

THE COMPLETE

GUIDE TO

WRITERS GROUPS,

CONFERENCES,

and **WORKSHOPS**



EILEEN MALONE

The Complete Guide to Writers Groups, Conferences, and Workshops

Eileen Malome



John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

New York • Chichester • Brisbane • Toronto • Singapore

This text is printed on acid-free paper.

Copyright © 1996 by Eileen Malone

Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

All rights reserved. Published simultaneously in Canada.

Reproduction or translation of any part of this work beyond that permitted by Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act without the permission of the copyright owner is unlawful. Requests for permission or further information should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information in regard to the subject matter covered. It is sold with the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering legal, accounting, or other professional services. If legal advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional person should be sought.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Malone, Eileen.

The complete guide to writers groups, conferences, and workshops
/ Eileen Malone.

p. cm. — (Wiley books for writers)

ISBN 0-471-14217-4

1. Authorship. I. Title. II. Series: Wiley books for writers
series.

PN145.M246 1996

808'.02—dc20

96-14684

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Introduction	1
<i>Part One</i>	9
1 Why Writers Connect	11
1.1 You Are Not a Private Peculiarity	12
1.2 Interdependence Is Not Dependence	13
1.3 Joining Reinforces	13
1.4 Dreams and Needs	14
1.5 Renewed Creativity	14
1.6 Reassurance	15
1.7 Feedback	15
1.8 Healthy Mental Exercise	17
1.9 Learning Better How to Better Learn	17
1.10 Keeping Current	18
1.11 Beginning to Write Irregularly, Regularly	19
2 The Variety of Writers Gatherings	23
2.1 Conferences	24
2.2 Writers Retreats	25
2.3 <i>Centers and Foundations</i>	26
2.4 Classes and Workshops	28
2.5 Writing-for-Publication Groups	31
2.6 Freelance Groups	32
2.7 Multiple-Service Writers Groups	34
2.8 Poetry Groups	35
2.9 Fiction Groups	35
2.10 Nonfiction Groups	37

2.11	On-line Writers Groups	38
2.11.1	The Internet	38
2.11.2	America Online and CompuServe	39
3	Group Expectations of You	43
3.1	Standards	43
3.2	Bylaws	44
3.3	Agreements	45
3.4	Commonsense Courtesies	46
3.5	Communicate	46
3.6	Always Speak to the Group as a Whole	47
3.7	Focus on the Work	48
3.8	Self-disclose	48
3.9	Present Your Work	49
3.10	Pay Attention to Other Works	51
3.11	Brush Up on Basics	52
3.12	Your Expectations of the Group	53
3.13	Different Group Synergies	54
3.14	Small versus Large Groups	55
3.15	Group Tasks and Projects	57
3.16	Take a Chance	57
4	Receiving Criticism	59
4.1	Group Manuscript Evaluation	59
4.2	Mistakes Are Not Failures	60
4.3	Attitudes	61
4.4	Avoidance Techniques	62
4.4.1	Scare It Off	62
4.4.2	Beg It Off	63
4.4.3	Be Precious	63
4.4.4	The True Story	63
4.4.5	Mumbling	64
4.5	Expand Your Comfort Zone	64
4.6	Harness Anxiety	65
4.7	Don't Underestimate Details	65
4.8	Take Notes	66
4.9	Speak Up	67
4.9.1	Ask for Clarification	68
4.9.2	Ask for Suggestions	68
4.9.3	Interrupt Name-droppers	69

4.10	Distinguish	70
4.11	Recognize Personal Preferences	71
4.12	Share the Rewrites	71
4.13	Save the Good Stuff	72
4.14	Cultivate Your Own Voice and Style	73
5	Offering Criticism	75
5.1	Understand and Be Understood	76
5.2	Use Concrete Language	76
5.3	Don't Repeat a Point That's Been Made	76
5.4	Remember That You Are Not There to Be Right	77
5.5	Use Questions	77
5.6	Vive la Différence	78
5.7	Be Sensitive	79
5.8	Pay Tribute	79
5.9	Use Praise as a Motivator	80
5.10	Don't Misuse Compliments	81
5.11	Lighten Up	81
6	The People Connection	83
6.1	Your Time	83
6.2	The Demands of Others	84
6.3	Recognition as a Writer . . .	85
6.4	. . . And as a Reader	86
6.5	Writers as Friends	87
6.6	Writers as Colleagues	87
6.7	Dealing with Envy	88
6.8	Setting Boundaries	89
6.9	Tormentors	90
6.10	Teachers Who Shouldn't Teach	91
6.11	Damaged Students	92
6.12	Saboteurs	92
6.13	Collaborators	93
6.14	Mentors	95
7	Facilitators	97
7.1	Leading	97
7.2	Communicating	97
7.3	Intervening	98

