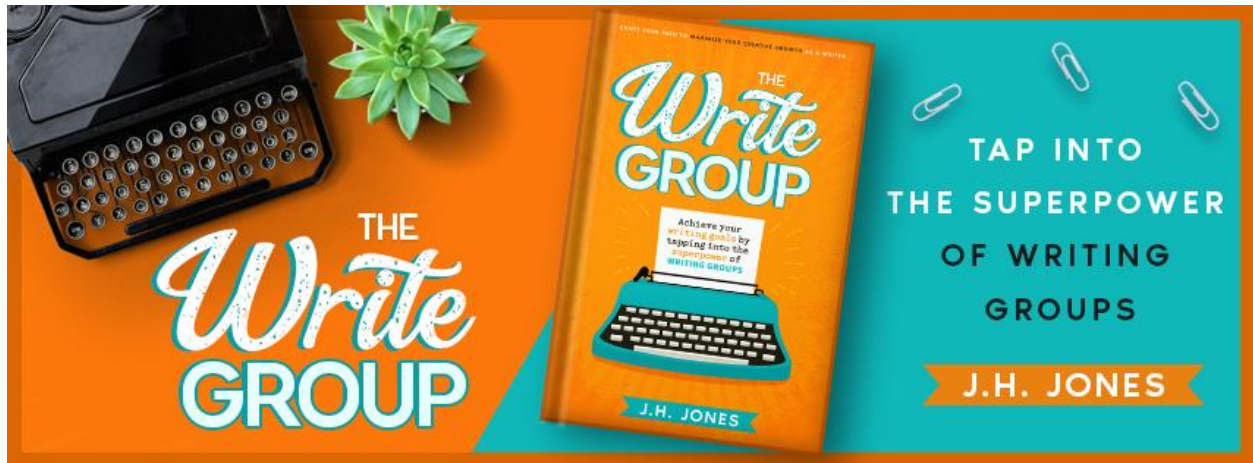




1. Why this book?

*"I got involved because I could use some help."
A seasoned author in a writing group*

I started this book project because I swore, up and down, I would never write again.

Let me explain.

Many years ago, I had the good fortune to be in a terrific writing group where writing buddies helped me learn about the craft of writing, motivated me to finish my projects and submit my work, had my back through disappointments and celebrated my successes with me.

Magic!

Unfortunately, various changes in my personal life made it impossible to continue with that group. All-too-soon, I was looking for another circle that would fit my new schedule, support my new project, and accommodate my new circumstances.

At one point, I thought I had found a circle. The experience, however, was the opposite of my previous exposure to a writing group, and I came away feeling so hurt and uncertain about my abilities that I vowed to give up writing altogether.

Oversensitive? Probably. I was much younger and had a lot to learn about being a writer. In fairness to myself, however, the group wasn't a good place for me to be.

Thankfully, time heals all wounds, and I got back to creative writing, eventually. What's more, I realized that the problem I experienced was just an episode with one group and was not true of all writing groups. I climbed back up on the proverbial horse and started my new search for a

circle.

This time, however, I armed myself with some useful, if hard won, information about myself and groups. So, as I searched, I asked questions of other writers and, to my surprise, learned that my negative experience was not unique. Some authors shared with me similar nightmares and lingering bad feelings. Yet, many more writers shared positive stories and gave their groups a thumbs up.

I wanted some of that! So, I asked loads more questions of the satisfied writers: Why did their group work? What made the manuscript exchanges useful? What were other, positive aspects of their circles?

After learning a lot from the one side, I also checked in with writers who felt they had negative experiences. What made the unpleasant group uncomfortable? What got in the way of being productive? In some cases, why did the circle fizzle out, or in others, why did the members quit? As you might imagine, there were a lot of different answers to all these questions.

Interesting to me, I heard about procedures and practices that were really helpful to the members of the successful circles. I made notes to remember these good ideas, hoping to apply them somewhere at a future date.

Likewise, whenever I learned about a situation that didn't serve the members, I jotted down those comments, too, promising myself to avoid those practices.

Over time, since I'm a note-taking nerd, I amassed quite a collection of notes. As luck would have it, I had an opportunity to join a new writing group. Before I jumped in, however, I reviewed my collection of jottings. With fresh eyes, I now noticed two distinct patterns.

First, where writers crowed about their wonderful circles, those writers often knew what they were looking for in a group and the members agreed on how they operated. Second, where writers complained about their groups, many times, the writers themselves were not clear about why they had joined the circle. Likewise, the group didn't button up their operations.

These patterns seemed clear to me, but I needed to validate my observations. So, I talked with even more writers, some new to the craft and some more mature at writing, who had experience with multiple groups and most of whom were tackling projects that differed from mine. I thought they might bring new perspectives and show me that there was some secret sauce that I had overlooked.

Guess what? Their analyses of their own experiences confirmed my suspicions. Writing circle strengths and snags aren't about genres or talent or skills or years of experience or the number of books published or stories in anthologies or prizes and accolades or even creative writing degrees. Instead, groups worked or didn't, based on the mindset of the writers, and how they set up the circle and carried out their mission.

That's an important awareness.

In my early days of writing, I would have told you that picking a writing group was all down to luck. If it worked, that was good luck, and if it didn't, well, that was just plain old bad luck. Yet with my new understanding, I realized luck had nothing to do with it.

