

Informal Mentoring through the Lens of the Academic Writing Retreat

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Background

Since 2012, the South Central Chapter of the Medical Library Association (SCC/MLA) has hosted a writing retreat in conjunction with the annual meeting. The Writing Retreat was originally developed and facilitated by Jack Bullion and Stewart Brower (the author), who published about their early findings in 2017¹. The Writing Retreat earned SCC/MLA the Medical Library Association Chapter Project of the Year Award in 2013².

The value of writing retreats for researchers has been well documented, including the value of protected time and a distraction-free writing environment. Kornhaber specifically notes the importance of having experienced mentors in the room, participating in a shared community of practice³. The transfer of knowledge from experienced writers to newer ones constitutes a novel form of mentoring.

Although the SCC/MLA Writing Retreat metrics can really only be considered as a case study, and no formal assessment of the overall program has been conducted since the 2017 article, some essential data can be easily shared. The retreat has been held annually from 2012 to 2024, except for three occasions. In 2016, there were very few applications for the retreat and it was not held as a result. In 2020 and 2021, the South Central Chapter meeting was moved online due to COVID-19 and the retreat was not held. Over the course of the eleven times the retreat has been conducted, the total number of attendees has been 87, averaging 7.9 attendees each time the retreat was held (Table 1). There have been 2 facilitators, minimum, each year as well.

Table 1.

YEAR	REGISTRANTS
2012	9
2013	11
2014	10
2015	12
2016	Not held
2017	8
2018	6
2019	9
2020	Not held
2021	Not held
2022	5
2023	11
2024	6
TOTAL	87
AVG	7.91

The metric that is more challenging to judge effectively is the number of publications generated from the retreat. Bullion and Brower's early findings showed fifteen discrete publications

generated by retreat attendees from the first three years. What is not reflected in that kind of assessment, however, is the number of early attendees who continued publishing, or who themselves became editors, or who moved on to other careers entirely. It also cannot convey the number of writing efforts abandoned because the retreat suggested other paths to follow, other topics to pursue, that might have led to publications years after the retreat was attended. With those considerations in mind, it is estimated that between 30 to 40 publications can be “attributed” to the retreat, but a formal survey of the attendees has not been conducted recently, so that number cannot be verified in any way.

Conducting the Retreat

The SCC/MLA Writing Retreat was first proposed in Spring 2012 to the board of the South Central Academic Medical Libraries Consortium (SCAMeL) to be funded as a research support initiative for the Chapter. SCAMeL and SCC/MLA agreed to partner in developing the first retreat for the annual meeting that Fall, to be held in Lubbock, Texas. The retreat itself was to be hosted in the Preston Smith Health Sciences Library at the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center.

Making the retreat part of the Chapter’s annual meeting was done for two primary reasons. First, the overall goal of the retreat is to improve research and publishing outcomes for the entire region, as represented by SCC/MLA. That goal was to include getting more manuscripts ready for publication, certainly, but also to help develop a stronger cohort of research librarians throughout the region.

Secondly, making the retreat a part of the regular annual meeting greatly increases the likelihood of participation. It helps create synergy around the event. Marketing and promotion of the retreat is simplified as it is often bundled with the rest of the planning for the meeting. Furthermore, it incentivizes membership in the Chapter since only SCC/MLA members are allowed to participate in the retreat.

The retreat has become an anticipated part of the regular Chapter meeting. A call for applications goes out to the Chapter membership approximately three months in advance of the meeting. The locale for the retreat is selected in partnership with the meeting’s Local Arrangements Committee, as well as accommodation for any ground transportation and meals.

The participants submit a brief application that includes their name and contact information, and a summary of what they hope to accomplish during the retreat. The application form includes the following prompt:

In 500 words or less, detail your intended use of the writing retreat. Describe your writing project in some detail and its potential value as a published article. Note where you are in the research/writing process and what work is left to be done. List potential publications if you have some idea as to where you will submit your final manuscript. Estimate how much writing you intend to complete during the retreat, and your next steps for after the retreat.