7.4	Teaching	99
7.4.1	Finding a Good Teacher	100
7.4.2	Teachers Who Showcase Themselves	100
7.4.3	Assignments	101
7.4.4	Inflexible Instructors	101
7.4.5	Motivators	102
7.4.6	Humor	103
7.5	Group Altercations	103
7.5.1	Change the Rules	104
7.5.2	Reflect	104
7.5.3	Brainstorm	105
7.5.4	Freewriting through a Problem	105
7.6	Resistance	106
7.7	Mutual Respect	106
7.8	Fitting Role Reversals	107

8 Starting Your Own Group 109

8.1	Signs of Trouble	109
8.2	Outgrowing and Embarking	112
8.3	Compatibility	112
8.4	Research	113
8.5	Making Room for the New	114
8.6	Logistics	115
8.6.1	Group Size	115
8.6.2	Time	116
8.6.3	Space	116
8.6.4	Focus	118
8.7	Imposed Deadlines	118
8.8	Levels and Limits	119
8.9	Age Differences	119
8.10	The Responsibilities of the Leader	120
8.11	What about You as a Group Leader?	120
8.12	What If You Stumble?	121
8.13	Reaching Beyond the Group	122
8.14	Community	123
	Venture	125

<i>Part Two</i>	<i>127</i>
9 Major Writers Organizations	129
10 Teaching Institutions	153
11 Major Resource Listing	183

Introduction

One Group's Story: The Writers' Bloc

It's 7:30, and the Oakland evening is balmy. As we enter the open doorway of the cottage, the smell of French roast coffee and the sound of energized conversation greet us. I am introduced all around as Joe's guest and warmly welcomed. One by one, the writers settle into sofas and chairs. Some kick off their shoes, and others place pillows behind their backs. A marmalade cat enters and stretches out in the middle of the living room floor. As if this were the gavel that starts the meeting, it begins.

All attention is focused on a woman sitting on the far sofa. While shuffling some papers on her lap, she gives a short synopsis of her story thus far, enough to jog everyone's memory. Then she sits up and proceeds to read aloud from her manuscript. As she continues her smooth, clear recitation, everyone vigorously scribbles notes. She pauses once to put a check mark on something she wants to fix later. There are no interruptions as she completes the reading of her thirty-page chapter. When she is finished, she leans back and looks around.

A distinguished-looking man with graying hair sitting opposite me is moderator this month. He calls on a young woman who signals that she is prepared to comment. Using her notes, she delivers her critique. She throws out terms like *protagonist* and *conflict resolution* and *the sense of consequence*. The moderator makes sure that she is finished speaking before moving on. I am astounded at how carefully everyone listened to what was read. I am also impressed by the apparently effortless flow of professional, technical terms in this informal, laid-back group. No one is showing off or one-upping others in a display of expertise. Weak areas are pointed out, and several ways to remedy the flaws are suggested. Exceptionally well-written segments are also acknowledged. As the discussion progresses, everyone speaks, even if only to agree with what has already been said; however, most group members

submit new ideas for consideration. One suggestion is debated quickly, and then the pace of the piece is discussed.

Throughout the entire critique, the reader does not defend or explain what she has written. Once she asks the critiquer to be more specific, and another time she rereads a sentence in question. Otherwise, she rapidly writes down notes to herself in the margins of her manuscript and once in a while on the backs of pages. After the last person has contributed, she thanks the group. Later, she will review the comments and make whatever changes, additions, or deletions she deems appropriate.

Another man reviews the group's calendar. It's up to him to keep track of who is going to read a month or two in advance, and he reminds them that should something unavoidable arise, the person scheduled must call around and get somebody else to substitute. Each and every meeting must have a reader—no exceptions.

The moderator interjects that he will not be attending the next two meetings. He has tickets to the opera. There is no problem. Informing the group ahead of time of meetings that will be missed is an expected courtesy.

The woman sitting next to me passes out photocopies of her chapter. She is struggling with character development in this particular scene and encourages everyone to write comments in the margins. Typed critiques would be gratefully received, too.

