Career Advice

SUPPORT FOR SUMMER WRITERS

Support for Summer Writers

Shut Up and Write

June 14, 2010

By **Kerry Ann Rockquemore**

Last week I received lots of mail about ending post-summer regret. Many of you were able to make a summer plan without difficulty, but it was the development of a support system that left you confused. All the queries seemed to all boil down to three questions: 1) What types of writing groups exist? 2) How do I figure out which type of writing group is right for me? And 3) If I were just more motivated and disciplined then I wouldn't need a group, so how can I change myself? Because having a support system is critical to actually executing your summer plan, I want to dedicate this week's column to the many different kinds of writing groups and what makes them either flounder or flourish as support systems.

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Faculty development researchers have demonstrated that accountability and support increase writing productivity among new faculty members. And yet, when graduate students, post-docs and new faculty talk about needing support that goes beyond substantive feedback, they're often met with some form of shaming: "Why do you need a support group?" "Can't you just motivate yourself to write?" "This is your job dear, so if you don't want to write there's plenty of unemployed people who would love to be in your position." In short, many are advised to *shut up and write*. And because shaming moves people into action, that may actually work for a week or two. But true needs have a way of resurfacing. So instead of taking the tough-guy, ignore-your-needs, shut-up-and-write approach, I want to suggest the opposite. In other words, I believe that embracing your needs will help you to develop a support system that will move you from the occasional shame-induced writing binges towards a healthy, consistent, and sustainable daily writing routine.

While it should go without saying, *it's OK to have needs*. In fact, if you wait until you are perfectly motivated, flawlessly self-disciplined, free from anxiety, utterly fearless, intellectually energized, and emotionally resolved before you start writing this summer, you may never begin! Instead, I want to encourage you to release yourself from the idea that having needs means there's something wrong with you. It's OK if you need support and accountability. It's OK if you're not productive in isolation. It's OK if you need community, feedback, a safe space to take risks, and a group of people who genuinely celebrate your accomplishments. It's OK because meeting your needs for community, support and accountability will not only increase your productivity, but also your enjoyment of summer writing.

What do YOU need?

If you can accept the fact that you don't have to change who you are in order to be productive, then I want you to dig just a little deeper by asking yourself: *What do I need to maximize my writing this summer?* Academic writers have lots of different needs. For example, some people need to physically share space with others while writing, some need a stern authority figure to answer to, some need solitude and the kind of support that is silent, some need a quantitative accounting of their progress, some need to be in groups with similar others, some need to be regularly inspired, some need ongoing substantive feedback by those in their specialty field, some need regular cheerleading, some need therapy, and some need an occasional exorcism (from the demons of bad academic socialization). It's even OK if you need all of these things at different times! The important thing is to identify what you need

without judgment, shame, or self-flagellation. Knowing what you truly need to maximize your productivity is what will allow you to construct a writing support system that is effective for YOU.

Connect with a writing group that meets your needs.

Once you have identified your basic needs, start to imagine the best way to get them met. I'm going to describe a few different types of writing groups for the dual purpose of expanding your sense of what a "writing group" looks like and illustrating the importance of letting your needs guide your selection of one. It's really quite simple: Writing groups flourish when everyone's needs are getting met and flounder when they don't meet the primary needs of members.

Traditional Writing Groups

When we use the term "writing group," the most common form that comes to mind is a small number of people who commit to a specific period of time (e.g., a summer) to meet face-to-face, once-a-month, for the purpose of reading, critiquing, and providing substantive feedback on each other's written work. This requires a commitment of 5-8 hours per month to read other people's work, draft comments, show up and engage during the meeting time. This tends to work well if participant's primary need is substantive feedback and if members are able to provide that for one another. This structure is less effective when participants have other more pressing needs (support or ongoing accountability) and/or the feedback is the sort that could be obtained more efficiently from a professional editor.

Writing Accountability Groups

If your primary need is to have a committed group of people to answer to each week, then writing accountability groups may be worth trying. The structure is fairly simple: four people agree to meet once a week during the summer (either face-to-face or by conference call). The groups meet for exactly one hour per week and each person gets 15 minutes to discuss the following items: 1) my goals for last week were _____, 2) I did/did not meet them, 3) if I didn't meet them, it's because of _____ and 4) my writing goals for next week are _____. Developing a daily writing routine tends to bring up all people's *stuff* and the group helps to support one another by identifying the limiting beliefs and behaviors that hold members back from productivity. Nobody reads anyone else's writing in this type of group. Instead the focus is on the writing process and moving projects forward so they can get into the hands of people with subject matter expertise (not group members). This structure works well when the primary needs of participants are accountability, support, community, and peer mentoring. It is ineffective when individuals cannot sustain the weekly commitment to the group or daily writing, and/or their primary need is for ongoing substantive feedback.

