Although we may often write in isolation, writing is a deeply social act—it’s about participating in conversations within and across diverse communities to get work done, to solve problems, to achieve goals, to make decisions, and to create knowledge. As we write, we can’t help but think about what others have said and what they might say. As Michael Bakhtin (1984) put it, “Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth” (p. 293). Every statement we make, Bakhtin (1986) says, "refutes, affirms, supplements, and relies on the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account" (p. 91). Because of this social and dialogic nature of writing, writing groups can play a central role in developing confident writers.

In fact, most experienced writers consider the art of soliciting and providing constructive feedback one of the most important practices a writer must develop. Experienced writers are well aware that writing is a rhetorical design process—one that starts with rough ideas, rough notes, and drafts, involves colleagues and friends to talk through ideas, and then succeeds through continual shaping of ideas and crafting of prose. Importantly, with a view of writing as a rhetorical process, writing groups are also about supporting each other in locating one’s work in the particular collective endeavours in which a piece of writing participates (e.g., a collective knowledge-making enterprise within or across discipline, the activity of reflecting on and improving pedagogical practices at a school, etc.). Accordingly, some of the most important tasks writing groups have is for writers to talk through their rhetorical situation—what kinds of readers they would like to reach, what purpose they might pursue, how that purpose is valued in a given setting, what resistance they might encounter to their arguments or knowledge claims, how they are aligning themselves with others in the activities in which they participate, what genre constraints they might need to navigate, and so on.

From a rhetorical perspective, then, writing groups are not about criticism and not about hunting for errors on the page—indeed, even attention to what is sometimes perceived as mere mechanics (e.g. punctuation and sentence structure) become a matter of deciding what to emphasize for your readers, given your rhetorical purpose—that is what you’d like to accomplish with your piece. Instead, writing groups are rather about helping group members develop as writers—that is locate themselves and their writing within an ongoing conversation or set of activities in a communal endeavour and shape their contribution to that endeavour. In this sense, the goal of a writing group is to inspire deeper insights into our activities and locations as writers and thoughtful revisions.

To help you get the most out of your writing group, this handout provides you with a brief overview of what writing groups can do for you and your group members, when to use writing groups, how to go about the two key tasks involved in writing groups—soliciting and providing constructive feedback, how to proceed, and what to do with the feedback you receive.

The benefits of writing groups
Writing groups have many benefits. For example, they can help you do the following:

Get a fresh set of eyes on your work and test drive your draft
When we write a paper on a given topic, we usually have much more in our mind about this topic than we could or should offer to our readers. As a result, when we read our own paper, we automatically fill in the gaps in our paper and interpret our writing according to our intentions, so that ideas seem logically connected. However, because our readers do not share our thought processes, the logical connections between our ideas are less apparent for them unless we have carefully crafted these links in ways that make sense to them and helped our readers navigate our text. While many writers find it helpful to set the
paper aside for a while and reread it later, nothing replaces a fresh set of eyes and reader response. A colleague, for example, might report a reading of our paper that is very different from what we had intended, or they might point to a section where they find it difficult to follow the relationship between ideas. In this way, that colleague might inspire us to reconsider those sections for our readers.

Learn more about your own writing strategies and those of others
Writing is not a smooth process; rather, most of the time, writers encounter roadblocks, struggle with decisions about how to situate their work, how to focus, how to shape their argument, and so on. However, with time, writers develop strategies and processes for dealing with these challenges. By sharing them in a writing group, you become more aware of your own strategies and processes, and you also learn from others about theirs.

Receive feedback and generate ideas for your revisions
Good feedback in writing groups can help you not only experience reader responses to your drafts, but also generate new ideas for revising and sharpening your draft. By talking through your writing with your colleagues, you can involve them in problem solving and in thinking about your draft and the readers you wish to reach. Often, you an good listener can help you articulate your thinking and generate new ideas and perspectives for your writing.

Learn from analyzing your colleagues’ writing
Not just receiving feedback, but also providing feedback is a valuable learning experience. Analyzing someone else’s writing, their ways of engaging readers, of achieving a purpose, or of positioning their work in a research community can strengthen your sense of both reading and writing. The questions you might generate for your colleague to consider can strengthen your own rhetorical awareness of writing as a way of being, knowing, and interacting in a communal endeavor. Usually, analyzing a paper and responding to it is easier than writing one, so that even beginning writers are often very good at providing feedback, from which they themselves also learn a lot about writing.

Set a structure to help you achieve your goals
Writing groups can also be designed to help members set realistic goals and achieve them by providing a structure and timeline for drafting and commenting. They can help you be accountable not only to yourself, but also to your group.

When to use writing groups
Writing groups can help writers develop their drafts at any stage of the process. For example, a writing group can help writers generate, brainstorm, and talk through ideas in the early phases of developing a paper; clarify their audience and purpose and situate their work; shape the organization and structure of the paper; discuss the ideas presented in the paper; or edit for grammar and style. As a group, however, you may want to articulate the kinds of things you’d want to the group to do.

The art of soliciting constructive feedback
Sometimes writers are disappointed in the feedback they receive and find it less helpful than they had hoped. Part of the challenge here is developing effective ways of inviting useful feedback—the kind of feedback that helps you see your draft in new ways, so you can revise and shape your draft. To receive useful feedback, you will need to help your colleague understand what you are writing, what you are trying to accomplish, what your rhetorical situation is, and what kind of feedback you are looking for.