The applications are reviewed by the retreat facilitators. In any given year, there are between one and three facilitators. One of those facilitators is the author of this paper, who originally proposed the Writing Retreat to SCAMeL and who has assumed primary responsibility for its continuation over the last 13 years. The other facilitators have been selected based on their prior experience in research and publication. Generally speaking, facilitators have a solid foundation in writing and publishing articles, and often have editorial experience as well.

It should be noted that generally every application for the Writing Retreat is accepted – the number of applications has never been overwhelming, and the facilitators are generally pleased to see as many applications as possible. If cost were a considerable factor, participation might need to be capped, but to date this has not been an issue, and no Writing Retreat has ever exceeded its budget.

The SCC/MLA Writing Retreat is structured as a full day of writing, followed by a half-day of workshopping. Usually, the retreat is hosted in a library near the conference venue. This gives participants the opportunity to experience library services and spaces as a consumer rather than provider, which sometimes sparks side conversations not related to the writing retreat but valuable nonetheless. Food and beverages are provided throughout the day to help participants maintain their focus on the work of the retreat, and a general area like a conference room or staff lounge is often provided as a place for participants to decompress whenever they need a moment away from the work of writing.

Traditional Mentoring in the Retreat

The goals of the retreat are straightforward: Get a lot of writing done, then make edits and improvements based on direct feedback.

On the first day of the retreat, writing is the focus. Everyone takes a moment at the beginning of the retreat to talk about what work they hope to get done that day. After that, the retreat facilitators tell everyone to make use of the library, find someplace they can get their work done, and get busy. Participants spread out everywhere—in traditional study carrels, or group study rooms, or on reading tables, or couches and chairs—whatever best meets their needs, and those needs might change during the day.

Everyone's individual writing goals are different. Some come with only the barest ideas for an essay or paper, while others are in the final draft stage for a book chapter or similar. The idea of the retreat is to have the protected time to accomplish whatever writing it is that the individual needs to get done.

Throughout the first day, it is a common practice for the writers to occasionally check in with the facilitators. This is informal but valuable time for more traditional mentoring to take place, sharing knowledge from more experienced writers and editors to less experienced participants. Sometimes these conversations are on specific, tangible items, such as points of grammar, punctuation, or narrative voice, effectively allowing a participant to get a quick answer and return to writing.

Often, though, the questions are about areas of concern that the writer is uncomfortable discussing in front of a larger audience. These can vary wildly across a range of topics including library office politics, institutional review boards, considerations of tenure or promotion, working through issues with editors, or any number of topics that benefit from the experience of a more seasoned professional one-on-one. These are quiet conversations, often punctuated with moments of insight or humor, that can help to take some pressure off of the writer and allow them to refocus their efforts. The value of having experienced researchers in the facilitator role cannot be stressed enough.

Near the end of the first day, participants prepare their manuscripts to be workshopped. To do this, they put their writing into a single electronic document with a cover sheet. For the cover sheet, they are instructed to write three to five questions for workshopping their writing. This helps focus the discussion on those areas where the writer has concerns about their manuscript. All manuscripts are then uploaded to a shared Google Drive, and the retreat ends for the day with instructions to all participants to peer review one another's work, paying particular attention to the questions from their cover sheet, all in preparation for the workshopping activity the next day.

Peer Mentoring in the Retreat

The workshopping segment on the morning of Day Two starts by loading one of the shared manuscripts up on the projector screen and reviewing the questions from the cover sheet one at a time. After each question, the participants share their thoughts and suggest answers. The intention here is to focus on the writing as a work product – Does the writing accomplish its intended aims? Is it readable? Where can it be improved? Do the readers come away with the knowledge the author intended to impart?

However, during this exchange, often the writer will have additional questions, as will the other participants. The facilitator keeps the dialogue professional and constructive, and focused on the work product, but invariably there are “teachable moments” in these dialogues where informal mentoring about the process of research and publication will take place.

One example comes directly from the workshopping itself: the value of having “more eyes on the paper.” Facilitators will talk about the value of peer networks like the writing cohort, and of having colleagues who will invest time in looking over early draft manuscripts and sharing their thoughts. This often leads into discussions about early communications with editors, particularly when an author is still considering potential publication venues and may only be in the earlier stages of writing. Facilitators with experience as editors can give valuable feedback, often without even seeing a working manuscript, by indicating whether a topic or theme is on-track for a particular journal, determining whether the manuscript fits with the journal's current needs.

