

AcWriMo @Maynooth University Library: a guide to running an academic writing programme

In 2020 and 2021, Maynooth University (MU) Library ran an academic writing programme for library staff, loosely based on the international Academic Writing Month (AcWriMo) model. This model originated in the U.S. with the aim of encouraging and supporting writing among early career academics and researchers. Individuals or teams set November as a time to advance their writing substantially through establishing specific writing goals and recording both time spent writing and output. The MU Library version of AcWriMo was offered in November 2020 (AcWriMo1) and February 2021 (AcWriMo2).

The goal for AcWriMo1 (November 2020) was to write a blog post of between 800 and 1,000 words. The goal for AcWriMo2 (February 2021) was similar – to complete a piece of writing of between 1,000 and 1,500 words for either a blog post or a professional journal. No prior experience of academic writing was necessary, and the programme was offered to library staff across all grades.

Following a brief review of the literature relating to academic writing groups, this article provides a step-by-step description of the content of the writing programme, which could be adapted and developed by other academic writing groups. It then discusses the outputs from the group, their evaluation of the process and the key emerging issues.

Keywords

academic writing; publishing; staff development; libraries; AcWriMo

Literature review

There is a significant body of literature relating to support for writing for academic publication, which, while not specifically relating to library staff, is applicable. This includes information on models for writing groups. In *The Work of Writing*, Rankin describes academic writing groups she has facilitated.¹

Professor Rowena Murray offers guidelines on facilitating academic writing groups, providing a framework for a series of six writing workshops – each three hours in duration, over a period of six months.² This allows participants time to take on board new ideas and strategies and to advance their writing. Murray found the programme ‘offers a relatively efficient model for initiating, increasing or improving writing. Moreover, participants generally submit papers soon after the course has ended.’³

Stivers and Cramer discuss a writing partnership, where two people work on a joint article. They suggest starting with a small writing project and a clear focus on what both people want from the writing partnership. A target date for completion and a weekly phone call are recommended – ‘just knowing that the call is coming is a spur to action’.⁴

Eodice and Cramer explore the benefits of a one-year campus-wide writing programme, Write On!, where 30 people from different faculties and units participated. The programme helped people increase their publication output.⁵



HELEN FALLON

Deputy University Librarian
Maynooth University
Ireland

2 Moore, Murphy and Murray describe the features and operation of writers' retreats (typically five days) they have facilitated and demonstrate the value of these both in the immediate and longer term, such as total immersion, writing support, engaging in the target activity, the creation of a community of practice and the provision of a holistic, pleasant, healthy environment.⁶

While the above authors have worked primarily with academic staff and postgraduates, the models they describe could, and sometimes do, include librarians. In writing about librarians as academic writers, Snyder Broussard notes that writing communities of librarians do not have to be limited to librarians. Writing groups across a university can provide opportunities to form new relationships, participate in new writing partnerships and foster deeper understanding of different roles. Participation in mixed groups can heighten the visibility of librarians in the academy and help them identify how to assist academic colleagues better. It also demonstrates that librarians, too, can be published authors.⁷

'Writing groups across a university can provide opportunities'

Gannon-Leary and Bent suggest that librarians develop a Community of Writers (CoW) as a '...safe place for people to practice their academic writing and also to learn about academic writing (it could be conceived as a virtual "writing retreat")'. A CoW would aim to help people write, research, and teach more confidently and creatively.⁸

Frequently, the literature relating to writing supports for librarians in the U.S. focuses on support for tenure-track librarians where publishing is tied in with achieving tenure. In this context, Campbell, Ellis and Adebajo explore using a writing group to develop collaborative papers and presentations.⁹ Similarly, Ackerman et al., in a survey of 200 early career U.S. librarians, noted the importance of mentoring and writing groups in helping to develop research skills and confidence.¹⁰

Exner and Houk describe two writing group models used with librarians in two University of North Carolina colleges. One, Jackson, established an academic writing group inspired by Paul Silvia's book *How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing*.¹¹ Meetings were fortnightly, involved approximately seven librarians, with the emphasis in each thirty-minute meeting on sharing goals for the coming two weeks. Outside of the meetings participants peer reviewed each other's work. The Bluford Library's academic writing group was more informal and met during their lunch hour. At the first meetings, librarians who had published shared their experiences of the writing and peer review process. Following that, meetings were an opportunity to discuss writing-related topics and progress with actual writing. While people did not significantly progress their writing outside the group, both models had some success in increasing confidence and motivation to write.¹²