Looking back on my own experiences, where I made writing progress, I had an aim in mind. Plus, I joined a group where writers committed themselves to writing excellence and to enabling others to level up their writing games, with a predictable format and schedule. Props to all these writers who have toiled in these groups and been so patient with me, sharing and learning. I feel such gratitude to you all for helping me practice my writing. Thank you.

Where I remember mixed or negative feelings, I didn't have a goal, or my ego grabbed hold of my writing steering wheel. Ouch! At other times, there were operational problems that took away from the potential benefits, and I became a quiet quitter or, in the worst case that I mentioned, couldn't face writing at all.

That's when I realized negative conditions were preventable. What made a writing group work—or not—was within the members' control.

You'll probably say goals and some explicit operating guidelines don't *guarantee* a great experience. And I'm sure you could cite some stories from your writing group past. Fair. But in my personal experience, goals and guidelines went a long way to enabling my writing growth, and the growth of others who were working with me.

That's when my nagging inner problem solver drove me to do more research. I studied how-to books, followed social media accounts, scanned author webpages, read writing community blogs and writing-focused websites. I also found more writers, in person and online, who had something to say—both positive and negative—about the value and workings of their writing groups.

At the end of the day, I uncovered many useful dos and don'ts, and tips and traps.

To tell you the truth, I found it challenging to extract the most from this information because people, publications, and social media outlets scattered the data all over the place.

With the thought that it would be helpful to collect all the good ideas into one spot, I started to pull together my bits and pieces and envisioned creating a single source of information. Then, if a writer were forming or joining a circle, or looking to enhance an existing group, that person could refer to one place to prep themselves and make their group the most effective it could be to support them in their creative journey.

Sounded like a good idea to me and fodder for a blog.

So, I rolled up my sleeves and started tapping out my ideas on my laptop, thinking I'd be ready

to launch in a week. But, to my surprise, I kept on writing and writing. I found I had much more to say about this topic than expected and my nonfiction book idea was born.

I've had a long career of business writing for companies, assisting them in their stakeholder messaging. But the idea of writing a non-fiction book was new. I felt like I was making a foray into the unknown, and frankly, that excited me.

On top of that, I realized that this collection of insights about writing groups could be useful to writers, whether they're new to circles or experienced and hoping to refresh their writer group commitment.

Equally, if a writer is in a group and feeling uncertainty or confusion, this book could offer some validation of their experience and help them consider their next best steps.

In other words, I'm hoping that my effort will speak to you, if you're looking for writing group help. To me, assisting *you* means bringing more creativity into this world. That's inspiring. Like no other time in history, I feel we need more forums to bring out all different human voices to respect, value, and understand each other. If I could add to that creative and inclusive pool in some small way, wow, I'd be pretty darn proud.

Anyway, that's why I wrote this book.

Now that you're here and you've read this far, I figure you want to write and you suspect there's gold to be mined in a writing group, but you'd like some help to dig it out. Great. You're in the right place.

However, if you're not interested in writing circles and you're looking for guidance on other writing-related topics, I'd like to be very clear about what you can expect. This book assumes that the notion of a writing group appeals to you. You'll get something out of this book if you're starting out as a writer, or a more seasoned creative but want to explore the writing medium with a team of other writers.

This book does not provide steps to master the craft of writing (although a well-working writing circle can help you become a better writer) or give you a how-to on getting your first novel on paper or present a list of the steps to get an agent. I leave those topics, and many others, to experts in those fields.

What this book does is to help you get the most out of the *right writing group for you*. You'll start with you and your thinking about your own writing. You'll use those insights to consider what you're looking for in a group and then target the kind of circle that matches your needs.

Next, this book will provide you with suggestions to apply to your group—whether it's an existing one or one that you are newly forming. You can easily customize the suggestions and use them to ensure your circle delivers on its potential so that you can grab your personal gold writing ring, while you're helping other writers achieve their goals, too.

Each chapter presents an important concept, with a quote from a writer with whom I swapped some writing-group war stories during my period of research. (The quotes are from my notes, and I do not name the authors.)

Then, I explore the concept, including illustrative examples, so that you'll get useful information that you can apply to your situation. The examples are based on my own experiences (painful and positive) or come from anecdotes that other wonderful writers shared with me from the wealth of their knowledge and in the spirit of helping others.

At the end of each chapter, you'll see "Important Points" that summarizes the main points. And towards the end of the book are two chapters ("Red flags" and "You know it's working when...") that include lists you can use to scan and check your personal experiences of a circle you're in or thinking about forming or joining. Using the lists will help you determine if you're in the right place or if you need to take a different action.

Lastly, I offer some resources that you can use to explore sourcing a writing group for yourself. Without doubt, there are other fabulous books and rich resources on writing groups, with brilliant advice and much useful information. By all means, check them out, because this book doesn't replace that body of good and thoughtful work. This book is an addition with a difference. I specifically design the suggestions so that you start with yourself as a writer before you jump into a circle. Then, I provide suggestions so that you can make your circle the best it can be. In this way, you will be empowered to choose and sustain *the group that's right for you and your work*.

And what is more empowering than exploring your own mindset, identifying your writing goals, and examining a few tools to apply to a group so that you can work with and learn from other writers?

Before we dive into your goals and the guidelines for writing circles, however, we need to take a first step. Let's cover the basic concept of a writing group to make sure we agree on what it is and what it is not.

Important Points

- The strengths or snags of a writing group lie in the members' goals and the setup of the group.
- This book will help you get the most out of a writing group. Other books will help you with writing skills and traditional- or self-publishing objectives.