

A Report on the Shut up and Write HERG Writing Retreat at Dartington Hall, Jan 2017, and an Argument for Writing Retreats at the University of Luxembourg

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Introduction

The backbone of every academic's career is writer's craft, and whether suffering under publication pressure or not, it is something that all academics must learn and continually refine. There are various literatures available on academic writing, and writer's craft in general. This paper overviews an evidence-based model developed by British scholars – Rowena Murray in particularⁱ – that aims at not only improving writing skills towards increasing publication output and boosting overall professional development, but also creating a supportive venue for academics, struggling with finding enough time to write.

The contents of this paper were based on observations made and lessons learned at the Dartington Hall Writing Retreat organised by as part of a research project entitled “Shut up and write”ⁱⁱ sponsored by the Higher Education Research Group (HERG)ⁱⁱⁱ of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS), in January 2017. As such, immense gratitude must be extended to Dr. Sara Dyer (University of Exeter), Sharon Leahy (University of St Andrew's), Susan Henderson (University of the West of Scotland), and David Simm (Bath Spa) who organized the extraordinary event in south Devon, and showed us and other newcomers the pros and cons about this writing format. So convincing was this experience, we are eager to institute them closer to home.

This paper, itself, was the product of a combination of several *splurge sessions* (see vocabulary below) at the HERG event followed by several *white water sessions* afterwards. Targeted at an audience that is perhaps not familiar with these writing models, this paper (1) explains a vocabulary to define various writing approaches, (2) describes what writing sessions, writing pools, and writing retreats are, describing both the structure and rules of writing sessions and suggesting some tips on what to look out for during such a writing session, and 3) argues the pros of pursuing different kinds of retreats at the University of Luxembourg.

In addition to describing our own learning curve and our experiences at the HERG Shut-Up and Write Writing Retreat, this report can also be understood as a continuation of previous discussions held at the Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning concerning writing. In August of 2016, Prof Markus Hesse and Dr. Gerald Taylor Aiken presented, “Teaching Geographical Writing: from techniques and mechanisms to habits and routines, practice and strategy” at the HERG event, organized by Sarah Dyer, Sharon Leahy, and Matthew Wilkins, at the RGS-IBG. An earlier blog entry by Markus Hesse and Gerald Taylor Aiken on writing abstracts may also be of interest too.

1. A vocabulary of writing approaches

The first step in understanding how to improve one's writing skills is to observe the kinds of habits that one might already be engaging in. Articulating specific writing approaches with respect to one's own style, helps to more narrowly define possibilities and limitations with one's own existing writing skill set. What follows is a vocabulary of different types of writing approaches. It can be noted that these are not specifically academic writing styles, but is simply a list of writing approaches that can be applied in other circumstances where writing skills are required.

Binge Writing refers to the classical mode of writing that many scholars already practice. It is the time that a writer sets aside – from hours to days -- where he/she can write alone and get a whole project done. It refers to that period of time that writers say something like, “I need to spend a few days in my PJs and write that article.”^{iv} For many it is a working model that has the potential for large outputs. It is, however, a model that difficult for some writers to follow – in particularly those with demands at home, and who are confronted with demands in the work place as well (such as marking, administrative duties, student-teacher interactions) that have less to do with writing.

Snack Writing, as described by the Times Higher Education, refers to the act of “working in small bursts” for periods varying from 30 to 90 minutes with no distractions.

White Water Writing, similar to snack writing, refers to short, quick, and collective writing sessions, where a given topic for a relatively short (500-1000 words) output is agreed upon at the outset, the structure is created on the fly, and the labour is divided up among participants ready and will to immediately get cracking on it.

Splurge Writing refers to the kind of writing that occurs when one just wants to get some ideas on a page. This may, of course, be done at any convenient time, but splurges can also be an effective way of managing writer's block (especially during a 90- minute session, see below) or otherwise general temptations to procrastinate. For example, this document began as a splurge: Connie was exhausted after focussing on the same paper for four consecutive 90-minute sessions (again, please see below), so she changed subject and decided to get ideas out about this session instead. In earlier times, she would have called this procrastination management: Unable to focus on what was urgent, she would turn her focus on to something less urgent (but important) for the short term.

Structured Social Writing (aka Writing Pool) is snack writing in groups. These sessions may be online in forums such as 750words.org that follow social media formats, awarding badges and medals etc. while developing a profile, or they might be like Shut Up and Write Tuesdays with HERG on Twitter (@SUWTues) where participants agree on a time to start writing and then exchange progress reports online. Day-long writing pools or over-night retreats bring the personal face-to-face interaction in to play, as writers chat and eat with each other before and after sessions.