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Jason Boczar, Barbara Lewis and Tomaro Taylor describe a Research and Publishing Committee for librarians, established at the University of South Florida (USF). Supports offered included facilitated writing groups, guidance documents and templates for articles, along with setting up peer writing partnerships.¹³

Fallon explores the potential of a blended learning approach to support Irish library staff to develop the motivation and skills to write for publication. This initiative had three elements: a one-day writing workshop, followed by the establishment of an online writing group, which carried out a series of writing tasks that built up to a journal article, and finally, two peer-feedback days. The article suggests that the combination of online and face-to-face activities has the potential to be a sustainable model for helping library staff to develop their skills to publish.¹⁴

Sullivan et al. carried out a case study of the Get Published Group at RMIT University Library in Australia. Participants in this group were librarians with little experience in getting published. The facilitators were two librarians who had published. The group met every two months for 18 months and used a range of learning methods, including input from group members, external speakers, practical writing exercises and reflection time. Group

3 effectiveness was evaluated midway and at the end by a survey and by tracking publication output. Results indicated that group members developed their confidence, knowledge of the publication process and research techniques. Publication output also increased.¹⁵

McBain, Culshaw and Walkey-Hall explore how a Library Research Working Group (RWG) at Flinders University has helped to build a culture of research practice and professional reflection among librarians.¹⁶

As noted, a significant body of the literature relating to academic writing focuses on librarians in tenure-track posts. The literature outside of this focuses on librarians writing for publication. There is no literature on library assistants and related grades developing their writing and publishing skills. This article aims to help fill this vacuum and to highlight the importance of academic and professional writing as a valid form of continuing professional development for all grades of library staff.

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Background and context

Maynooth University (MU) Library has a culture that supports writing for academic publication among library staff and publication output by library staff is high by national standards.¹⁷

Supporting library staff publishing is articulated in our Library Strategic Plan 2020–2023

'20.2 We will develop Library internal research capacity by encouraging Library staff to undertake formal education programmes, attend conferences, publish and participate in professional bodies.'¹⁸

'There is no literature on library assistants and related grades developing their writing and publishing skills. This article aims to help fill this vacuum'

The Library offers an annual workshop on writing for academic publication to staff in Irish libraries. During the Covid-19 pandemic this changed to a virtual workshop (via Zoom). In addition to participants from Ireland, the virtual workshop attracted participants from the U.K., Italy and Indonesia.

At University Research Week,¹⁹ Love Data Week²⁰ and similar events, guest speakers, from within the University and beyond, present on various topics relating to publishing. This has included a lunchtime presentation, during Love Data Week in 2020, by the editor of *New Review of Academic Librarianship* (NRAL). This event, via Zoom, attracted almost 40 library staff from Ireland and beyond. A librarian and a lecturer in Library and Information Studies shared a lunchtime platform as part of Research Week, with the title From Pitch to Publication, outlining their experience of publishing a book.²¹

AcWriMo is a new initiative at MU Library. Initially established in 2011 by Charlotte Frost, then a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, it drew on the model for National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo), where participants aim to write 50,000 words of fiction in a month. Frost developed a similar model for academic writing and invited people worldwide to participate each November via her website.²²

The decision to develop a local model at MU Library was taken because the formal AcWriMo month is geared towards very substantial writing projects, where people are, for example, endeavouring to complete a PhD thesis or advance a book to publication.

Participation

The option of participating in the programme was offered, via e-mail, to all library staff, excepting student assistants. Seven people signed up for AcWriMo1 and five for AcWriMo2. As facilitator, I felt that these numbers were ideal in terms of both group interaction and my ability to manage the process and to advise and support participants. Danielewicz and

- 4 McGowan suggest that a writing group should have a maximum of six people, with each member working on his or her own project and giving input to other participants on their work, prior to more formal feedback from referees or editors.²³ Rankin, another experienced facilitator of writing groups, generally works with six to twelve people.²⁴

Of the seven who signed up for AcWriMo1, three were at librarian grades and four at library assistant and related grades. Of the five who signed up for AcWriMo2, one was at librarian grade, the other four at library assistant grade.