The treasurer, wearing one earring and a Hard Rock Cafe T-shirt, gives his report. He takes a moment to explain to me that everyone pays \$10 per month and that the money is held in a bank account. It is used for birthday cakes and cards and a huge annual party. At Christmas, the members pick names out of a hat for presents and have a marvelous dinner in a San Francisco restaurant—open bar, whatever they want, all on the treasury. The money also helps pay for guest speakers and scholarships.

Sitting in front of the window is a woman with a lovely southern drawl who has received partial funding from the group's treasury for a writing class she is attending at a local university. In exchange, she has agreed to bring back to the group what she learns in the class. Tonight she explains that each person in her class reads five or ten pages, two or three people make comments, and then someone says, "Next," and on they go. The class is still in its early stages, but she doesn't feel that the critique is as complete as it might be.

A book review that one member wrote for another member's recently published historical novel is read aloud. A photocopy of another review is passed around. An announcement is made that author Leonard Bishop (whose novel-writing class at the University of California was the impetus for this

group) will be in town sometime in May. Some sort of reception will be planned, but not now, not tonight. It's now 10:00 and time to wrap it up.

Quick tidbits of conversation take place as smaller groups pause in the doorway, on the front steps, and on the sidewalk. Literary gossip, deals with agents, and interactions with publishers and editors are shared as members walk to their parked cars. The evening was focused, thorough, productive, and satisfying.

On the drive back to San Francisco, I assess the dynamics and focus of this group. It was formed to help writers with their novels, and everything it asks of its members drives them from reading the initial rough draft through the various stages of rewrite necessary to get the novel ready for publication. *It doesn't make any difference whether the member is a successful author honing yet another work into final form or a first-time author still struggling with the early stages of rewrite. This is a working writers group. While adhering to some basic practices, it changes to fill the current and immediate needs of the group members.*

Sometime in the mid-sixties, this group was conceived by Leonard Bishop. A few of his students at the University of California at Berkeley suggested that he do some private teaching because they were not getting what they needed from academe. He agreed and began what became known as Bishop's Monday Night Creative Writing Class. It met fifty-two weeks a year for almost twenty years in the homes of different students. Group members started, finished, and published books. When Bishop had to leave the San Francisco Bay Area and move to Kansas, he left some basic instructions.

One was to set a day and time and stick to it. If the meeting will be Monday night from 7:00 P.M. to 10:00 P.M., keep it in that slot. Don't make exceptions because of holidays or vacations; it gets too confusing. Take no breaks. Meet every week, or don't meet at all.

Even now, this group's attendance is excellent. Members take leaves of absence from time to time when they can foresee great difficulties in regular attendance. Even though everyone is expected to be writing and sharing their works-in-progress, some let their own writing simmer for a while as they put their energy into helping others. Consequently, even those who aren't reading from their own work hold the same high level of responsibility toward attendance. Everyone calls ahead to explain an anticipated absence. Everyone has made the commitment, and that's what writing a novel is all about—commitment. It's like going to an important job.

Meetings always start at 7:30 P.M. and last as long as the work is being read and discussed. Of course, exceptionally long works are often submitted ahead of time. The goal is to be there on the prescribed night. "You'd think it

couldn't be done," says a working single mother, "but it can and we do. Every week can be a tough grind. It's rough producing regularly and getting immediate feedback." They all agree that a writer's discipline is ultimately self-imposed.

Bishop also insisted that the group impose a financial commitment, too. It doesn't have to be much, but the idea of paying dues seems to hold the members together. It's interesting because as one member told me, when people fall behind two or three months in their dues, you know that they are ready to drop out of the group.

Aside from these basic logistics, the primary standard that Bishop emphasized was honesty. Give the most honest criticism that you can to help the writer. When receiving criticism, remember that it is your manuscript, not you, that is being examined and pulled apart, even though it may seem much too personal to bear. No one's estimation of you or your work should ever be so important that it affects your self-esteem. Eventually, you are going to receive rejections from agents and editors and publishers who, in Bishop's words, "wouldn't know a piece of fine writing if it stepped on their eyeballs." The group is there to help each individual develop a sense of self-worth.

Adhering to these basics, the group has continued through divisions and reattachments. Once their books were published, some members dropped out, only to return when starting another. Some took time out to attend to their health or to family matters. Some got what they needed from the group and left to teach workshops and classes elsewhere; now they refer their students back to the group for ongoing support. Throughout, a steadfast core has remained.

