

Guidance for leading an online writers' retreat

This document provides some ideas to help you lead a productive online writers' retreat. Writers' retreats are extremely flexible and lend themselves well to different formats (e.g. a half-day or full-day event). You can also experiment with the length of the 'writing blocks' (or timed writing slots) and vary the activities within each retreat.

[Download our draft structure template to edit and share with your participants.](#)

This writers' retreat format is based on [research](#) conducted by Rowena Murray, who identified the productivity and wellbeing benefits of writing blocks (because we can only focus for so long), setting writing goals, and discussing with peers.

Before the first writing block

Participants start 'arriving'. Set a time for everyone to 'check-in' to your chosen platform so that you all know who is taking part. For video conferencing platforms you should also allow some time for participants to test their audio/visual tech.

Warm up activity - free writing. Just like you would warm up for physical exercise, you should warm up for writing. Invite your participants to write non-stop for 5 minutes about something unrelated to their research (e.g., the view from their window). This will get everyone in the right mental zone for writing and open up the creative pathways in the brain without the pressure of academic content. Try to encourage everyone to use a pen and paper, as the physical act of writing works better for this activity. The key is to keep writing for 5 minutes: participants should aim to keep their pen on the page and avoid editing their writing.

Goal setting. Allow 2–5 minutes for everyone to write down their goals for the day. These can include how many words you will all aim to write and which area(s) of your thesis/paper you aim to cover. The form of technology you are using might dictate whether it will be easier to share these as a whole group or in pairs, and whether this can be done verbally or through typing into the chat box.

During each writing block

Someone will need to act as a time-keeper, initiating the writing block and notifying all participants when it has ended. This allows everyone to focus solely on writing for the allocated time slot (avoiding distractions such as social media, emails and mobile phones) and it prevents you all from writing for too long (binge-writing) and burning out. At the end of the block, you may wish to encourage everyone to reflect on the progress of their writing goals and make notes that will help with getting back into writing after the break.

During each break

It is good practice to start the break with some form of stretching since everyone has been hunched over computers and laptops. This 5-minute [office yoga](#) video might be useful, or you can use Pam Lock's [5-minute stretching routine for writers](#). After this, everyone should be encouraged to

move away from their screens to rest their eyes. During the main lunch break encourage participants to step out for a walk, if possible.

After the last writing block

Reflect. Use the last part of the day to allow everyone to share what they achieved in the writers' retreat (via the same method of sharing that was used in the initial goal-setting activity). You could also use this time to discuss how well the retreat's content and technology worked, and whether any changes should be made when doing this again.

Find out more

- [Download our draft structure template to edit and share with your participants.](#)
- [Read about how to choose the best platform for your virtual event](#)
- [Read our 7 steps for planning a successful live webinar](#)
- If you have any questions about hosting your own writers' retreat, please contact Sarah Kelley (sarah.kelley@bristol.ac.uk)