2. The set-up: Writing sessions, writing pools, and writing retreats^v

Writing sessions, writing pools, and writing retreats are events, trusting environments, designed to optimize writer's craft, and can be understood as the “set-up” in which different

writing approaches can be used. They are based on Murray's 90-minute writing session, and can be pursued on an individual basis or in groups (professors, post-docs and/or PhD students), depending on the immediate needs of the writer and willingness of others to form a group.

A *writing session* is a 90-minute block of time set aside to do nothing but write. 90 minutes is the magic number because, according to research conducted by Rowena Murray, it is the time limit that is neither too short nor too long, and the amount of time that has shown to boost productivity the most.

Perhaps the most surprising aspects of a 90 minute writing session are the strict set of rules, which at first glance seem authoritarian, and even unrealistic. Some rules include:

- Arriving on time and stopping on time
- No phones, no internet, and no eating
- Turn sounds on the computer off
- No moving about, getting coffee or going for a smoke (especially in a group situation where movement can generate distraction for some)
- The 90 minutes must be used in full. If, for example, a writer feels that he/she is not getting further on the first text, the writer is encouraged to turn to a different topic instead of something different all together.
- Participants may bring music (with sound proof headphones) and anything else needed to make writing (and sitting) more comfortable (loafers or pillows)
- Opportunities for checking mails, getting refreshments, are reserved for break times.

As strange as they may sound, the rules are nevertheless an essential component of a successful session and participants are strongly encouraged to respect them. The advantage is that adhering to the rules generates a very concentrated atmosphere that is hard to find in other contexts. An implication of these rules, too, is that writers need to come to the session prepared in ways that they might not be accustomed to.

A *writing pool* is when a group of writers get together and commit to a socially structured 90-minute session. This may be in a face-to-face setting. One participant at Dartington Hall (HERG-RGS) commented on how the writing pool/ retreat (see below) felt like sports training. Just as some find it easier to meet up for sports (committing to peers/team members in contrast to doing it alone, which can be less motivating), meeting up to write offered a similar sense of support.



Writing pool at the Dartington Hall Writer's Retreat organized by HERG-RGS

A *writing retreat* is when a group of writers retreat for a couple of days in order to engage in consecutive 90-minute sessions. This is a place free of distractions commonly found in the work place or at a home office. The retreat format is a strict schedule, with up to four 90 minute writing sessions per day following the writing pool format. Each day is facilitated by someone who keeps track of time, gathers questions and concerns, takes pictures, and facilitates discussion. Writing sessions are opened and closed with a briefing/debriefing with co-participants about goals set, goals achieved or not achieved, or general issues with progress. Below is an example Retreat Programme taken from the Joining Instructions for the Dartington Hall Writing Retreat organised by the Higher Education Research Group of the Royal Geographical Society.

Wednesday 4 th January	14.00	Arrive in Upper Gate house and set up
	14.15- 14.45	Introduction and warm-up
	14.45-15.45	Writing
	15.45-16.15	Afternoon break
	16.15-17.45	Writing
	19.00	Evening meal - Solar
Thursday 5 th January	From 7.30	Breakfast – White Heart
	9.00	Tea and coffee served in Upper Gate house. Please be at your desk by 9.15
	9.15-9.30	Planning
	9.30- 11am	Writing
	11-11.30	Morning break
	11.30-12.30	Writing
	12.30-14.00	Break Lunch served at 13.15
	14.00-15.30	Writing
	15.30-16.00	Afternoon break
	16.00-17.30	Writing
	19.00	Evening meal - Solar
Friday 6 th January	From 7.30	Breakfast – White Heart
	9.00	Tea and coffee served in Upper Gate house. Please be at your desk by 9.15.
	9.15-9.30	Planning
	9.30- 11am	Writing
	11-11.30	Morning break
	11.30-13.00	Writing
	13.00- 13.15	Reflections and plans
	13.15 – 14.00	lunch
	14.00	Depart

The programme followed at the HERG writing retreat at Dartington Hall

Things that one can do and watch for during a writing retreat:

- Monitor progress and learn about one's own writing needs and habits, considering the following questions: What goals were met, what expectations were met, how many words were typed? Also, what kind of material was written? Was it a grant application, journal article, chapter, or report? What kind of material was easiest to write and why? (Managing easy with difficult may be a way to optimize progress, especially at moments of writer's block.) What kind of impediments were encountered? Were there moments/sessions that were less productive than others? Can a reason be identified as to why this was the case (lack of sleep? Food? General writer's block?)
- Learn from exchanging with others about their writing needs and habits, talking to others about what they are writing, and how they feel about their work/writing accomplishments.
- Consider what worked best about the retreat, what could be improved, to what degree it was helpful to be with others, and how these writing approaches and set-ups can be introduced in your daily work. For example, while Connie found the retreat an excellent opportunity to learn about other people's work, while writer's

craft is a cross-disciplinary trade, and while she saw the benefits in discussing writer's craft with others from different disciplines, she was left wondering if a different kind of added value could be achieved by having more scholars in the room whose work lay thematically closer to her own. For a second example, feeling rather overloaded, Connie also found that she could have used a longer break in the afternoon of the second day.

