

HELP! I'VE outgrown MY WRITERS' GROUP

The new year is a good time to assess your literary life and how best to move forward. Sarah Davies suggests asking yourself whether your writing group still fits the bill



You've been a member of your writers' group for a while, turning up to all the meetings, engaging with the prompts, giving and receiving feedback from your fellows.

Then, possibly quite unexpectedly, probably slowly over a few weeks or months, you begin to feel you could maybe miss a few meetings.

You might find yourself deciding only to go when certain other members are there (or when certain people

aren't). You may find yourself with little to say about the work others are sharing. You may feel the feedback you're receiving for your work is unhelpful ('I liked that'; 'I love the way you read your work.').

You might have outgrown your writers' group.

This is the time to really think about where you are in your journey as a writer, why you joined a writers' group in the first place and – most importantly – why you're still attending the group today.

Why did you join the group?

It's worth, at this stage, thinking not only about why you joined a group but why specifically you joined the group you're in.

Did you visit a few before you settled on your current group? Think back to what it was that attracted you to this group. What did it give you? Apart from the right day, time and venue, what was it that

the group members offered?

In my case, I was excited to join a group of welcoming, friendly writers who liked to share work based on a prompt and whose feedback was honest, encouraging and helpful. The group also held discussions about reading, movies, TV shows, etc that I thought might be interesting. There were explorations of using other art forms to inspire or complement our writing and there were opportunities to submit work to publications or to perform.

At the time I joined it was exactly what I was looking for to kickstart my exploration of fiction writing, something I hadn't done since school.

Once you're clear on why you joined the group in the first place, consider whether it has delivered what you hoped:

- Are you writing more consistently?
- Have you been exposed to writing/inspiration/opportunities you might

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otherwise have missed?

- Have you made the most of the opportunities the group has afforded you?
- Have you given and received constructive feedback that has helped you and your fellow writers develop?
- Has your reason for joining the group in the first place been met?
- Have your reasons/motivations/aspirations changed since you joined the group?
- Is being a member of this group now holding you back?

That last point might seem a bit harsh, but it's meant as a





challenge to you and not as a criticism of the other members of the group. Let's look at that question more closely...

Is being a member holding you back?

If your current group comprises members who are at the same level of knowledge as you, then it's really a case of you all learning together, finding things out as you go along. Unless you join a group where members are better or more experienced than you, it's mostly going to be a case of the blind leading the blind.

If your current group has a constant influx of new, inexperienced writers joining, then you may find yourself giving a lot of advice and feedback and receiving little constructive criticism of your own work.

This may be great if you're looking for teaching or coaching experience, but not so great for your development as a writer.

If you're treated as one of the 'stars' of your group there's a real danger that you'll stop growing, simply because no one challenges you or pushes you to go further.

If any of the above is ringing true for you, then it's probably time to move on.

That's not to say that you can't stay in touch with the members of the group socially or take part in open mic events or other open opportunities that the group runs. You're simply admitting to yourself that to move your writing to the next level, you need something different.

So where next?

Don't assume your next step has to be to join another writing group – that certainly isn't the case. Think about what it is that you want to develop in your writing and go from there.

There's a wealth of **books and online resources** about the technical aspects

of every sort of writing. You may find that giving yourself some time to read and think about a few of those will be really helpful to give you a boost in knowledge and the opportunity to try some new ways of writing.

Reading widely in fiction and non-fiction is also really useful. Start analysing the structure of different kinds of writing, recognising themes, tropes and plots, thinking about what seems to work and what doesn't... Learning from those who have gone before has a great benefit for writers.

And do read from outside your own comfort zone and preferred genres.

Submitting work to competitions and publications can be scary when you start out because you're now putting your work up against writers from across the country and even the world.

Submitting your work is a hugely beneficial challenge to embrace, though. There's the discipline of meeting the brief and the deadline, and the anticipation of how far you may get.

There will also, hopefully, be some **feedback**. Even if it's a 'not for us', at least you know that your work is being seen by fresh eyes. And look out for other opportunities to get feedback on work from experienced writers, editors, agents and suchlike.

But do be prepared to hear the truth. The feedback might feel harsh, but use it to grow your knowledge and push your work further.

Accountability

If you decide not to join another group, you could look for an accountability partner. This is someone with whom you agree goals you want to meet and then they support you to keep on track.

If it's another writer, you could support them in their goals, too. Certainly, someone who understands what you're doing, even if they write in



different genres to you, can be incredibly good for bouncing ideas off.

Finding a new group

Look around, both in real life and on the internet. Real-life groups will have that buzz of physical connection (when you are actually able to meet in real life), but online groups will give you a wider reach of writers to engage with. Online groups are also perhaps easier to visit once and then move on from if they don't feel right.

If you do decide to join a new group it's worth remembering that you should ask for the feedback you want or need before you start reading your work. That way people listen more actively and will also, hopefully, feel able to give their honest opinions in response to your offering.

In conclusion

I hope that I've given you some food for thought about next steps if you think you might have outgrown your current writers' group.

Please don't stay in a group that's no longer serving you simply because of the friendships you've formed or the social opportunities it offers; you can maintain both of those outside of the group.

Good luck in continuing your writing journey in the way that's right for you to develop your skills and achieve your dreams.