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# A time and a place to write and hone skills

A writer's retreat for faculty and graduate students

**W**riting for publication is essential for gaining professional visibility, securing tenure, and achieving promotions. However, successful writing requires substantial time and a specific skill set, both of which can serve as barriers to success. Participating in a structured writing activity, such as a retreat, allows for protected, allocated time for writers to focus on scholarship and productivity.<sup>1</sup> It also serves as a training opportunity for participants to develop their writing skills. Libraries are uniquely positioned to provide this support to students and researchers across departments.

The Dartmouth Biomedical Libraries serve faculty, students, and staff in the life and health sciences at Dartmouth College. We also serve healthcare providers at the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center. Over the past several years, we have regularly received requests for publication support, specifically pertaining to editing, publishing recommendations, content organization, and reference management. The Biomedical Libraries have offered support related to reference management and have been able to triage a number of questions, but we do not offer full-service writing support. In response to this need, we organized a writer's retreat spanning two consecutive days. The purpose of the retreat was to support researchers in the process of manuscript preparation by providing access to writing support, research assistance, and a time and a place to focus on writing. This retreat pro-

vided a way for the library to expand its reach and to showcase its existing services related to identifying publishing venues, increasing research impact, managing references, and providing assistance with literature reviews.

## Implementation

*Planning:* Three librarians from the Biomedical Libraries organized the retreat in collaboration with a Dartmouth writing specialist, who has a scientific background and experience as a *JAMA* editor. We began planning three months in advance of the retreat. During the planning phase, the writing specialist offered insight into the format and structure of the retreat.

*Format:* Over the course of the two consecutive days, participants benefitted from uninterrupted independent writing time and structured programming. Writers attended group seminars, peer-feedback sessions, and individual meetings with the writing specialist and a research librarian.<sup>2</sup>

*Venue:* We selected the Matthews-Fuller Health Sciences Library, a Dartmouth College

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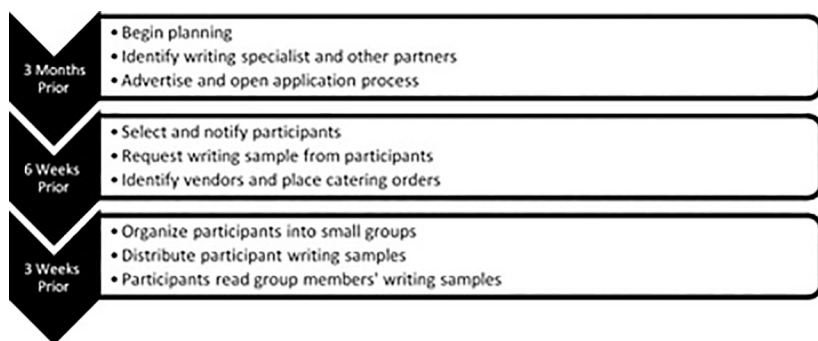
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library located at the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, for its varied space and for the fact that it removed participants from their regular environment. Recognizing the need for a distraction-free space, we took advantage of the fact that the library is traditionally viewed as a venue that promotes quietude and scholarship. The Matthews-Fuller Health Sciences Library also has a variety of spaces that include private study rooms, comfortable

appropriate journal, and advised on how to increase impact once published.

*Didactic sessions:* All participants attended three didactic sessions. The writing specialist led seminars focused on strategies for writing the manuscript, on the top ten reasons articles get accepted and rejected, and how to respond to reviewers' critiques. Librarians from the Scholarly Communications Program led a session on depositing content in per-



**Planning Timeline**—Librarians interested in planning a retreat should begin planning at least three months in advance. Organizers should develop detailed checklists of all items associated with the planning process.

seating, carrels, offices, and a classroom. In order to minimize impact on other library users, we selected days with traditionally low traffic. We posted signage in advance of the retreat to inform library users of the event.

*Orientation and goal setting:* We began the retreat with a brief welcome session and a goal-setting activity. Using the SMART criteria (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-limited), participants defined the primary goal they wished to accomplish by the end of the retreat. Participants shared their research topic and their primary writing goal.

*Individual meetings:* Participants followed individual schedules and met one-on-one with the writing specialist and with their assigned librarian. The writing specialist reviewed each participant's writing sample and provided personalized recommendations for improving his or her writing. Librarians also met with each participant to discuss strategies for ensuring a comprehensive literature search, offered guidance for choosing an

sonal researcher profiles, talked about how to read a publishing contract, and discussed how to ensure compliance with NIH-funded research requirements.

*Peer-review sessions:* Each participant attended a small-group peer-review session facilitated by the writing specialist. Each small group comprised five individuals from a variety of disciplines and experience levels. Ahead of the retreat, participants read one another's writing samples, and during the session gave and received peer feedback with guidance from the writing specialist.

*Participants:* We recruited participants primarily through the Biomedical Libraries listserv and by distributing flyers at two institutional writing seminars. We invited all members of the biomedical community at Dartmouth College and the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center to participate in the retreat. The only caveat was that we limited participation to writers of manuscripts. We did not include grant writers for the vast dif-

ferences in format and style between grants and manuscripts.

Prospective attendees submitted an application containing a draft abstract, an explanation of why they wanted to attend the retreat, and what they wished to accomplish by the end of it. They also submitted a description of where they were in the writing process, which helped to inform our selection decision.

We based our selection decision on similarities among participants' goals and where they were in the writing process. From the applicant pool of 26, we selected 11 individuals to form a professionally diverse cohort with representatives from a variety of disciplines, ranging from public health to genetics to anesthesiology and beyond. Participants ranged from graduate students to associate professors to deans. The remaining applicants were placed on a waiting list and given priority for the next retreat.