Time

The group met using the Teams programme for one hour once a week. In addition to this, one hour of work time, four days per week, over the four-week period, was allowed for writing, subject to the needs of the library service. Participants were, of course, free to do further writing outside work time.

The allocation of four hours per week, over four weeks (16 hours in total), was sufficient to progress a straightforward piece of writing without impacting on regular library operations. This amount of time was the equivalent of attending two days training and two days were recorded as staff training days for all participants. All meeting dates were established at the outset.

'the piece of writing should not be research-based ... and that the focus should be on writing a straightforward blog post or article'

Topics

Writing topics were agreed in advance with me as facilitator. I stressed, in my initial e-mail, that the piece of writing should not be research-based (unless the research had already been completed) and that the focus should be on writing a straightforward blog post or article within the month. The e-mail also suggested that topics might include, but were not restricted to, descriptions of training undertaken, a review of a library-related book, a library event, a reflection on some aspect of the writer's work or career or a description of a library initiative.

Week 1

During the first one-hour meeting in Teams, people were asked to keep their cameras on and to introduce themselves. As facilitator, I explained the aim of this four-week programme, which was to:

- find your voice
- organize your ideas
- structure your piece
- present it as coherent narrative.

The outcome was to:

Produce a piece of writing of between 800 and 1,500 words suitable for either a blog post or professional journal article. A series of tasks followed which gave people the opportunity to work to a time deadline and word count.

Over four weeks, participants completed a series of 13 tasks. These tasks and the weekly structure can be accessed from the data accessibility statement at the end of this article.

Outputs

Seven people signed up for AcWriMo1. One left after session one, a second person after Week 2. Pressure of work was cited as the reason for leaving the group by the person who left after the first session. The person who left after session two had completed a major library project and had a large body of information that she wished to write up in some form. It is likely the project was too big for this model. Four of the five people who completed AcWriMo1 published their blog posts; the fourth person presented on her writing at our library Year in Review Event.

Five people signed up for AcWriMo2. All participants completed AcWriMo2. One was somewhat outside the group, as she was working on a peer-reviewed article but felt she would benefit from the collegiality of the group and some dedicated writing time. While she found the process of value, she did not complete her article during AcWriMo2. Three of the four others published their blog posts and a fourth published a 1,500-word article in *An Leabharlann: The Irish Library*.

Feedback

From the point of view of output, the model can be perceived as quite effective. However, I wanted to find out more about people's actual experience of AcWriMo. Shortly after the completion of both iterations of AcWriMo, I asked people, by e-mail, to write a short narrative piece about the experience. Six people responded. Full responses can be accessed from the data accessibility statement at the end of this article. Key points of feedback included the value of having time to write, a support network, a common purpose and specific writing goal, peer support, a facilitator and the opportunity to be part of a community of practice. These points are discussed in turn.

Time and space

Often people feel they cannot write unless they have a large chunk of time, but, in reality, that rarely happens for library staff, and we need to use the small slots of time we find here and there. The experience of AcWriMo illustrated to people that it is possible to execute a clearly defined writing project in a set period, in this case one month. The feedback also noted how this can be fun.

'it is possible to execute a clearly defined writing project in a set period, in this case one month'

'I realized that it can be informal, fun, flexible and personal while still being informative and valuable to others.'

The group offered a safe space where people could share experiences and learn from each other. People valued this dedicated time without work interruptions. The size of the groups, with small numbers (seven and five), was also important.

'In a small group it is easier to build trust and engender confidence in putting work out for colleagues to read.'

Support network

In normal circumstances a writing group is likely to be of value. During the Covid-19 pandemic this was even more the case. While all participants were MU Library staff, by the time AcWriMo2 started (April 2021) we had been working remotely for almost a year. Two staff members appointed during the period had not met the other members of the group in person and the value of this was noted in the feedback.