Joe Capello, a charter member of the group, which calls itself The Writers' Bloc, remembers his beginnings. He had once taken a course at a college in San Francisco where the instructor was so caustic that it stopped him from writing anything more for almost ten years. He had just about given up on himself as a writer when he saw a description of Leonard Bishop's writing class in a college catalog. He laughs as he recalls his first impression. There was Bishop sitting at the head of a very long table in a narrow, rectangular classroom, looking like anything but what Capello had expected of a successful author. Students were sitting at the table, beyond it, and around the walls and were standing in the hallway. Suddenly, Bishop said, "Here are my credentials," and he opened his briefcase and began throwing out one book after another, all of them his. This was no ivory-tower academic spouting dreary, condescending platitudes; this was an aggressive, intense, hand-waving writer who walked his talk.

Capello had to wrench up his courage to submit a chapter of his work.

Bishop brought it back to class with a critique attached. He then read sections aloud to the class. At the break, he told Capello, "I want to talk to you." Putting his arm around Capello's shoulder, he said that it was a great piece of work. His wife had read it and announced that this was the kind of book she enjoyed reading. Bishop then invited Capello to join the private group.

It wasn't all rose-scented praise, however. There was one chapter that Capello felt particularly good about—perhaps too confident. When it came back with a five-page critique, there was very little, if any, praise. He was devastated. When he left the class and got into his car, he looked at it one more time. In essence, Bishop had told him that his talent was an added tribute, but he still needed to learn more skills. Capello threw the manuscript and critique down on the passenger seat. It remained there for a week. He didn't care that Bishop had said that any harshness he might encounter in the group would be trivial compared to the viciousness possible in the industry. He didn't care that Bishop had said that you are accountable for what you do and say and provoke in your writing. He sympathized at an intimate level with all those students who had appeared in Bishop's class once or twice and never returned. He was hurt and angry. Finally, he was able to separate his self from his work, and sitting at his kitchen table one foggy morning, he reread the instructor's critique. Then he amazed himself by exclaiming aloud to no one in particular, "That son of a gun was right!"

This kind of experience is not rare in a good writers workshop. As a matter of fact, everyone in The Writers' Bloc feels that if you truly care about helping another writer, you will always offer an honest opinion. It is most unkind to watch silently as someone makes the same mistake over and over again; it is almost cruel to let the writer think that all is well when, in fact, improvements could and should be made. Writers who are well versed in craft and grammar, plot and character development, should help writers who are not as adept. Of course, for a successful experience, there must be a willingness to learn.

Marilyn Haiches is a perfect example of someone who was willing to learn. She had originally been in a group that she felt was more into stroking than critical analysis. Then a friend told her about The Writers' Bloc. She sent a letter and submitted a sample of her manuscript. "The marvelous thing about writing," she says, "is that age and gender and physical appearance and social status make no difference. The work is all that matters—and the work that goes into the work."

Haiches clearly understood the group's caution toward accepting rank beginners. She knew that editing skills come from years of expertise and practice and that it takes a great deal of energy to get someone new up to speed. She also appreciated that during this transition, group members might

not get the quality and quantity of critique they require. Haiches chewed her cuticles and waited.

Then the group welcomed her. Members told her later that they saw that the work needed more structure but that they also saw the real writer speaking in it. They were delighted to have her join them.

She walked into an atmosphere of rigorous standards, exactly what she wanted, and it practically scared her to death. “Holy cow,” she remembers thinking, “I’m like a complete freshman at the first day of school.” It didn’t matter that she had a successful background in producing advertising, writing radio spots, and working in documentary film. Everyone in the group was committed to putting in valuable time with an eye on getting published. They were not sweet, nor were they bullies, but they were undoubtedly focused on the craft of writing. Things she might have known intuitively, they articulated. She felt intimidated as she realized that the groups she had known previously were tea parties compared to this one, but she also felt very lucky to be a member.

Eventually, Haiches conquered the steep learning curve by total and intense listening. She gobbled up all the literary terms being tossed about regarding omniscient points of view and first-person narrations. She incorporated what she learned.

When it was her night to present a chapter of her first draft, she found it daunting. Someone else read it aloud, and she kept thinking, “Oh, how could I have written that!” She listened carefully as group members told her how the first draft gets the whole story out. “This is where you spew more than you’ll ever use, and it is important not to self-edit too much at this point,” she explains. “You find out where the story really is going in the next draft.” She listened and learned because everyone else had already done what she was in the process of doing.

