

QUICK Guide sheet for RiverWords Sessions*

RiverWords sessions are an alternative to the “normal” writing group process. Designed more to help the writer grow in their work than to correct errors, this process should be used when any (or all) of your writing group members are feeling that they are not getting everything they need.

FIRST

For these sessions to work, you **must** all accept the basic assumption that each writer knows, within themselves, what is the best course for their writing, and that this knowledge can be revealed through answering open and honest questions.

AHEAD OF THE SESSION

1. Find a space to hold the meeting that is comfortable and confidential. If meeting in a private home, ensure that others will be absent, there will not be comings and goings, and that pets are away from the meeting area, phones turned off, and a do not disturb on the door. If meeting in a public meeting area, be sure it can be closed off to traffic and that those who own the space understand the confidentiality restriction, that bathrooms are available nearby, and that the space is both large enough and comfortable.
2. Members of the group (not the writer bringing questions, should:
 - a. Review open honest questions, consult websites, and/or read Parker Plamer’s book “A Hidden Wholeness” to discover the “musts” for OHQs. Remember: open, honest questions are NOT to satisfy your curiosity, they are NOT yes/no questions. They do not offer advice or strategies or editing - they are designed to help the writer explore her **own** answers, within herself.
 - b. Spend some time clearing your head of everything you know about the writer and their writing - prepare to *just* focus on what is said in the meeting, without preconceived notions
 - c. Read the statement provided by the author - very carefully.
 - d. IF the author has given a piece of writing to members ahead of time, decide whether reading it would help you to ask good questions, or whether it might predispose you to certain opinions.
3. The “focus writer” - the writer who has a problem to bring to the group, should:
 - a. Identify your problem as clearly as you can, and write a statement for your group that you are ready to give to them **at least** one week prior to the meeting. Make it as brief as possible - a page or less. It can be as simple as “I don’t feel that I am doing the right kind of writing for me.”

- b. Decide whether or not you will make notes for yourself to take to the meeting, and prepare to give a verbal opening which summarizes your problem before the questions begin. Again, it can be as simple as a single sentence.
 - c. Decide whether or not you want to give the group a specific piece of writing ahead of time. If so, you should provide it to them at the same time that you provide your statement.
4. All members should **practice** open honest questions in at least three “mock” sessions prior to the real one - recommended that you use a fictional writer, fictional problem, and a piece of writing written by someone not in the group for this practice.

AT THE MEETING - THE PROCESS, WHICH IS THE RULES

RULES FOR RIVERWORDS SESSIONS

1. All aspects -- *all aspects* -- of the meeting are entirely confidential. You may never, outside of the meeting, discuss any words, advice, questions, answers, or readings encountered during the meeting, unless given permission by the author who is the focus. These meetings should enjoy what we call “double-confidentiality” - not only do you never discuss **anything** from these meetings with someone who was not there, you *do not even discuss it with those who were there*.
2. The author prepares (either in writing or mentally) a statement of what their problem is with the current piece they are writing. In preparation of this, think also of what hunches you have about the solution, what resistance you feel, what you think could/should happen next.
3. The meeting lasts for two hours, with a single author as focus, a facilitator who runs the meeting, and a recorder who jots down questions and answers to give to the focus person later.
4. Begin the meeting with a time of silence, allowing the author who is the object of the meeting to focus and clarify mentally. The author speaks to begin the meeting whenever they are fully ready to begin. Others should remain silent until then.
5. The author states what the problem is, what the challenge is, and the hunches they have. When the author is done, others may speak, but **ONLY** to ask questions - **NO ADVICE GIVING. NO SUGGESTIONS. NO OBSERVATIONS.** The only speaking allowed among the group are **OPEN, HONEST QUESTIONS.**
6. What is an “Open, Honest Question?” The best way to define an open honest question is that it is the type of question that the asker could not **POSSIBLY** know the answer to, and no answer is implied by the question itself. (Guidesheet for open honest question practice in the next chapter). The **GOAL** of these questions is to help lead the author to **FIND THE ANSWER IN THEMSELVES.** An open, honest, question is brief and to the point. It is not leading. It does not

imply that you know the answer. You don't. You need to help the author find the answer they already know.

7. The author can respond to questions or decide to pass. If the author takes time to respond, WAIT - DO NOT PROD THE AUTHOR.
8. The questions should NEVER become grilling, or rapid-fire. Respect the author's space and trust the silence needed to get to the right answer.
9. During the course of the meeting, it is the job of others ONLY to ask questions, and to remain completely focused on the author. If there are silences while the author thinks, waits for the next question, everyone should remain focused on that author - no joking or side conversations or fidgeting. If any of these protocols are broken, it is the job of the facilitator to remind all of the rules and get the meeting back on track.
10. The meeting should go the full allotted time - DO NOT QUIT because you think you've "run out of questions" -- dig deeper.
11. Once the questioning is completed, the facilitator should allow 10-20 minutes for the group to feedback to the author *what they've heard her/him say*. This is NOT a time for members to 'sneak in' their advice - the goal is to let the author hear *what you heard her say*. Do not use it as a time to 'direct' or 'advise' the writer - mirror-back to her the words **she said** that really stand out for you. This, also, will take some practice.

At the end of the meeting, the recorder should give all notes to the author. If it moves you, it's traditional to thank the members of the group. The facilitator should also remind the group of the confidentiality rules and the necessity for keeping that confidentiality.

I have taught more than 100 courses in writing at many levels, and, after spending several years in training for Clearness Committees and this specific form of questioning, adapted the techniques for my college writing classes. The results were profound - not only a notable increase in the quality of student writing, but in their skill at collaboration, their ability to analyze and reflect, and a strong increase in enthusiasm. I hope your writing group finds it equally beneficial.

* This guide sheet is provided for free, so feel free to share it widely, as I have not copyrighted it, nor do I intend to. If you want more information on how to do RiverWords, you can consider purchasing the full book, **A River of Words**, which includes more detailed information on every aspect of the practice, as well as dozens of practice worksheets, planning sheets, etc., available on Amazon at : [A River of Words](#)

CAUTION: While the process from which RiverWords sessions are built is used by some communities to solve personal problems, conflicts, and emotional issues, those

groups have considerable training in and experience with the technique for those purposes. The techniques, as outlined here and in the book should ***never*** be used by anyone without such extensive training for purposes other than writing groups.

For Further Reading

Palmer, Parker. *A Hidden Wholeness* (Pages 132-138)

<https://www.fgcquaker.org/resources/clearness-committees-what-they-are-and-what-they-do>

<http://quakerspeak.com/serve-quaker-clearness-committee/>

Other Works by J. McKenzie

SCIENCE/SPECULATIVE FICTION:

[The Map of Faith, Weaver's Book 2](#)

[Somewhere Never Traveled, Weaver's Book 1](#)

[The Heretic's Song](#) (Young Adult)

GENERAL FICTION:

[The Hapless Life of Samuel Joseph](#)

[The Locus of Memory](#)

[Two Mothers Speak](#)

NONFICTION:

Personal Actions for Peace

Foundational Mathematics

On Your Way: A Guide for Single Student Parents

