

Case study: Writing retreats

Introduction

Writing retreats have been held at Keele since Summer 2014, but have grown in popularity since Autumn 2016. They provide a dedicated space for researchers to sit and focus on their writing in a supportive environment that encourages creativity and productivity, with no distractions. The aim of the retreats is to provide a structured environment where staff can attend and feel a social obligation to write in a dedicated space, away from the office.

The retreats follow a variety of formats, but most are structured full-day events with blocks of time dedicated to writing which are broken up by breaks for discussion, goal-setting and refreshments/lunch. Other retreats occur over lunchtime and some are half-days, providing flexibility for attendees. In a one-day writing retreat participants typically write 2000-5000 words.

Where do they happen and how many people attend?

- Centrally led by the Learning and Professional Development Centre (LPDC)
 - These are full-day structured writing retreats which occur monthly and are open to all staff and PGRs
 - They are often fully booked and are the most popular retreat across the University, with 14-18 people normally in attendance
 - Over 70 people have attended one or more retreats between December 2016 and June 2017.
- School of Geography, Geology and the Environment
 - These retreats have been running regularly since Summer 2014.
 - They are a mixture of half-day and full-day events.
 - Initially women-only event, they are now open to all staff in the school for research work only.
- School of Psychology
 - These retreats are a mixture of half-day and full-day structured retreats, plus an annual weekend retreat.
 - They normally attract 5-6 people at a time
 - There's been about 40 retreats between May 2016 and August 2017.
- School of Social Science and Public Policy
 - Since November 2016, the School has a dedicated writing space available between 9am and 5pm Monday to Friday.
 - They are structured retreats with 5-10 people attending each day
- School of Humanities
 - Lunchtime retreats occur for two hours each week during the semester
 - They attract both research staff and PGRs, with 4-8 people typically attending a session
- School of Medicine
 - One of the newest groups to have established, "write my fire" have been running retreats since April 2017.
 - They are half-day retreats, with typically 8-9 people attending
- Keele Postgraduate Association Clubhouse
 - Also new and running for the first time over Summer 2017, these structured day retreats are open to PGR and PGT students.

Other retreats have been run by the LPDC for staff in Keele Management School, for UG students in the School of Law, for PGT students in the School of Humanities, for research staff and students as part of the Researcher

Summer School and for individuals writing applications for Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) via the university's HEA CPD Route.

Feedback from writing retreat attendees

What do you find most useful about the writing retreats?

“Having no distractions, and a complete focus on writing.”

“The 'booked in my diary' space and focus away from the office, and the social obligation the retreat forces on us...”

“The structure: being told when to start writing, when to stop; Being surrounded by others who are also writing; Having a dedicated space to write, and therefore doing the preparatory work beforehand”

“The fact that I just had to turn up and get on with writing, whilst all my other needs were taken care of”

“Having protected time to spend writing and having someone else to "take control of time" for a day.”

How have the writing retreats helped you?

“I find the attendance at them forces me to re-engage with my research, even at very busy times of year. I've had two papers accepted to journals since starting to attend writing retreats and drafted (though not yet finished) two grant proposals....”

“Overall, it has improved my confidence, productivity and wellbeing. I find more retreat style spaces/times in my own work, and seek out bounded opportunities for focused writing where I can.”

“I am better at planning and preparation before writing, and better at keeping on the task, though I still value the facilitation on writing retreats - being told when to start writing, and when to stop, is very valuable”

“I find that I can get a lot down on paper during the writing retreat and then can update and add to this over time rather than having to write everything perfectly the first time around. I believe this has sped up my writing, especially for chapters in my thesis, and I will definitely be booking onto more courses in the future.”

“I structure my day when trying to complete a writing task. There are many tips that I have been given from others on the writing retreat that I now implement in my writing.”