*Budget and cost to attend:* We did not charge a fee for participants to attend the retreat. Due to the writing specialist having an existing contract with the college, the only expense associated with the retreat was food. The librarians organized and participated in the retreat as part of their normal compensation agreement. Food was an integral part of the participant experience, as it allowed participants to focus on their writing and on the programming without having to consider bringing or buying a lunch or snacks. On both days, we provided a morning snack, lunch, and an afternoon snack.

*Feedback:* At the close of the retreat, the group met to review goals, to report back on progress, and to give broad feedback on participants' immediate impressions of the retreat. Two days later, we issued a survey containing questions about logistics and overall experience. Eight of the eleven participants responded to the survey:

- To the question, “[On a scale of 1-5,] how helpful was this retreat in helping you to achieve your primary goal?” (1: Not helpful, 5: Very helpful), all respondents indicated 3, 4, or 5;

- To the question, “[On a scale of 1-5,] how satisfied are you with the setting of the retreat? (1: Not satisfied, 5: Very satisfied), all respondents indicated 5;

- When asked, “Was the length of the retreat appropriate?” (Too short; Too long; Just right), all respondents indicated “Just right.”

We also asked participants what aspect of the retreat they found most helpful. The most common answers were meeting with the writing specialist, having protected writing time, and meeting with like-minded peers to review one another's work.

Participants also offered suggestions about how to improve future iterations of the retreat. The most common suggestion was to include additional structured exercises to allow participants to practice new skills and review each other's work. One participant also suggested that it would be helpful to have a workshop focused specifically on how to meaningfully critique colleagues' writing, and another recommended that the writing specialist meet with all participants on the first day. Participants also recommended extending the length of time allocated to individual meetings with the librarians and the writing specialist. Finally, participants collectively expressed interest in meeting monthly in small groups to continue their writing activities.

## Next steps

From the feedback, we identified an immediate action item: to form ongoing monthly writing groups. So far, we have successfully facilitated five small groups and have scheduled several more through the fall. We also offered a second Biomedical Writer's Retreat in June 2016. Considering the participant feedback, we restructured the retreat to include more peer support and structured activities. We also scheduled all participants to meet with the writing specialist on the first day.

In response to feedback regarding peer support, writers participated in three peer workshops that were not offered in the first retreat. The first new structured activity was facilitated by a librarian: each of the three

librarians led a small group of either three or four participants to practice writing and communication skills. On the second day, participants attended one peer-feedback session to provide ongoing support of one another's writing. They also attended a librarian-led session on crafting a clear and concise message.

Our mid-term goal is to identify a second writing specialist so all participants may receive individual feedback in the early afternoon. We will also consider expanding our program to include retreats specific to grant writers. We also plan to offer "mini retreats" where participants will spend a half day working on a particular aspect (such as the discussion or methodology section) of their grant or manuscript.

## Challenges

The long-term goal is to offer services on an ongoing basis beyond the confines of a structured retreat. Such activities may include, but are not limited to, daylong seminars led by field-specific writing specialists; librarian-led seminars on conducting systematic and literature reviews; and management of references, personal impact, and data.

The first challenge will be to identify all on-campus stakeholders, including, but not limited to, writing consultants, content specialists, and copy editors. The second challenge pertains to funding. Although the cost to run the first retreat was relatively low, we foresee the cost of future retreats rising due to the impending retirement of the writing specialist.

We will need to be creative in thinking about funding and possibly allocate efforts to writing grants and collaborating with internal departments to cosponsor events.

## Concluding thoughts

As purveyors of scholarly information, librarians are natural partners in scholarship and therefore naturally suited for organizing and playing a part in writer's retreats. Through our retreat, we were able to provide com-

prehensive writing support, a service that was previously unavailable to researchers at our institution. The retreat brought together a professionally diverse cohort of researchers and worked well for participants with a range of writing experience, from a graduate student writing his or her first manuscript to a team of senior researchers collaborating on a paper. Participants valued both the time to focus on their individual writing as well as the feedback from peers and instructors. The retreat allowed the library to showcase lesser known services.

Some participants were surprised to learn that librarians offer literature search assistance and can help with selecting journals and negotiating publishing contracts. The retreat enabled us to connect with individuals we may not have reached otherwise. We describe a retreat for biomedical researchers, however, a similar retreat could be offered for researchers in other academic disciplines.

## Notes

1. Moira Bent and Pat Gannon-Leary, "Writing for Publication and the Role of the Library: 'Do have a Cow, Man!'" ("Don'T have a Cow, Man"-Bart Simpson)," *New Review of Academic Librarianship* 16, no. 1 (March 2, 2010): 26-44, doi:10.1080/13614530903478870, www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13614530903478870.

C. T Cable, D. Boyer, C. Y. Colbert, and E. W. Boyer, "The Writing Retreat: A High-Yield Clinical Faculty Development Opportunity in Academic Writing," *Journal of Graduate Medical Education* 5, no. 2 (June, 2013): 299-302.

Maria J. Grant, Wendy Munro, Jaye McIsaac, and Sophie Hill, "Cross-Disciplinary Writers' Group Stimulates Fresh Approaches to Scholarly Communication: A Reflective Case Study within a Higher Education Institution in the North West of England," *New Review of Academic Librarianship* 16, (2010): 44-64.

2. A sample participant schedule can be found at the following link: <http://tinyurl.com/DartmouthRetreatCRL>. //