

The Writers Room Toolkit

by Donna Brodie and Ann Banks

There is no one way to create a writers' room, but for those looking for some guidance, we have put together this toolkit encompassing our 37 years of experience at the The Writers Room in New York City. While these guidelines won't apply to every situation, our hope is that they will provide a starting point for those who need it.

Concept. First and foremost, define your concept. Do you envision a writing space that is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week? Library hours or business hours, 9-5? Just evenings and weekends?

What is your constituency? Full-time or part-time writers, or both? Will you be open to all genres? At The Writers Room, we welcome novelists, screenwriters, poets, playwrights, journalists, biographers, memoirists, historians, librettists, graphic novelists, young adult and children's book writers, and bloggers without prejudice or work sample. At the same time, we do not serve graphic artists, musicians, dotcom entrepreneurs or others who may be looking for a co-working space. When they ask about membership in The Writers Room, we refer them to other shared work spaces around New York.

Location. How will people get to your writers' room? Are you in a city, a town, a suburb? Centrally located or in an eccentric spot? What about parking? Public transportation?

Security. How will you ensure the personal security of members and safeguard their belongings? Before we moved to a building with a front desk in the lobby, we

rented space in commercial buildings that were locked to the public--only tenants could gain admission with a key or code. If that is the case for you, you will have to find a landlord that understands that your writers are not employees but members of your organization and will have access to the workspace beyond nine to five, if that's your plan. Some landlords will balk; others will be happy to have you.

Operations. You're not just renting a space, you're starting a business. Do you mean yours to be for-profit or not-for-profit? Learn the difference: being not-for-profit may provide supplemental income, as donations to your room will be tax-deductible. If you're in a state or city that has a generous budget for the arts and not much competition for those funds, non-profit may be the way to go. With that status, however, comes the burden of many filings, and if you intend your writers' room to be small, this may hamper you. For example, you'll need to have your financial statements audited each year, which costs upward of \$5,000. Money from grants, meanwhile, comes with lots of paperwork, before, during and after the grant period. You'll need to hire a writer who can write grant proposals.

Non-profit does not mean no profit: much like any other business, you must close your books every year with a net gain, or you're losing money and will eventually become defunct. The difference between non-profit and for-profit is how you handle your money at the end of the year. In the case of a for-profit writers' room, any profit you have after taxes is yours to use as you like. In the case of non-profit, any net gain must remain in your operating account, be deposited in a reserve or be spent on purchases and services for your writers' room.

Rental Space. Start by renting a small room at a rent you can afford. You'll have an idea of what you can afford based on the number of writers who will sign on at the very beginning. Read the lease carefully. Then read it again—commercial leases always involve hidden costs. If possible, get a real estate lawyer to review the lease with you. Measure the space. Don't take a broker's or landlord's word on how many square feet your writers' room is, as "square feet" is a flexible term depending on what city you live in. It's all a negotiation with the landlord until you sign the lease. After that you'll be locked into those terms for the next 5 to 10 years.

Furnishings. Desks, chairs, lamps. Those are the basics. Ideally uniform. If they're not uniform, people will vie for "their" desk. This can create disharmony among members. It's not a fatal condition, but everything you can do to build harmony from the outset works to the advantage of your members. You will need adequate lighting that does not throw glare on computer screens. If there is room for a couple of comfortable sofas or easy chairs, bring them in: they are good spots for thinking (or dozing). At The Writers Room, we even have a nap room for when fatigue threatens to overwhelm.

Flooring. Any surface is fine, although carpeting provides the most quiet and muffles ambient noise. If you plan to carpet your space, consider using carpet squares so if there is a spill you don't have to replace the whole carpet. The Writers Room laid carpet tiles in its workspace more than seven years ago and because of proper care and annual cleaning, the floor coverings still look new.

Utilities. Heating, cooling and other basics. The lease should provide for adequate heat supplied by the landlord for the cold months. Yet a commercial building is not

legally required to supply heat on evenings and weekends, so think about how you can warm your space when the heat is off.

Throughout the year, you will need to arrange for good ventilation, and you will need air conditioning in the hot summer months. This can increase your electrical costs significantly.

