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SECRETS OF *SUCCESSFUL* *WRITERS'* *Groups*

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AUTHOR AND JOURNALIST

Writing can be a lonely business, but even more so, going it solo can mean missing out on assignment leads, critical feedback and important industry information. That’s why whether you’re a journalist, poet, playwright or novelist, reaching out to like-minded people through writers’ groups can offer you much more than a coffee companion—it can also boost your career.

Author and journalist Claudia Gryvatz Copquin of Melville, NY, joined a Long Island writers’ group in 2009 specifically for the networking possibilities. “The parameters were that everyone needed to be in similar stages of their careers,” says Gryvatz Copquin, whose group formed after a fellow writer reached out on Facebook. “If the goal is to share contacts and advice, as it is for us, then it helps if everyone is at the same stage. Someone starting out in their career wouldn’t be able to contribute.”

Gryvatz Copquin’s group, which meets monthly at members’ homes—and sometimes at the beach—consists of about 20 female writers with unrelated clients. “It’s nice because there’s not a competitive nature to the group,” she says. “To have people who are in my field who can relate to what I’m going through, to bounce ideas off, set goals with, compare rates with and talk about the industry with is invaluable to me.”

Leigh Ann O’Connor of New York, a nonfiction writer, says that her first writing group spun off from an adult education class. “But it was disorganized, and those who did attend were more interested in gossip than in their writing,” she says. “I really wanted committed people for that extra push, inspiration and support I needed, and they weren’t interested.”



So O'Connor mentioned this to a friend who mentioned it to another friend and soon they had four core members who meet every Thursday at a local café from 9 to 11 am. "Because I am a busy working mom, I know if I didn't have the discipline of this group, I might let my writing go by the wayside and I don't want that to happen."

For new writers like Amanda Uhl of Cleveland, who joined the Northeast Ohio Chapter of Romance Writers of America a year ago, the objective was having the support of experienced colleagues to show her the ropes. There are about 50 members in her chapter, which meets monthly at a local library. Because their group is part of a national organization, they also have access to Yahoo chat rooms and conferences.

"It has been extremely valuable to me in figuring out what to do and how to go about it," says Uhl. "It's a sounding board, critique partnership, and an opportunity to interact with professionals in the business and to learn about different aspects of my craft."

In October 2014, mystery writer Nadine Nettman of Los Angeles was looking for a group of serious writers who all shared the goal of critiquing each other's work. She joined four other agented and published fiction authors who are all dedicated to keeping each other on track. To that end, three members each submit about 30 pages to be critiqued by the others the Friday before their meeting. They go over their notes in person and follow that up with written notes the person can look at later.

They meet every other Monday at the home of a member who is centrally located, from 7 to 9 pm. They also rely on group texts and a private Facebook group.

"We've formed a trusted bond so we can each take criticism when needed and also help each other out when we're stuck on a scene or plot issue," Nettman says.

Of course you can set out with one goal and have it evolve over time. Playwright Barbara Trainin Blank of Silver Spring, Md., a member of the Playwrights Alliance of Pennsylvania from 2000 to 2013, originally joined the group for the critiquing element, but quickly realized she benefitted from their approach to having their plays workshopped.

"I thought the advantage would be the critiques, but everyone was too kind and encouraging," says Trainin Blank, who is also a journalist. "On the other hand, prior to that I was in what I still call 'the mean group,' where everyone tore each other apart and I got no encouragement. A good group has a balance of critique and encouragement. For me, being able to have my plays performed in front of an audience to get their feedback was something that wouldn't have happened without my group."

But these writers all agree that regardless of your goals, you have to make a commitment to be available to the other people in the group—and that doesn't just mean showing up.

"You can't just use the group to take information for yourself," says Gryvatz Copquin. "You have to be willing to share your knowledge as well. If you're someone

who doesn't want to reciprocate, that can turn off the group. There's also a huge trust factor because you're sharing ideas and information you don't want made public. You have to be an honorable person."

Also, if yours is a critiquing group, Trainin Blank says you don't want to be that person who dominates every session with your opinion—or just wants to talk about your own work. Nettman recommends a sandwich method: Start with what the writer did well, then mention what you think they need to work on, followed by another encouraging note.

Trainin Blank advises not settling for the first group you find. "Attend a couple of times and see how it feels. Like anything else, groups have chemistry," she says. "You can respect each other, but if you don't connect, it won't work."

Despite our social media-dominated world, the writers' group members here all agree that in-person time is crucial. "Important conversations come out of face-to-face time," says Gryvatz Copquin. Even so, her group posts notes on their Facebook page for anyone who missed the meeting.

To find a writers' group, start with your local library. You can also reach out via Facebook to friends or colleagues. But however you go about it, O'Connor says, "put rules and guidelines in place from the start so that you all agree on what you will do with your time together."