

Baillie Gifford Writing Partnerships Programme: Writing events philosophy

The Baillie Gifford Writing Partnerships offers writing support to graduates and postdocs in the Humanities at Oxford, by facilitating writing partnerships for independent-but-together writing, and by offering group writing events. Over the last 12 months the events offered have included writing bootcamps (half- or full-day) and writing breakfasts, with a variety of non-writing elements (e.g. admin sessions, computer-housekeeping sessions, creative-thinking guidance, work-in-progress surgeries). If you're taking part in the Programme this year, you may be interested in taking part in this kind of event. The purpose of this document is to give you with the information you need to decide whether a writing event is likely to be useful to you, and to make it maximally useful to you if you do decide to attend.

There are many ways in which a group setting can be helpful to writerly practice. Many alternative formats for the Writing Partnerships Programme writing events could therefore have been chosen, but equally, none of the decisions which have fed into the design of these events has been arbitrary. All of them are grounded in extensive exploration of why people succeed or fail in making time to write, succeed or fail in focusing when they do make time, and feel good or bad about their writing however much they do. As Programme Coordinator, I have tested out, in varied contexts, methods for helping people change habits that aren't working, however long and deeply they're ingrained. The insights I draw on come in part from formal feedback given by participants in writing events and writing partnerships, and partly from my own observations of and research on the distinctive stressors, constraints, and opportunities of humanities research environments – and on the processes of habit formation and behaviour change more broadly.

Please read this document carefully before booking a place at any of this year's writing events. Understand that by making a booking, you are confirming that you have read it and agree to be bound by the principles set out here.

1. Writing groups don't have to have leaders. They can also be democratic entities in which the social contract is created by all members. There are pros and cons to both. The writing bootcamps, breakfasts, and afternoons provided as part of this Programme have a leader who communicates the rules of participation, explains them, and enforces them. She does so because she believes that abiding by the rules will be beneficial for participants' writing practice. She is also always open to discussion of the rules and to potential adjustment of them, but adjustments have to be agreed (either before or during an event), not assumed to be permitted.
2. Whether they're created top-down or bottom-up, all successful groups have rules of some kind. The rules for these particular events are (unless otherwise stated):
 - 1) Cancel your place at least 48 hours before the start of the event if you find you can no longer attend, if at all possible. (Catering orders have to be finalised at least 48 hours in advance, and these events are usually oversubscribed, so don't waste food or a place.)
 - 2) Arrive punctually for all sessions, and stay until the end of the event. (If you arrive late at the start of an event, you may be asked to wait outside until it's possible for you to join with less disruption.)

- 3) Relinquish your phone for the entirety of all sessions and breaks, or leave it elsewhere. (An emergency contact number can be provided; please say if you need it.)
- 4) Don't use social media during the sessions.
- 5) Use email only during an admin session and only if your session plan explicitly involves using it.
- 6) Use the internet only as strictly necessary for your writing. (Ideally switch off wifi for the duration.)
- 7) Write in writing sessions, and don't try to carry on writing in other sessions (e.g. group discussions, admin sessions, etc.).
- 8) Obey your session leader in all things.
- 9) Say something if obeying the session leader feels hard, impossible, or nonsensical.)

One purpose of all these rules is to create a temporary but close-knit community of focused writers. You may find some aspects of writing alongside other people difficult, but there's also a reliable power that comes from being in a room full of other people who have the same basic aim as you. That power of shared focus and commitment is weakened as soon as one person treats the rules as optional. The other purpose of the rules is to free your mind from standard distractions so that you can write better. This freedom too may feel deeply uncomfortable. If the contrast between this way of working and your usual way is particularly strong (for example, if your addiction to digital connectivity is particularly severe), you may not find that abstinence helps you write better, because you may not reach the end of the withdrawal phase before the event ends. In that case, we encourage you to consider attending again, or practising the relevant difficult habit in your everyday routines, especially your meet-ups with your writing partner, so that you can cultivate your own ability to write undistractedly.

3. Good-natured enforcement is not an easy job. Your session leader will, however, attempt it. She may do so by, for example, asking latecomers to wait outside until a point in the event when they can enter with minimal disturbance, or by refusing them entrance altogether; by pressing you to articulate a writing goal more clearly; by looking now and then at what's on your screen and asking you to remove anything from it that shouldn't be there (e.g. a WhatsApp window); by asking you to give her your phone if you keep it, or to close your laptop at the end of a writing session so we can all focus on the stretching and mind-clearing. Keep in mind the whole point is to help you write better, in a way you may struggle to do on your own.
4. The best way of enforcing rules is to make people able and keen to abide by them. Your session leader is always available to talk, in private (by stepping outside, or going to another room), about any difficulties you're having or changes you would like to make. Sometimes we may have to agree that the only option is for you to leave the event, but if so, there will always be the option to meet for a chat afterwards to discuss alternative ways of supporting and developing your writing practice. Beyond the rules, the rest of the events' structure has been carefully designed to make it easier for you to follow the rules and to benefit from them: nice food and drink, stretching sequences and short meditations, outdoor breaks,

inspirational quotes for your desk and books to browse, assigned seating and a time-keeping bell – all these things are intended to make learning new habits easier by making it a more pleasurable departure from your norm.

5. A final way of framing the point of all the rules is that they free you temporarily from the burden of choice, so that you can devote your full mental energies to the writing itself. Everything else is out of your hands. That may be daunting or frustrating at times, but it is also a luxury.

Please write to the Programme Coordinator, emily.troscianko@humanities.ox.ac.uk, if you have any questions or observations. She'll be happy to discuss anything you'd like to raise.