



Writers' Groups – should you join one?

by
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Author and professional speaker, Julie H. Ferguson leads workshops that provide aspiring authors with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to approach publishers and succeed. Her workshops are available as downloadable booklets and more articles can be accessed through Beacon Literary Services at www.beaconlit.com, then click on Writers' Tools.

Why is it so many published authors belong to writers' groups and so many unpublished writers don't? Is this phenomenon telling us something? An essential truth, perhaps? Without a doubt....

Half-a-dozen best-selling novelists and non-fiction authors I know, who earn royalties in the six figure range, still attend their groups. Most manage it via the Internet but they continue to benefit from their colleagues' assistance with difficult passages and critiques of their works-in-progress. They also deliver their wisdom to the other members. Some published authors belong to more than one writers' group.

I have attended my group off-and-on for about fifteen years, only taking time out reluctantly due to unavoidable conflicts. Since I joined it, I have had two books published on Canadian naval history, with a third about Anglican bishops due out next spring. Benefits vary from writer to writer but here are a few:

- Editors/agents are reassured when they learn unpublished authors belong to a group.
- Writers gain much support from other writers – groups are a place to celebrate and commiserate.
- Members discuss the 'business' of writing, such as query letters, proposals, synopses, taxes, Public Lending Right, copyright, etc.
- Writers develop their craft in a non-threatening environment – practice, critique, editing, etc.
- Groups are highly motivating and often fun. Friendships often form to mutual advantage.

Writers' groups come in all shapes and sizes. Some are free and others charge a fee; some have experienced leaders and some do not; some are just for poets and others are for all types of writers. You get the picture. I favour a live group, rather than virtual, that has a multi-faceted membership of published and unpublished writers, poets, novelists of

different sub-categories, non-fiction authors, playwrights, and freelancers. A mixture exposes a writer to techniques one might otherwise not know much about. I need a group that is highly demanding but constructive in their criticism. As groups differ widely, a first timer needs to try out more than one if possible and see which one suits.

Finding a live writers' group can be a challenge; many are full. The best ways I know to locate the groups include asking those who instruct writing programs in continuing ed departments, asking a local librarian, mingling at book signings or open mic evenings, or joining a local writers' association – you'll start getting their newsletters and make contacts.

After you have settled in to a group, not only do you receive wisdom, you must be willing to do your share of dispensing it. Initially you may only provide a little to the critiques but as you work on the craft of writing, you will begin to contribute more and more. Honest give and take is the lifeblood of writers' groups; the members, their support systems.

The **essential truth** is therefore – attend a writers' group in person or online to enhance your writing career.

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