

Starting Your Own Agraphia Group

Complaining is an academic's birthright. The art of complaining develops early, when undergraduates complain about their professors, their textbooks, and the cosmic unfairness of 9:00 a.m. Friday classes. In graduate school, complaining approaches professional levels—students are aggrieved by the tediousness of statistics classes, the imperiousness of their graduate advisors, and the omnipresent half-written dissertation. And, of course, professional faculty raise complaining to a refined, elegant art, particularly when provosts or parking permits are involved.

Sometimes these complaints involve writing. Professors and graduate students both like to complain about writing: how hard it is to finish the dissertation, how they might not finish the grant proposal before the deadline, how they didn't write as much during spring break as they had hoped. Complaining about writing is usually bad, especially when it involves the specious barriers described in chapter 2. When people sit around and talk about what they could accomplish

if only they could find time to write or get a new computer, they're colluding to maintain their useless, wasteful, binge-writing habits. But can we harness the proud academic tradition of complaining for the sake of good, not evil? Can we use our atavistic academic instinct toward collective whining to help us write a lot?

This chapter describes how you can create your own *agraphia group*, a type of support group for people who want to write faster and better. It uses principles of motivation, goal setting, and social support to help people maintain good writing habits. If you followed the tips in chapters 2 and 3, then you have a writing schedule, a list of project goals, and a set of writing priorities. A writing group will reinforce these good habits and keep you from slipping back into the darkness of binge writing.

THE AGRAPHIA MODEL

The psychology department at University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), like psychology departments everywhere, has a lot of faculty members who wish they could write more productively. A few years ago, Cheryl Logan, a friend of mine in the department, had the idea of creating a weekly writer's group. We thought it would be fun to organize the group around research on goal setting, which offers practical tips for sustaining optimal motivation (e.g., Bandura,

1997). I suggested calling the group the Trollope Society in honor of the Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope. Trollope wrote 63 books; most were two- or three-volume works. Psychologists can learn a lot from Trollope. He wrote most of his books, including the classic six-novel series *Chronicles of Barssetshire*, while working full time at the post office (Pope-Hennessy, 1971). To accomplish this, he wrote each morning from 5:30 until breakfast. As he remarked in his autobiography, "Three hours a day will produce as much as a man ought to write" (Trollope, 1883/1999, p. 271).

Trollope was a great writer, but "the Trollope Society" was a bad name. Cheryl suggested *agraphia*—the pathologic loss of the ability to write—which nicely captured how most of us felt about writing. We rustled up some faculty, and the Agraphia Group was born. The purpose of the UNCG Agraphia Group is to give people a chance to talk about ongoing writing projects, to get others' ideas and insights about writing challenges, and to help each other set reasonable goals. We haven't conducted a formal program evaluation, so we lack hard data that support our agraphia model. Nevertheless, we've met regularly for several years, and we believe that it helps. We can also boast of independent replications of the agraphia model—friends at other universities heard about our success and started their own groups. A successful agraphia group has five components.

Component 1: Set Concrete, Short-Term Goals and Monitor the Group's Progress

Motivation research shows that *proximal goal setting* enhances motivation (Bandura, 1997). When people set concrete, short-term goals, they can see ways of achieving the goals and monitor how quickly they are moving toward their goals. At each agraphia meeting, the members should set goals that they'll commit to completing before the next meeting. These goals resemble the goals described in chapter 3: They must be specific. Goals like "think about my paper" should get struck down by the group; goals like "make an outline for my paper," "write the general discussion," "write at least 1,000 words on my book," and "call the NIMH program officer to discuss my grant proposal" should be encouraged. Trying to write isn't writing—don't let a group member get away with goals like "try to make an outline" or "try to write 100 words."

As we saw in chapter 3, people must monitor their goal progress. We bring the Folder of Goals to each meeting, and each person says what he or she plans to do before the next meeting. We write down each person's concrete goals and keep them in the folder. At the start of the next meeting, we recite the past week's goals and say whether or not we met them. Figure 4.1 shows a recent sheet of goals. Our system prevents people from wriggling out of their goals or having false memories about what they said the week before.

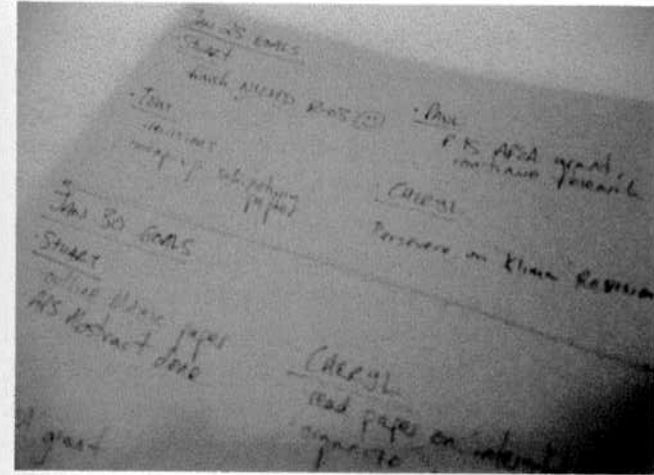


FIGURE 4.1. An example of our agraphia group's goals. The names have been left alone to expose the guilty.