Facilitators will often return to the idea of writing as a work product. This can help inexperienced authors separate themselves from the writing somewhat, to treat the writing and publication as an outcome – to “murder your darlings,” as so many have advised⁴. Additionally, however, treating writing as a work product means that new authors have the opportunity to create standing routines that support their research efforts. This might include scheduling writing time and

blocking off calendars, setting concrete writing goals, and then defending your writing time with stubbornness and even misdirection, as advocated by Silvia and others⁵.

This leads to developing stronger writing routines that are recognized as a part of the regular work of being a researcher librarian. Writing time might include activities that center upon the practice of the research endeavor without necessarily being the writing itself. For newer authors, some amount of time might be spent reading and note taking, or reviewing other work from members of the cohort, or participating in scheduled writing accountability sessions. The Early Career Librarians Initiative (ECLI) of SCC/MLA hosts a recurring writing accountability meeting where individuals regularly check in on their writing progress and encourage one another in their writing efforts⁶.

The workshopping time at the annual writing retreat is also an opportunity to share and learn about opportunities for researchers in scholarly publishing, and to find ways to become involved in the ‘industry’ of research and publishing. Along with calls for papers, many journals will issue calls for volunteers for a variety of jobs that require different kinds of experience, such as social media and marketing. Of course, while that can be a useful way to get a toe in the door, newer researcher librarians gain much more experience in publishing by assisting with copyediting or layouts, or writing a book review, or serving as a peer reviewer. Every year at the retreat, these matters tend to come up during the workshopping as a matter of course.

Developing Your Own Writing Retreat

Facilitators at the writing retreat have traditionally been journal editors, or more experienced writers with significant publication histories. Facilitating the retreat is approached with care, but also with a degree of informality that helps create trust among the attendees. Again, within the writing cohort, this helps build a community of practice, but it also creates opportunities for sharing knowledge, and providing informal mentoring to a new generation of researcher librarians.

Much of the work of the retreat cannot easily be translated into either online or asynchronous modes of work. Online collaboration in real-time (over Zoom, for example) would be a possibility for the workshopping element and is something worth exploring, but the retreat benefits greatly from being held in-person, in a neutral or even exceptional environment away from the workplace.

For researchers interested in replicating the writing retreat, resources are available to assist in the effort^{7,8}. Tying the retreat to an existing conference has been helpful in cohort-building. When coordinated by a research committee within a larger organization, the writing retreat capitalizes on relationships that already exist. Having a retreat as part of an annual meeting lends credibility. For library leadership with tight budgets, adding an extra day or two for professional development can be a relatively minor expense against the overall cost of travel. State conferences, regional conferences, or chapter meetings would have natural advantages in terms of size and cost over national or international gatherings. Researchers wanting to develop writing retreats of their own should consider these factors as they can help create the kind of “critical

mass” that helps an event become a regular, even routine, part of a larger organization. But having researchers who are invested in leading such an effort facilitating the retreats would help cultivate a successful outcome.

Future Steps and Conclusion

Another assessment of the SCC/MLA Writing Retreat, one that follows up on the article from 2017¹ but is expanded to include the total number of retreats, is an obvious next step and one the author plans to pursue. Developing or adapting the best assessment tool to fully document the extent of the influence the retreat has had would be a crucial step.

The author is also considering building a toolkit for researchers who are looking into replicating the retreat in other forums. Although there are many articles and much research devoted to writing activities and retreats in particular, a blueprint for developing a similar kind of writing retreat could help accelerate the process while providing practical advice and tools for success.

Even informally, though, the SCC/MLA Writing Retreat continues to build a cohort of researchers within the South Central Chapter. It provides a framework for supporting the scholarly activity of researcher librarians at all stages of career development. It creates an environment for informal mentoring and advice-sharing between experienced researchers and novices, as well as peer-to-peer. And it helps cultivate the next generation of library professionals as researchers, writers, peer reviewers, and editors, assuring the continuation of the scholarly enterprise among academic and medical librarians.

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