At her most recent reading, she tried something experimental at the end, something that would either kill the piece or make it more powerful. When she realized how the group grasped her intent and appreciated her efforts, it was the best feeling. “The quality of the group is really, really high,” she says, “and I think that maybe three or four books are now ready to be published. Whether or not they are marketable, they are certainly finely crafted and well written.”

Nancy Cossitt won the Alabama Writers’ Conclave Award and came to the San Francisco Bay Area from Alabama to study novel writing under Wallace Stegner. Even with this writing background, Cossitt appreciates The Writers’ Bloc. “I am receiving superlative editorial help in the final polishing,” she says. “Without this writing group, my novels would not have been written.”

Another writer who credits the group as the impetus behind the work is Lee Serrels. "I've completed one book and am three-quarters through another. The group sharpened my wit and kept me on a forward track," Serrels explains. "No one is unkind, but they are all honest, and if you can't handle the honesty, everyone is sorry that you have to leave, but goodbye. Believe me, without these special friends I might have had that novel in my head, but never would have actually written it."

Another writer who would never have tackled a novel without group support is Gloria Suffin. She lives very comfortably with the fact that the book is taking a long time. "I live a very vital life!" she says, and looks to the group to point out where she has blind spots. "In the process of writing, a writer has what is in the head, but it doesn't always come out directly on the page, and in a sense, that is the purpose of the group," she explains. Whenever the group finds little things in each scene that she had not made clear, Suffin is grateful. It prevents her from swimming around in murky writing and losing time.

Now on the fourth rewrite of her 600-page novel, Suffin claims, "Revision is what it is all about." Recently retired as an English teacher, she explains that most teachers don't assign rewrites in the classroom. "You get a grade and a paper marked with mistakes, but teachers don't teach creative writing, and they don't help you with alterations. Groups do. There's nothing like a group for working through revisions and rewrites, especially on long works."

"If I hadn't joined the group, I would have only written short stories," says Donna Gillespie, author of *The Light Bearer*, which is climbing the best-seller list in Germany and England. It was a major transition for her, going from the story to the novel-length conflict. The group insisted that her short stories were not long enough for what she was trying to do.

"There is something wonderful about knowing that there will be meetings and they are waiting for the next chapter," she says. "It helps you through those trying, fainthearted periods. At the beginning of a book it can easily disintegrate. You can disconnect and reconnect a lot. It's a very fragile process. The group gives you an outside discipline and keeps you from being swallowed up by your own demons."

She continues, "Writing a novel is so complex. Scenes grow out of scenes and characters put pressure on other characters. You really need the group as a sounding board when you read aloud your chapters. You want to get down what is real and most true, and you call on your fellow group members to keep you honest. You watch how differently or similarly each person responds, and it's very compelling when you hear the same critique from everyone.

"The biggest enemy when you write is yourself. This is why there's no

reason for competition in a good writers group. There's always room for one more good work. The group serves as a kind of family, each wanting the best for each other. You can't get this experience from a correspondence class. I remember how proud I was when Donna Levin published; it was amazing, I was in such awe at her book signing."

Donna Levin is another of the group's successfully published authors. Four and a half years after joining Bishop's original group, she sold her first novel. Since then, she has published two more novels and has just finished another. She says that the group lifted her out of that limbo of wanting to write but not knowing how and being afraid to try.

The group helped Donal Brown in the same way. A high school English and journalism teacher for more than thirty-two years, Brown says that group participation has helped to reinvigorate him. Not only has he learned a lot, hands-on, about writing processes and techniques that he can carry over when teaching writing and literature to younger students, but he has become better able to "understand my attitudes towards writing, the mind-sets that I need to actually finish the confounded thing."

The group helped adjust the attitude of Karen Caronna, who has written three novels within the context of her group experience. "There were times when the group dynamics absolutely saved me. When I thought my writing, which of course is an extension of my self, was absolutely worthless, the group was present to buoy me up and encourage me."

And so it goes. Those who speak here echo many other writers who thrive and grow in the company of others like themselves.

I've discovered that all over the country there is a vast variety of groups for writers. Some are similar to the one described here, and some are very different. Nevertheless, in numbers impossible to count, they remain steadfast in the spirited services they provide. When you find the right group, the results will be an extraordinarily more effective writer. I celebrate the diversity and uniqueness of all gatherings of writers.

Part One