Common purpose and specific writing goal

The fact that all members of the group were library staff meant there were common understandings and contexts. Danielewicz and McGowan suggest that when setting up a writing group, it is important to find colleagues who have an interest in working in a group, a

6 willingness to share work that they feel may be very unformed and are prepared to respond to the work of others. They note the writing group is meant to increase the effectiveness of the member's written work, not to police the kind of work being done, and that writing groups have a lifespan. 'The two essentials for all groups are establishing a firm, regular schedule and a workable format for circulating and reading each other's work.'²⁵

Having a specific writing goal from the outset was beneficial. The fact that almost all participants were writing a blog post gave a very clear focus, and helped me as facilitator, to structure writing tasks and plan sessions. The articulated aims – find your voice, organize your ideas, structure your piece, present it as a coherent narrative – also helped to have clarity from the outset. Breaking tasks down helped and made the writing process less daunting.

'When I hear the word "academic writing", I tend to think of assignments or a formal style of writing which automatically brings me back to university standards and the pressure of deadlines.'

'I was very nervous starting out at doing this. I have never written a blog post before and I wasn't sure where to start.'

In both the November and February iterations of AcWriMo, the participants were from different areas in the Library and, even in normal circumstances, would not be working together.

Peer feedback

The value of feedback and peer support, with weekly meetings and the opportunity to comment on drafts, was particularly important. People appreciated the feedback of their colleagues and the facilitator, which was done in a sensitive manner in what was a safe space for all.

Facilitation

The value of the facilitator in co-ordinating and driving the process, and in giving feedback, was noted.

Community of practice

Completing a blog post, in addition to giving participants the opportunity to write a relatively short informal piece about a topic that interested them, helped develop skills and confidence in writing. It helped people connect locally, and nationally, giving them a sense of being part of a larger community of library practice. Feedback indicated that participants planned to continue writing into the future.

'I now have a record of a fairly big experience in my life, and I'm quite proud of it.'

'AcWriMo was also a great opportunity to connect with library staff across Ireland who read my published blog post.'

'I am delighted that my blog post was published online and I am already formulating ideas for the next one.'

'In the future, I would enjoy a common space to share each other's work and provide feedback to each other.'

'The two essentials ... are establishing a firm, regular schedule and a workable format for circulating and reading each other's work'

'Having a specific writing goal from the outset was beneficial'

'The value of feedback and peer support ... was particularly important'

'It helped people connect ... giving them a sense of being part of a larger community of library practice'

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Conclusion

Schneider identifies four factors conducive to productive writing groups. These are safety, self-confidence, focus and practice. She emphasizes the importance of the writer having a

7 community of support and notes that writing for sharing and responding require wisdom and firm leadership.²⁶ I believe our group offered this.

Having dedicated time and a structure validates writing as a form of continuing professional development (CPD). Frequently library staff perceive CPD as attending courses either on or off-site, and more recently via Zoom.

A survey of Irish academic librarians found that 21 per cent listed lack of time as the reason that they had not published.²⁷ The amount of time given for AcWriMo, 16 hours over four weeks, and an additional four hours for the group meeting, was not excessive and did not impact detrimentally on work. The structure of the process ensures time is not wasted, as can happen with unfocused writing projects.

AcWriMo provided participants with the opportunity to interact with other library staff to explore topics of mutual interest and to articulate interesting ideas. The process of writing can generate new ideas and some of the group have subsequently produced further blog posts. Three participants entered a national blog post competition for library staff, and one was awarded second prize. Another participant had an article published by *An Leabharlann: The Irish Library*. Having a blog post or article published has engendered confidence in members of the group, which is important in further developing academic writing.

The group was self-selecting, with people putting their names forward. This meant there was a high level of motivation from the outset. This in turn helped generate the intellectual energy that producing good writing requires.

Participants were at different grades and worked in different sections of the Library. As noted earlier, this was very valuable, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, where some people had not met in person. It also emphasized that professional writing is not limited to librarian grades and all library staff have valuable experiences that can be crafted into articles.

'professional writing is not limited to librarian grades'

AcWriMo is one of several methods that can be used to develop academic writing skills. The longer-term impact of this endeavour on writing output will be the subject of future study.

Data accessibility statement

A detailed outline of the tasks undertaken by participants of AcWriMo is stored in Maynooth University repository and available at <https://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/15174>. The participants' full feedback is also available at <https://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/15173>.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'full list of industry A&As' link: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>.

Competing interests

The author has declared no competing interests.

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Helen Fallon
Deputy University Librarian
Maynooth University
Ireland, IE
E-mail: helen.b.fallon@mu.ie
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6249-9797

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