An agraphia group should meet every week or every other week. Beyond 2 weeks, people's goals become too abstract and long range. We have a set of core members who meet weekly. Some members can make it only every other week, so they set bigger goals than the rest of us.

Component 2: Stick to Writing Goals, Not Other Professional Goals

Professors have a lot of obligations. It's easy for an agraphia meeting to degenerate into complaining about service committees, teaching, or wayward grad students. Avoid this. Many of our meetings are brief:

We break out the prior week's goals, check off which were met and unmet, and set new goals. It might take only a few minutes per person. If we have extra time, we usually chat about challenges that members are facing, such as approaching a book publisher regarding a contract, motivating an agraphic graduate student, or developing a grant proposal for the first time.

When getting your own agraphia group off the ground, consider having the group read books about writing. You can discuss the books after reviewing and setting goals. This book is a natural choice; in the back of this book, you'll find a list of other books worth reading and discussing. If group members struggle with style, pick *On Writing Well* (Zinsser, 2001) and *Junk English* (Smith, 2001). If the group struggles with motivation, turn to *The Writer's Book of Hope* (Keyes, 2003), *Professors as Writers* (Boice, 1990), and Stephen King's *On Writing* (2000).

Component 3: Big Carrots Can Double as Sticks

The agraphia group should reinforce good writing habits with informal social rewards. It's a big deal when a group member submits a grant proposal or sends a manuscript to a journal. If the agraphia members suffer from caffeine dependency, you can reinforce writing behavior by paying for another member's coffee. The small carrots of social life are a big part of an agraphia group's success. But support groups shouldn't be unconditionally supportive. If someone consistently fails to

meet his or her writing goals, the group needs to intervene. The group is not a forum for indulging in specious barriers or for justifying a consistently bad level of writing. It's rare that a member is completely stuck—those people never come to the meetings in the first place—but the group should be ready to confront someone who consistently fails to meet his or her goals. A good way to do this is to ask the person about his or her writing schedule. This question usually reveals that the person hasn't been following a schedule. Then goad the wayward group member into forming a more realistic schedule and pressure him or her into committing to it for the next week. Do this every week until the person breaks down and writes. If that method doesn't work, consider using psychology's time-honored method of motivating behavior with electric shocks.

Component 4: Have Different Groups for Faculty and Students

The UNCG Agraphia Group is for faculty members only; we don't invite graduate students to attend. It sounds unfair, but there are good reasons why faculty and graduate students should have different groups. Faculty and students have different writing priorities (see chap. 3), and they face different struggles and different challenges. Graduate students often feel intimidated in a large group of faculty, erroneously believing that their writing goals (e.g., finishing a master's

thesis) are less important than the professors' goals. When professors are alone, they can speak candidly about their struggles with mentoring students as writers and about stalled projects involving students. When students are alone, they can speak candidly about struggles with class projects and with writing projects involving their advisors.

If you're a graduate student, many of your friends are probably other students in your cohort. You're facing the same writing challenges—theses, dissertations—at the same time, so an agraphia group is a natural way to support each other's writing. Start a students-only writing group, and keep it a secret from your advisor—he or she might want to join.

Component 5 (Optional): Drink Coffee

Because of the profound caffeine addiction of its members, the UNCG Agraphia Group meets at a coffee shop next to the department. Although coffee is an important part of our group, it doesn't seem to affect the other agraphia groups. Tea—or perhaps even water—may work equally well.

CONCLUSIONS

By now, it's clear to psychologists why an agraphia group helps people write a lot. Social psychologists realize that the group is a constructive source of social pressure. People who are binge writing will feel pressured by the scheduled writers to make a schedule and



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stick to it. Behavioral psychologists notice that the group provides positive reinforcement for the desired behavior and punishment for not behaving properly. Clinical psychologists recognize that the group can provide insights and suggestions to people struggling to change their unproductive ways. Cognitive psychologists point out that analyzing successes and failures enables people to evaluate their action strategies. Developmental psychologists realize that they can get away from the children shrieking in the lab and have a moment of peace in the coffee shop. Form an agraphia group with some friends in your department—it will make writing more fun.