

“On your marks. Get set. Write!”:  
introducing undergraduate students to  
writing retreat pedagogies

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# What are writing retreats?

- Structured days and times dedicated to writing
- Led by a facilitator and aligned to a schedule
- Emphasis is placed onto the processes of writing (less about the practices, creativity and skills involved in writing)
- See published works by Murray and Newton (2009) and MacLeod, Steckley and Murray (2012)
- Influenced and informed by:
  - Communities of Practice (Wenger 1998)
  - Containment theory (Menzies-Lyth 1988)
- Increasingly popular with academics and postgraduate research students

# Why undergraduate writers?

- Writing retreats reserve time and space for writing
- Do undergraduate students need this?
- The undergraduate student population has expanded and, by extension, diversified.
- Students may have to juggle:
  - Part-time work
  - Caring responsibilities
  - Commuting
- Students also suffer with procrastination!
- Time management was something that students consistently voiced during my research on student writing
- Writing retreats help undergraduate students to manage these types of difficulties

# Writing retreat version No. 1 – ACE week Nov 2017

*The writing retreat is suitable for students who want to access dedicated time to writing. It could be an opportunity to devote the time and space to write an essay, a reflective log, a literature review, a report or part of a dissertation. Students will need to arrive 'ready to write' and will have to commit to being 'offline' for the day. The writing retreat will be structured so that writing is collective using a 'typing pool' approach and interspersed with regular breaks from writing in order to keep momentum and flow afresh. The structured writing retreat is a tried and tested approach to help writers start and maintain writing. Students are encouraged to read the following article about structured writing retreats prior to attending:*

Murray, R. & Newton, M. (2009) 'Writing retreat as structured intervention: Margin or mainstream?' in *Higher Education Research and Development*. 28(5): 527-39

*Students are encouraged to bring wellies or walking boots for a lunchtime walk in the woods on the Clifton Campus. Students should also bring a laptop (either their own or borrowed from NTU in preparation for session)*

# Writing retreat version No. 1 – ACE week Nov 2017

9:30-9:45 Discussion of writing goals

9:45-11 – *Writing time*

11-11:30 – *Tea and coffee break*

11:30 – 12:45 – *Writing time*

12:45 – 1:45 – *Lunch and walk*

1:45 – 2:00 – *Resetting Writing Goals*

2:00 – 3:15 – *Writing time*

3:15 – 3:30 – *Taking Stock*

**Differences:** Shorter writing stints. Shorter lunch break. Fewer scheduled writing stints. One day rather than the residential-style 2.5 days

**Similarities:** Strictly adheres to the schedule. Writing time is silent activity. 5 minute warnings and reminders to back up work given. Promotion of work/life balance. Goal setting and taking stock.

# Attendees:

	<b>No of students attending</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Level 4</b>	<b>Level 5</b>	<b>Level 6</b>
Wednesday 15 <sup>th</sup> November 2017	6	0	7	1	4	2
Thursday 16 <sup>th</sup> November 2017	13	4	9	0	7	6

# Student Feedback (summary)

Question	Comments
What was the most useful aspects of the writing retreat?	No distractions (phone, music) Assigned writing slots Having the dedicated time to writing without distractions. The pace worked well for me and the breaks away from the computer made me want to go back to writing, instead of writing non-stop all day.
Would you suggest any changes are made to any part of the writing retreat?	Could possibly have had one more hour writing time (3-4pm) Shorter lunch break (30-45 mins) so getting back into writing isn't as hard
How many words did you write?	Between 500 and 3000 words
What writing project did you work on?	Journal research for references; Essay for Education, Aspirations and Identity; essay planning; Learning and the Individual
Would you recommend a writing retreat to a friend?	Yes
Would you consider attending another one if you had the opportunity to do so?	Yes Yes, I think they would be really helpful close to deadlines once we know what things we want to put in our essays, to actually get started.

*I have now organised a series of twilight writing events across March and April. The twilight writing events provide protected time and space for writing. Please note, that these are not workshops and do not offer opportunities for feedback on your work. Instead, the twilight writing events will adopt a 'typing pool' approach where we all write together. I will also have a writing project that I will be working on.*

*The sessions are extra-curricular and although attached to the module, are not part of the scheduled teaching for the module. Therefore, they are all entirely optional.*

*To attend a twilight writing event you will need to commit to:*

- *Writing in silence during the scheduled writing slots*
- *Arriving promptly and staying for the duration of the event*
- *Refrain from accessing the internet and mobile phones during the scheduled writing slots*
- *Arrive prepared and able to write*



- 5:00 - 5:15pm - Setting writing aims
- 5:15 - 6:30pm - Writing (no talking during this time - just typing)
- 6:30 - 6:50pm - Break
- 6:50 - 7:50pm - Writing (no talking during this time - just typing)
- 7:50 - 8pm - debrief and evaluation

**Differences:** Writing in the evening (less focus on work/life balance as a result?); only 2 writing stints; little and often approach (fortnightly opportunities across March and April);

**Similarities:** Structured, writing slots; built-in break times; silence required for writing; 5 minute warnings and back-up reminders; writing aims and review of session

- Part of a final year dissertation module
- Interspersed across the year to coincide with key projected writing moments
  - December 2018
  - January 2019
  - March 2019
- Optional but requiring sign-up
- Promoted through lectures, learning room and email
- Students who signed up received an additional email a couple of days before the event reminding them of the structure and purpose of the day

