

# Writing Tips from Ellen Cassedy

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## What Makes the Best Writers' Group?



Over the years I've been a member of five writers' groups. One met at a café; we wrote, sipped, and read out loud. Another met online. A third grew out of a class with Ursula LeGuin and leaned heavily toward sci-fi. Then there was one that discussed a writerly topic each month, with no sharing of work.

Each had its strengths. But the last one was **the best**. It lasted for years and was very valuable to me. What made it so good?

**1. We were serious.** There were six of us, all deep into writing projects that were profoundly important to us. That gave us an ample supply of new work. Each monthly meeting was devoted to two people.

**2. We were diverse.** Among us, we were writing a screenplay, a historical novel, two memoirs, a dystopian feminist piece, and (me) a nonfiction work about Lithuania's encounter with its Jewish past. I found it incredibly useful to run my drafts by people who didn't know where Lithuania was and had not read everything they could put their hands on about the Holocaust. And in my encounters with *their* work, it was challenging and enlightening to articulate what I did and didn't like about writing very different from my own.

**3. We had rules.** Everyone read and marked up the work under discussion ahead of time. We all showed up. The chit-chat at the beginning didn't go on too long. We went around in a circle, speaking in turn; no one hogged. We were kind, but not too kind. Most of the time the person being critiqued didn't get defensive.

**4. People were – well, great.** One comment that *still* keeps me going was: “Ellen, this is your sacred work.” Another memorable comment spoke volumes with its faint praise: “There is nothing wrong with this.” And I still don't know what to make of this one, which was actually meant as a compliment: “After reading this, I asked my doctor to up my anti-depressant medication.”

**5. We shared nuts and bolts advice** – about query letters, agents, software, book talk venues. It was from this group that I heard the idea of the Virtual Writers' Retreat, where you tell family members you'll be unavailable for three hours or a day or three days – however long you can swing it – and then go off and get a chunk of work done.

**6. We got to be friends.** We clapped and cheered when something good happened, offered shoulders to cry on when times were tough.

**To find a writers' group, or start one of your own,** check out your local bookstore, community bulletin boards, writers' centers and classes, and the Internet. Issue a call for writers who will meet face to face, or suggest a genre or interest area and "meet" virtually instead.

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Ellen Cassedy is the author of *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust* (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2012). To see all of her Writing Tips, visit her website at [www.ellencassedy.com](http://www.ellencassedy.com).