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# Building Community Through Shared Writing Experiences

**Marilyn DeLong**
College of Design, mdelong@umn.edu
University of Minnesota

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***Building Community through Shared Writing Experiences***

Marilyn DeLong, about the Creative Writing Circle of the University of Minnesota Women's Club

Have you ever thought about pursuing a fascinating writing topic of personal interest, but lacked some motivation? A writing group can offer both motivation and support for writing. In addition, it is a great way to get to know others with similar interests in writing.

The *Creative Writing Circle* is a subgroup of women who are members of the University of Minnesota Women's Club (UMWC). In this special interest group, we focus upon a self-selected topic of interest to write about, e.g., a mother's memories of life in a difficult time and place, the experience of living in another culture, or the opportunities and challenges of living within this one. Such life experiences offer fodder for exploration and provide an incentive to further explore the experience.

This recently formed group of creative writers came together as one of 17 interest sections in UMWC. A primary goal of UMWC is to foster community in small groups of women pursuing a variety of personal interests such as hiking, women's health, art and design, or poetry. All are vital ways of fostering relationships among mature women.

UMWC is a group of approximately 300 women that started as faculty wives in the early 20$^{th}$ century but has grown to include all women interested in participating in a social group with other vital and engaged women—all who would like to get to know you better. Additionally, each year UMWC provides scholarships for undergraduate students at the University of Minnesota, each at $5,000.

Members in the *Creative Writing Circle* are engaged in writing memoirs, historical fiction, poetry, or whatever is of interest. We ask for voluntary submissions of 5-10 pages one week ahead, in time to review for the next meeting. We receive 2-3 submissions each month to share with others in the group. At our monthly 2-hour meeting, the group reviews the submission and offers support and critique. Often our reviewers ask probing questions and offer suggestions for further detail and development of the writing. The critiques are kind, insightful, questioning, and focused on improvements.

We also practice writing prompts, such as "your most demanding teacher," "your first kiss," or "the year you were born." Sometimes these writing prompts become enlarged memories to write about.

In the process of writing something about your life, there are discoveries to be made. For example, we have discovered that remembering induces more memories; the outcome of triggering one memory can be enriched by remembering another. This often

happens as we think about either the pain or blessing that we felt in our lives the first time around but realize the impact later in writing about the experience.

Writing about your life is important, especially at a significant life point for this group of women, such as retirement transition. Such a life review can help a person see purpose in what has been accomplished in a lifetime and help with the transition to further purpose.

Members who are familiar with helpful references encourage reading about processes and procedures in published works. Reading such references makes a person realize writing is no easy task:

Peeling off the layers: Lillian Hellman in *Pentimento* suggests that writing about your life is like peeling the layers to see what you didn't see the first time. Perhaps in the process you learn to value in a different but still recognizable way. This has proven to be the experience of the creative writer's group.

Finding your voice: Writing about your life is not just a matter of remembering. It is a matter of finding your voice and your audience. Mary Karr in her book, *The Art of Memoir,* suggests that the first step is to start with a blank page and fill it with memories. Then in the process of structuring the memories for your intended audience, you must find your voice. If you can't do this, she believes that you might as well relax and go to a movie or have a glass of wine.

Unreliable truth: Maureen Murdock writes in her published work, *Unreliable Truth, On Memoir and Memory*, that memoirs are "unreliable truth" because they are focused on one person's memories. Even though the writer tells the story from his/her perspective, it is still one perspective. When family members read the writing of another member, they often conclude they grew up with a different perspective of the family.

Members share the value of a writing group:

Many in the group have experience with writing, critiquing and publishing. These experiences range from having been a writing instructor, to being a publisher of books of fiction or nonfiction. But we welcome those without writing experience who are just interested in composing a story about personal life experiences. Here are some of their stories:

--What I've found so inspiring about this writing group is the freedom to write about any subject in any genre we choose. Non-fiction, poetry, fiction. You name it. Some of us have a background in only academic writing, and these choices are so much fun. My background is more focused on journalistic writing, and now I'm able to spread my wings to try writing by different rules, or to break a few rules! It's gratifying to be forced to write on deadline, which I'm accustomed to, but also to have a supportive audience

that's less judgmental than a professional editor under the stress of deadlines and with more rigid ideas about form. Louise Mengelkoch

--Mutual support is vital in developing writing skills. Writers gain confidence through encouragement and come to experience the great satisfaction of self-expression and examination. The shared stories of each other's lives are fascinating and draw the participants close as a team. Judy McConnell

-- For years I planned to write about my family's story of displacement after World War II. My background in writing includes personal journaling, and professional writing related to my career in nursing. Several women in our group have vastly more experience in writing than I do; however, we share a love of words. After reading each other's submissions, we discuss and offer ideas to enhance our writing. Joining this group has helped me become more disciplined in writing my story, while also expanding my knowledge in how to construct a well-written story. This is the first writer's group I have ever joined; I feel lucky to have landed here at the start of my journey. Deb Legan

--I have been an academic all my life with the purpose of writing for objectivity in reporting research. Participating in this writer's group made me realize that writing my memoir is a totally different effort. When reading my writing, the reviewers continue to ask the question: "But how does it make you feel?" I have come to realize that writing about feelings is not only cathartic but calls for a totally different kind of effort. I find the shared writing experience to be an excellent motivation to rethink my life and is a way to express gratitude for the many important influences from family, teachers and friendly mentors. And YES, shared writing is a way to learn about those fascinating experiences of other women in the group. Marilyn DeLong

**References**

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