

## Visiting Scholar Program – Research Writing

---

### Writing accountability groups: Using peer pressure to your advantage

Joining a writing accountability group (WAG) can be an effective tactic to boost your productivity. Success in academic research requires large quantities of writing, among all the other career demands. A WAG can be the right match for you if you want (or need) support and community to stay motivated for writing regularly.

Daniah Basodan, assistant professor in pediatric rheumatology, initiated a WAG recently ([featured in \*Pediatric Pulse\*](#)). Here are some of her tips on making a WAG work for you and on benefits to you.

CM: First, what exactly is a WAG?

DB: WAG stands for writing accountability group. It's peer-to-peer support for writing. Our group meets one hour a week for 10 weeks. We first discuss our writing successes over the past week and whether we met our set goal for writing regularly. We then take 30 minutes to write on our individual projects. We finish by sharing our writing plans for the week ahead and discussing the challenges of academic research.

CM: What inspired you to start a WAG?

DB: I felt overwhelmed by all my duties as a clinician and academic during the pandemic. On top of that, I was trying to manage my course work as a part-time student (Bloomberg School of Public Health, Johns Hopkins University). I had great research ideas, but I already had two projects that I dreaded because I had left them aside for almost a year. I accidentally signed up for a virtual class for JHU graduate students that was dedicated to writing time. For the first time, I didn't feel alone in writing despair!

A [paper](#) and [book](#) by Kimberly Skarupski of JHU fed my inspiration. In our department, Sarah Forgie and Geoff Ball supported me to act on my inspiration. Our first WAG launched in January 2021 and our second launched in June 2021. WAG members saw that, despite our different levels of experience, we all had similar struggles and concerns. We felt less isolated and more empowered to work on our projects and keep WAGging!

CM: Who is likely to get the most benefit from a WAG? Are they just for new faculty members or early career researchers?

DB: I think everyone can benefit from joining a WAG. We all procrastinate and then face ever-growing barriers to writing. WAGs start to break down those barriers. Struggles and successes happen at all stages of an academic career. Sharing those struggles in a supportive environment moves us beyond emotional barriers and guilt to build positive writing habits.

WAGs may especially help people who struggle to carve out time for research. WAGs help by normalizing our struggles in writing and academic work.

CM: What main benefits do WAG members experience? Secondary results or side effects?

DB: Our goal is to develop sustainable daily habits of writing. We discuss myths around writing. We break down the writing process into small, measurable daily chunks (15 to 20 min), avoiding the need to keep reorienting to our writing task. We benefit from setting the habit of writing, just like setting the habit of exercising: it gets easier when you do it regularly.



## Visiting Scholar Program – Research Writing

---

We also gain a sense of community. Peer mentoring happens naturally as we discuss our work. We troubleshoot processes such as ethics approval and responding to grant reviews. As we learn about each other's work, I also see potential research collaborations sparking between people from different fields.

CM: What type of commitment must people make to benefit from their WAG?

DB: We ask that members commit to at least seven out of 10 sessions. This sets the expectation and habit of prioritizing writing, scheduling time on our calendars, and respecting that time.

CM: Where can people find out more about WAGs and how to set up their own? Where can they get support to run an effective WAG?

DB: A great starting place is [Kimberly Skarupski's FAQ on WAGs](#), particularly her toolkit for starting a WAG. **Bonus:** That site links to many other resources on academic writing. Her [paper](#) and [book](#) on WAGs really energized me.

I also give a presentation to orient WAGgers at our first session. I am more than happy to help people start one in their department or division.

CM: The Visiting Scholar Program can also help with starting a WAG. Contact [cathy.mcphalen@ualberta.ca](mailto:cathy.mcphalen@ualberta.ca)

**Coming soon:** Other types of writing groups that can help academic researchers who need more than accountability, such as critiques, feedback or coaching.