# Writing retreat version no 3 – Module delivery 2018/19

**9:00-9:30** *Introduction and discussion of writing goals (please make sure you can be here for this important part of the day)*

**9:30-11** – *Writing time (silence required)*

**11-11:30** – *Comfort break*

**11:30 – 12:45** – *Writing time (silence required)*

**12:45 – 1:45** – *Lunch and walk (optional)*

**1:45 – 2:00** – *Resetting Writing Goals*

**2:00 – 3:30** – *Writing time (silence required)*

**3:30 – 4:00** – *Taking Stock and evaluations*

# Writing retreat version no 3 – Module delivery 2018/19

	No of students	Male	Female	Returners
December 2018	23	2	21	3
January 2019	12	2	10	2
<b>March 2019*</b> *Interest expressed:	<b>16</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>7</b>

This time for the writing retreat event (**i.e. March 2019**), I am offering you three possibilities in terms of how you can attend. They are:

- a) Attend all-day from 9am until 5pm
- b) Attend morning only from 9am until 12:30
- c) Attend in the afternoon only from 1:30 until 5pm

To help you think about what might work for you, please see below the timings that will be (strictly) adhered to on the day:

## Morning session:

*9:00 - 9:15 - Introduction and discussion of writing goals*

*9:15 - 10:45 – Writing time (silence required)*

*10:45 - 11:00 – Comfort break*

*11:15 – 12:30 – Writing time (silence required)*

## Afternoon session:

*1:30 – 1:45 – Setting and Resetting Writing Goals*

*1:45 – 3:15 – Writing time (silence required)*

*3:15 - 3:30 - Comfort break*

*3:30 - 4:45 - Writing time (silence required)*

*4:45 – 5:00 – Taking Stock and evaluations*

# What was the most useful aspects of the writing retreat?

- In the library you can get caught up in the pressures that you're there to do work and that you have to get work done, but being there at retreat with an open mind, you can get a lot more done than expected
- The silence and chance to have frequent breaks – especially a long lunch
- The environment provided gives such a productive way of working. Definitely the most efficient and balanced day of work possible
- The silent working and regular breaks
- Set writing times and breaks
- Having a silent room to work in, regular breaks, setting targets
- The structure and silence. Everyone is here because they want to get on with work so it works well. Set breaks kept me on task really well too
- Having silence where it kind of forces you to do work. No distractions. Balanced time between breaks and writing well. Set times having to sign up and being here for 9am
- Having to sign up and being here for 9am – gets the day started early. Also hearing that everyone works at a similar speed is reassuring.

# Would you suggest any changes?

- Perhaps one more section of writing – feel at the end that I still have potential to continue writing – only 45 minutes more or so!
- Make more of them!
- I didn't personally find the afternoon very useful as after an hour lunch break I found it hard to get back into the writing mind frame – maybe shorten lunch and have an additional afternoon break?
- Shorter lunch break and short afternoon break
- No
- Not really, the structure allows enough time for everything to be done, breaks, food, stretch and writing.
- Perhaps not all go round the room and say your goals or how many words you have done as it may make others anxious or feel like they haven't done as well
- I found the 5 min warnings slightly distracting and tuned out at that point

# Other comments/feedback

- How many words did you write?
  - 200 – 2000 words
- What writing project did you work on?
  - Dissertation; PGCE application; preparation for interview; essay for another module
- Would you recommend to a friend?
  - Yes; definitely; 100%; already have!
  - No negative replies
- Would you consider attending another one?

All positive responses from student feedback including:

  - Yes! I think if the library offered these I would attend one a week/every two weeks
  - Yes! It was so productive, thank you!
  - Yes! I know it would require a lot of staff time and university space but I would come once a week if I could. Thank you!
  - Yes please! Was around the perfect time also

# Limitations and Disadvantages

- Not all students come although a good 'mix' of students did attend
- Stronger take-up of female students (to an extent reflecting the course demographics)
- Some sign-up and don't attend on the day
- Others don't sign-up and attend on the day
- When dealing with a large cohort there is the risk of demand outstripping supply
- Students may expect workshop type input. Important to stress the importance of writing time in silence
- It's a significant commitment of staff time



# What next for undergraduate writing retreats?

- Continue at module level
- Focus on dissertations but allow students to work on other projects
- Deliver Dec and March
- Organise for the day but offer the flexibility of half-days
- Start talks with library/study skills support teams to potentially develop more centrally...

# Some tentative conclusions:

- There is scope for undergraduate writing retreats
- Linked to modules where writing is due
- Might work well as a collaborative endeavor
- Silence is golden
- Must be promoted carefully and sign-up managed
- Potential to develop a sense of community for student writers
- Provides space to discuss writing as a process
- Provides students with a take-home strategy for writing to use elsewhere
- Contributes to lifelong learning!

# Any questions?



# List of references

- MacLeod, I., Steckley, L., & Murray, R. (2012). Time is not enough: Promoting strategic engagement with writing for publication. *Studies in Higher Education*, 37(6), 641-654
- Menzies-Lyth, I. (1988) Containing anxiety in institutions: selected essays, volume one. London: Free Association Books
- Murray, R. & Newton, M. (2009) 'Writing retreat as structured intervention: Margin or mainstream?' in *Higher Education Research and Development*. 28(5): 527-39
- Wenger, E. (1998) Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press