Of course there will need to be electrical outlets within reach of all desks. The NYC Writers Room has wifi as well as free member access to LexisNexis and other research databases. This is a luxury, but is much appreciated by the members. Consider Americans with Disabilities Act standards if you want to be accessible to writers with disabilities. If you wish to receive government grants, it will be mandatory to provide a workspace in accord with ADA standards. This means you will have to be on the ground floor or in a space with an elevator.

Governance. At The Writers Room, we are governed by a board of directors whose members must be writers. This was established in our charter and has not been revised. Should your board members also be members of your writers' room? On our board, we have had plenty of hyphenates—writer-fundraisers, writer-philanthropists, writer-lawyers, writer-marketers and so on. Most of the board members have been Writers Room members as well.

Staffing. At first you may not be able to afford to hire staff. But keep in mind that if you, the founder, are also running the space, you won't have much time for writing, defeating the purpose of opening your own space. The solution, if you can manage it, is to budget money for a part-time manager in the beginning.

As your writers' room takes off, you will finesse the staffing question according to the needs of your members and your resources. We believe that the longevity of The Writers Room, operating without cease since 1978, is due to the fact that it was writers themselves who saw the need and filled it.

Calculate all of your costs. Rent, salary, electricity, supplies for your office, supplies for your members, repairs, insurance, consultant fees, accounting fees, employer taxes, marketing, website maintenance—these are the majority of the expenses you'll encounter, but there will be others, some ongoing, some one-time. For example, if you incorporate as business, whether for-profit or non-profit, you will have one-time incorporating expenses of a few thousand dollars.

Qualifying Membership. You don't have to be published to join The Writers Room. Our stated criterion for membership is "seriousness of intent." In the case of those who aren't published, they can supply references from writing instructors, writing workshop colleagues and writer friends.

Member fees. If you are a non-profit, then a healthy income flow, like that of The Writers Room, derives 75% from membership income and 25% from donations. It's unwise to rely on donations for too much of your budget as the funding climate changes all the time.

If you are for-profit, divide your expenses by the number of members you expect to attract. As a rule of thumb, if your expenses for the year total \$100,000 and you think you'll serve 100 members a month, you'll probably have to charge \$100 a month to break even. (To earn additional income, you can offer locked storage units for members' laptops and materials.)

Serving 100 members doesn't mean that you need 100 desks. At The Writers Room, we have found that an 8:1 member-to-desk ratio is right for us. Since writers work at different hours and we are open 24 hours there is always a desk available—except briefly during New Year's resolution time! We have also experimented with having a few private offices for which we charge a higher rent but have found that having desks with rotating users works better for us, both financially and for creating community.

How your members will pay, and how often, need to be decided taking into account seasonal demand. You can set a higher rent for month-to-month members than for members who pay quarterly. Make sure you're not stuck with an empty room—and empty coffers—in the summer. Do you need to provide ancillary programs like readings? Probably not if you are in a big city, but maybe so if you are an island of literary culture in a smaller town.

Quality of life. Certain universals apply to creating a sanctuary for thinking and writing. The most important of these is silence. Create a cell phone policy and stick to it. At The Writers Room, we request that phones be turned completely OFF. A vibrating device can be nearly as annoying as a ringing one, especially when its owner leaps up and runs for the door to answer it. At The Writers Room we have a niche separate from the silent writing sanctuary where members may make outgoing calls.

No smells. Chinese food is not the writer's nourishment it once was, and the wafting of aromas in your workspace is to be avoided as it maddens others. Also the rustling of potato chip bags, the slurping of soup and the like violate the silence rule. Beverages are fine.

Talking should be confined to your lounge if you have space for one. The Writers Room has tried various solutions and has settled on a kitchen-lounge for relaxing and meeting other members. We supply tea, pretzels and milk. Members are free to bring their own daily supplies and keep them in the refrigerator.

Marketing. We have tried various methods from postcards to National Public Radio ads. We've found that by far the best marketing tool is word of mouth. Writers telling other writers about you is the greatest testimony to the value of your writers' room. That said, we have a Twitter feed (@WritersRoomInc) and a Facebook page (facebook.com/WritersRoomInc) that we keep current with announcements of members' readings, etc. You will certainly need a website, though it can be very simple in the beginning. www.writersroom.org.

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