- Take care of oneself! Four 90 minute sessions per day is intensive, exhausting, and a lot of sitting. It is not advisable to arrive tired or hungry. Eat well, walk as much as possible and go to bed early.

On a last note, a retreat can be very taxing and demanding, a 2-day retreat of eight 90-minute writing sessions can be quite enough. By the fourth or fifth session at Dartington Hall, several mentioned how difficult it was to sit for so long, or that they were feeling drained by the hours of concentration. The retreat format must thus be a supportive environment, fostering healthy living and eating and general wellness and, at best, even relaxation.



Participants go for a hike after a morning of writing sessions at the Shut-up and Write HERG retreat

3. Why retreat to write?

The outputs of writing retreats are colossal. Many participants felt that they made enormous progress in terms of achieving a great quantity of writing, while moving forward and intensifying the quality of writing. At Dartington Hall, Connie shocked herself: In addition to beginning this paper, her own accomplishments also included a completed first draft (4000 words) of a book chapter due at *Palgrave*. And, she was just one person. Similar feelings of accomplishment were felt throughout the retreat: One woman got the first draft of the final chapter of her doctoral dissertation done; a second got a stab at a paper for *Transactions* and developed a strategy for a grant application; a third wrote a piece on GIS

apps for a planning magazine. The quantity alone was impressive, but not few commented that it was also an opportunity to zero in on their story-telling, on finding their voice and narrative. According to Tom, the writing retreat provided an opportunity to address and write down especially all those less-developed ideas that have been floating around in his head for quite some time and to share them with others.

In addition to written output, the retreat format was a means of professional development, useful in both spheres of research and teaching. Established scholars can examine and re-examine their own habits and refine their own skills. The model can also be used in a teaching context (hence the support of HERG!), as students can be taught writing skills and learn to use the tools of the trade. In the case of the University of Luxembourg, writing sessions – both one-day retreats held in the office and overnight retreats held at an off-campus location may be particularly valuable for professional development within the multi-lingual environment -- and associated pressures experienced therein, such as the need to develop writing and communication skills in a second or third language. In this regard, a retreat that hones writer's craft is rather transdisciplinary and of possible interest to all three faculties.

The retreat format as a whole was a forum for scholars to engage and network with one another. During coffee breaks or lunches, researchers debrief with one another, discuss their challenges, and in this way learn about each other's work. Connie, for example, learned about forensic soil science, about publishing experiences at the *Guardian*, the relationship between geography and higher education, and received some very valuable information on how to develop a scholastic career path.

A casual observer might sceptically ask, "Why retreat? What not just sit down in your office and write?" Given that writing pools and retreats are not for everyone the question is understandable. Yet, it obscures the notion that writing is a skill that can always be improved and, as all crafts, requires time and concerted attention. Writing pools and retreats are thus a way of both raising awareness about the tools of the academic trade, and demystifying, or even removing the taboo of talking about, the arts of writing. And, given that some may indeed profit from this format, it is thus a way to foster the diversity of writing styles and needs in an academic institution. Writing pools and retreats have been shown to be a means of counter-balancing gender imbalances in the work place, as Murray argues^{vi}, as women (in particular, but parents in general) are often restricted in their options to find that quiet writing space.

So... We left convinced, and would love to organize further events in Luxembourg. Any takers? Please get in touch with us!

Further reading:

<https://teachingfocusededgesnetwork.wordpress.com/>

HERG on Twitter (@SUWTues)

i See Prof. Rowena Murray's Inaugural Lecture "Why Write?"

<http://www.rowenamurray.org/2015/11/prof-rowena-murrays-inaugural-lecture-why-write/>. At minute 30, she begins to describe writing retreats in detail. Her biography at the University of the West of Scotland can be found here: <http://www.uws.ac.uk/staff-profiles/education/rowena-murray/>

ii <http://www.herg.rgs.org/herg-shut-up-and-write/>

iii <http://www.herg.rgs.org/>

iv That is an actual quote from an academic.

v To read up on social scientific studies of retreats, please read Murray's (2009) "Writing retreat as structured intervention: margin or mainstream?" in Higher Education Research and Development Vol 28:5, pp. 541-553, Available here: <http://www.rowenamurray.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Structured-writing-retreat-paper.pdf>

vi See Prof. Rowena Murray's Inaugural Lecture "Why Write?" <http://www.rowenamurray.org/2015/11/prof-rowena-murrays-inaugural-lecture-why-write/> See minute 32