

Baillie Gifford Writing Partnerships Programme: Writing events philosophy for online events

The Baillie Gifford Writing Partnerships Programme 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. The events offered include writing mornings and afternoons, writing sprints, and a variety of events oriented towards longer-term writing (and life) planning, all comprising timed writing sessions with a range of additional elements to support your academic writing. If you're a participant 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. This version of the document is tailored specifically to the online-only events being run during Michaelmas Term 2020.

A group setting can be helpful to writerly practice in many ways. 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're getting done. As programme coordinator, I have tested out many methods for helping people change habits that aren't working, even when those habits are deeply ingrained. The insights I draw on come in part from feedback given by participants in writing events and writing partnerships, and partly from my own observations of the distinctive stressors, constraints, and opportunities of humanities research environments—as well as my wider professional expertise in academic writing, behaviour change, and mental and physical health more broadly. This term's events are designed in acknowledgement of the COVID-19 pandemic, to help you sustain your writing practice in ways that accept our changed reality without letting it derail your entire life.

Please read this document carefully before booking a place on any of this term's virtual 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 events provided as part of this programme have a leader who communicates the rules of participation, explains them, and enforces them. I do so because I believe that abiding by the rules will be beneficial for your writing practice. I am also always open to discussion of the rules and to potential adjustment of them—indeed, some of the current rules have arisen out of comments and suggestions from past participants—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 on a specific event booking page) set out below. Many of them are centred on the simple

attempt to reduce the distractions that give us excuses not to write. We know that in a home-working environment not all distractions can be eliminated, but practising the skills of 1) eliminating the distractions that can be eliminated and 2) refocusing after disruption is crucial to sustaining meaningful personal activity during a troubled time.

Virtual writing event rules:

- 1) All our writing events will be run via Zoom. All events will also involve committing to time away from your phone, so you're encouraged to use the desktop rather than the mobile app if possible. Since some event functionality depends on having the desktop/mobile app installed rather than joining direct from your browser, ensure you've downloaded and installed it before the start.
- 2) If you find you can no longer attend, cancel your place at least 48 hours before the start of the event if at all possible. If you don't turn up and don't cancel your place twice during the term (emergencies excepted), you will be unable to book onto writing events for the rest of term.
- 3) Arrive punctually for all sessions, and stay until the end of the event. All events will use Zoom's waiting room function. If you arrive late please email me (emily.troscianko@humanities.ox.ac.uk) to notify me that you have arrived, and to explain why you're late. I will then either admit you to the event from the waiting room, or email you to explain why not (e.g. if you are so late that you have missed material crucial to participating fully in the event). If you arrive late twice during the term (emergencies excepted), you may be unable to book onto writing events for the rest of term.
- 4) If you are unavoidably called away from your desk, return to it as soon as you're able to.
- 5) Be ready to switch your mobile phone off or on airplane mode for the entirety of all sessions and breaks, and ideally to place it somewhere out of sight. Time will be made at the start of each event for you to do this. (We understand that COVID brings uncertainty and that being uncontactable may be a source of anxiety; we also know that having uncontactable times is therefore all the more crucial for us all at the moment.) If you need to use your phone for the Zoom call, and/or need to be contactable in case of emergency, please tell me in advance.
- 6) Switch off all pop-ups and other notifications from email and social media apps during the sessions. Don't use social media at all during the sessions, and use email only during an admin session (if applicable), and only if your plan for the session explicitly involves using it.
- 7) Use the internet only as strictly necessary for your writing. Closing your usual browser is recommended.
- 8) Write in writing sessions, and don't try to carry on writing in other sessions (e.g. during breaks, group discussions, breakout rooms, admin sessions, etc.).
- 9) Obey your session leader in all things.
- 10) If obeying the session leader feels hard, impossible, or nonsensical, say something (e.g. via a private message in the chat bar, or by asking to open a breakout room to talk in private).

- 11) Be respectful and understanding of others' perspectives and their difficulties known and unknown, in your words and your actions.

One purpose of all these rules is to create a temporary but close-knit community of focused writers. Seeing other people on screen writing while you write will never replicate everything about being in a room writing alongside them, but it can nonetheless feel very different from not seeing or interacting with anyone else. There's a reliable power that comes from sharing time with 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, so remember that your focus and commitment help sustain everyone else's. As noted above, much of what these events are designed to do is to free your mind from standard distractions so that you can write better. This freedom may feel deeply uncomfortable, especially if the global health crisis has made you more distracted than usual. 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 at the moment), you may not find that abstinence instantly 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, and/or to practise 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. Your time, patience, and determination will be well rewarded.

3. Good-natured enforcement is not an easy job. As your session leader I will, however, attempt it. I may do so by, for example, asking you to wait in the virtual waiting room if you arrive late, until a point in the event when you can enter with less disturbance, or by refusing you entrance altogether; by pressing you to articulate a writing goal more clearly; or by asking you to stop using your phone or to stop writing at the end of a writing session so we can all focus on the stretching and mind-clearing. Keep in mind that the point of all of this 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. I am always available to talk (by scheduling a video call before the event, or via private text chat during the event) 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 arrange a video call afterwards to discuss alternative ways of supporting and developing your writing practice. Beyond the rules, the rest of the events' structure has been designed to make it easier for you to follow the rules and to benefit from them: writing-related exercises, stretching sequences and short meditations, designated break times, a time-keeping bell – all these things are intended to make learning new habits easier by making it an at least partially pleasurable departure from your norm.
5. A final way of framing the point of all the rules and structures 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 focusing on just one thing is also a luxury.

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

**Emily Troscianko, Baillie Gifford Writing Partnerships Programme Coordinator
Oxford, October 2020**