, and push you toward your goals. As a member of the group, you provide the same service for others.

Things to Consider When You Create Dissertation Support Group:

- ✓ Composition: Who's going to make up your group? Will you include students from your own department only or will you open the group to other departments?
- ✓ Progress/Process: Can members be at different points in the dissertation process or should they all be in the same stage (for instance, prospectus stage vs. chapter drafting)?
- ✓ Leaders: Will there be a group leader? A rotating leader? The group leader can assist in setting the agenda, setting and communicating meeting times/dates, and can keep the group on task during meetings.
- ✓ Size: Is there an ideal size for your dissertation group? For instance, if your group meets for 1 hour, 5 members may be the maximum size due to time constraints.
- ✓ Expectations: As a group, you will want to define your expectations clearly. What exactly do you hope to achieve in the group? For instance, do you simply want knowledgeable readers? Role models? People who inspire you to stick to your deadlines?

Some Dissertation Support Group Pitfalls to Avoid/ The Group Member from Hell

(GMFH): The GMFH can disrupt group progress and energy, even when he/she is well-intentioned. It is useful to identify this member and to address this issue quickly and straightforwardly. Otherwise, this group member(s) can derail the entire group and lower moral and productivity. Below are some categories that the GMFH often fall in to:

- ✓ The "Monopolizer"
- ✓ The "Harsh Critic"
- ✓ The "Late-Comer"/"No Show"
- ✓ The "Fragile" Feedback Recipient

* Bolker, Joan. *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day: A Guide to Starting, Revising, and Finishing Your Doctoral Thesis*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998. Print.

Setting Up a Dissertation Group: A Checklist:

- _____ Are you at a point in your writing where you are ready to discuss your work with other students?
- _____ Did you set clear expectations for the group?
- _____ Have you decided between a cross-department group and a single department group?
- _____ Have you decided how often you would like the group to meet?
- _____ How large do you want the group? As many members as possible? Just two or three others?
- _____ Should your group be leaderless? Would a single leader or rotating leader work?
- _____ Have you thought about where you will find members for your group?
- _____ Have you considered where your group will meet? On campus? In a coffee shop?
- _____ How will you communicate? You might consider setting up an email listserv or a Facebook group.

Sample Protocol for Dissertation Group: Below is a sample protocol/agenda for a dissertation group meeting. This protocol assumes that this group has a group leader.

1. The leader will get the group started by asking each member if they reached their self-set goals from the last meeting. Each member will report successes and failures to the group.
2. Then the leader may ask each member what he or she is working on, or where the person would like some help. Sometimes members pose questions to the group; sometimes they may want the group to read for clarity. (If a group member has a lengthy document, the leader may request that this member send the document to the entire group approximately a week ahead of time). During the feedback portion of the meeting, the leader should keep careful track of time so that each member has a chance to share with the group.
3. After each group member has an opportunity to discuss his/her work, the leader can wrap things up by soliciting goals from each member for the next meeting.
4. Last, the group should decide on their next meeting time, place, and date. The leader should communicate this to the group (and any who weren't in attendance) via the group's chosen method of communication.

* Bolker, Joan. *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day: A Guide to Starting, Revising, and Finishing Your Doctoral Thesis*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998. Print.