Write-On-Site

If you're someone who needs to be around others when you're writing and/or feels isolated, a Write-On-Site group may work well for you. It's also very straightforward: an organizer selects a time and place for meeting and disseminates that information to a group of interested others. At the appointed time, people descend on the designated space and everyone writes. Every thing else is optional: there can be a weekly attendance commitment (or not), the group can range from two people (writing buddies) to as many people as the space will hold, and it can occur in a public or private space. There's no reading each other's work, there's no discussion during the writing time, it's just about getting into the same physical space and actually engaging in the act of writing. The collective writing energy of the group is energizing and people are free to come early and stay late for socializing. Like every structure I'm describing, this works well when participants are getting their needs met (everyone comes to write). It doesn't work well when people arrive and their primary needs are support, substantive feedback, or processing why they are stuck.

Online Writing Groups

There are a variety of online writing groups that are designed to provide

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support, accountability, and tracking progress over time. Some are free and some cost money, but essentially the structure is the same. Participants commit to a period of daily writing, check in each day at the end of their writing time, track their daily progress over time, and engage in discussion about writing with other participants. If you subscribe to a fee-based service, your progress will be automatically transformed into beautiful charts and tables, and you will receive the additional accountability of electronic contact with a writing coach. For example, The Academic Ladder's Writing Club costs $70 for four weeks. This support system works well for people who need daily support and encouragement, feel isolated in some way, and/or for whom electronic relationships are genuinely satisfying and significant enough to elicit the feeling of accountability. This support structure is less suitable for people who need face-to-face contact and interaction in order to feel a tangible sense of accountability and community.

Coaches and Nags

It may be the case that you have a variety of needs but your schedule disallows you from committing to any kind of group for the summer. Or alternatively, you have no idea what you need and you would like to work with a professional to figure it out. There are a variety of writing coaches out there who will consult with you weekly (for fees ranging from $65-$125 per hour) to increase your awareness of what's holding you back and help you to develop and implement strategies to move you forward. I have also worked with a Professional Nag who will call you each day at the beginning of your writing time, make you state clearly and succinctly what you will do that day, and connect with you at the end of your time to hear whether you completed your work or not. Nagging is great for people who have trouble getting started with their writing each day, but are fine once they get into the flow. Coaches and nags work well for people who either aren't clear what their needs are or need more personalized and intense accountability than a group can provide. Of course, this doesn't work for people for whom the mere idea of being *nagged* feels oppressive.

I currently use all of these mechanisms at once! I have a coach, participate in an online group each day, have a weekly accountability group meeting, and attend Write-on-Site every Friday morning. I know that if left to my own devices, I will not write. I'll be very productive in every other imaginable way, but I won't write. Over the years I have come to accept the fact that I need community, support and accountability and instead of judging myself negatively for having those needs, I embrace them, create mechanisms to meet them, and find that participating in these types of supportive systems brings me increased productivity and tremendous joy. You may have different (and fewer) needs than I do, but the key to having a productive, fulfilling, and enjoyable summer is to ask yourself: **What do I need and what kind of writing group will best support my needs?**

WEEKLY CHALLENGE

This week I challenge you to:

1. Ask yourself: *What do I you need to support my writing this summer?*
2. If you're reactive to the idea of having needs, or to answering this simple question, gently ask yourself: *Why?*
3. Consider what it would mean to accept your needs as part of who you are (as opposed to trying to fix them).
4. Imagine a support structure that would meet your needs and support your writing.
5. If it already exists, join it. If it doesn't create it.

I hope this week brings you the clarity to identify your needs, the freedom to embrace them, and the creativity to connect with mechanisms of support that will allow you to maximize your productivity this summer and develop a sustainable daily writing routine.

Peace and Productivity,

Kerry Ann Rockquemore

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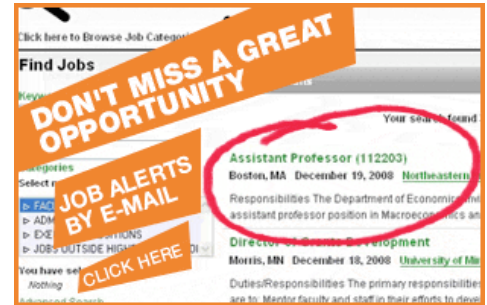
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Comments on Shut Up and Write

Overcoming Bingeing and Busyness
Posted by Thomas Lawrence Long , Associate Professor in Residence, School of Nursing at University of Connecticut on June 14, 2010 at 9:15am EDT
Having just presented a four-day writing retreat for nursing faculty, I appreciate the timing of this column and your more recent column on the same subject, both of which I've linked to the NursingWriting Web site: http://nursingwriting.wordpress.com

Researcher Robert Boice points out that faculty frequently suffer from two maladaptive behaviors that inhibit their scholarly productivity: "bingeing" (the belief that they need long stretches of uninterrupted time in order to write) and "busyness" (the belief that they cannot "find" the time because they are already too busy).

You've provided a practical way to overcome both.

good points
Posted by Amy Benson Brown , Dir., Author Development Program at Emory on June 28, 2010 at 10:30am EDT
Thanks for articulating so crisply the good insights in this series. Shame looms large as a block in many different facets of writing and publishing and is too rarely addressed head-on. So, good for you! I liked "Why Aren't You Writing?" too. And I'm going to recommend these pieces to authors I work with ---Amy

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