1) Articulating your rhetorical (writing) situation
What are you writing? Whom are you trying to reach? How will your readers likely respond to your paper? How likely will your readers be to accept or question your claims? For example, is your research located within an accepted research paradigm, or are you arguing for a paradigm shift? What is your purpose for writing? Why are you writing this piece? What’s the exigence?

2) Articulating your concerns and questions
Your colleagues need to know what kind of feedback in particular you are looking for and how you would like them to read your paper. For this purpose, you’ll need to become more aware of the kinds of questions that you were struggling with, identify sections or approaches you don’t feel quite comfortable with, and so on. Here are some examples of questions you might ask:

- What sense did you get of what I am doing in this paper, what my purpose is, what I am arguing, and why this is an important contribution to the field?
- I am writing an article for an encyclopaedia, so it needs to be easy to understand for high-school students, and it needs to treat diverse perspectives of the issue equally. Could you please point out words, sentences, sections, or ideas that might be too complicated or specific for such a general audience? I am also personally more biased toward x. Could you let me know if alternative perspectives to mine are still treated fairly?
- What do you understand as my main point in the paper?
- Did you as a reader always feel well prepared for what was to come next, or did you encounter sections or sentences that came as a surprise?
- Does this argument seem compelling? Do you think I have enough evidence here?
- What assumptions do you think I make about my readers here?
- I couldn’t decide if I should place this point here or elsewhere. Where would it best fit into the flow of the argument for you? Why?
- I need to cut 500 words. Given my purpose of “x”, what do you think is least conducive to that purpose and could be cut?
- Is there anything that seems needlessly repeated—that I could cut out?
- Did you come across terms or concepts that might need definitions, clarifications, or examples?
- Do any sections look as if they stray from my main purpose?
- When you read the introduction, what did you expect as a reader? What did you expect the paper to be about? How did you expect it to be organized?
- Does the conclusion result logically from the paper? Does it answer the question set out at the beginning? Does it drive home the point about the significance and application of the research or about specific open questions for future research?

3) Listening Well
When you receive feedback, listen well and ask for clarification or for specific examples from your colleagues. Take notes on their comments, but do not defend your writing. Instead be attentive to the response of your readers. Take what you can get to inspire new ways of thinking about your writing.

To be sure, as the writer, you will need to develop a good rhetorical understanding of where your colleagues are situated—how familiar they may be with the particular readers you are trying to reach and with the community in which this piece of writing is trying to participate. Ultimately, as the writer, you will still make the final decision about your paper in the end because it is your contribution and therefore your responsibility and privilege.

Do talk about your writing, though, when your colleagues are done giving feedback. Talking about your work can help you generate, shape, and clarify ideas in your draft.

The art of providing constructive feedback
The way you provide feedback can make the difference between a writer who comes away feeling inadequate and stifled and one who is excited about his or her new ideas and can’t wait to get back to the paper and to revise it. We have probably all seen feedback of the stifling kind: “unclear,” “awkward,” only a question mark, or even crossed-out sections or rewritten passages without explanations. These kinds of comments often remove the last bit of control the writer had over the text. From a rhetorical perspective, they are not particularly helpful, either, because they don’t help the writer think about the readers they wish to reach, the purpose they might pursue, and the ways in which their writing is situated in communally shaped expectations and practices.
In contrast, the exciting kind of feedback is based on authentic engagement and dialogue with the writer. The best feedback we can provide is that of a reader sharing our reading experience with the writer but leaving the writer in control. Such feedback avoids judgment and does not tell the writer what to do, but reports our reader response and asks questions that help the writer reconsider her or his readers’ concerns and expectations and take the next step, for example by exploring something further that seemed promising or clarifying something that we had difficulties understanding. The goal is to get the writer thinking and talking about their writing, their readers, their goals, etc. We call this kind of feedback reader-response or dialogic feedback.

How can you provide such feedback? To provide constructive feedback, you will need to consider both what to say and how to say it:

Suggestions for what to say
1) Before reading, be sure to understand the purpose, readers, controlling question/ focus, and rationale of the paper you are reviewing. Ask as many questions as you need in order to understand what the writer is trying to accomplish with their paper, for whom, and why.
2) Ask the writer to articulate the kind of feedback that would be most helpful to them. In this way, you help them think about and take control of their writing. With a little encouragement, writers can often pinpoint where they might have felt uncomfortable or unsure when writing the draft.
3) Articulate your response as a reader, e.g., what you understood was the controlling question and what the important points were. Let the writer know which points caught your attention and seemed particularly interesting and might perhaps be worth exploring for the intended readers as well. Your report can help the writer compare what comes across as most important versus what the writer had in mind as most important.
4) Articulate for the writer what you did not understand, where you got stuck, where you did not understand how ideas were linked, where you could not decide which of two or more meanings were intended, where you would have found an example helpful, etc.
5) Ask questions that inspire the writer to think about their readers, purpose, controlling question, rationale, argument, organization, etc. and to take the next steps towards revising the draft.

Here are some examples of questions you might ask the writer:

- Here, I did not have a good sense of where we were going and why we were going there. What was your rationale for addressing these particular concerns rather than others.
- Is the controlling idea in this paragraph “x” or “y”?
- Are “x” and “y” related ideas or are they separate?
- How is “x” related to “y”? Is it a cause for “y”, a consequence?
- Did we discuss “x” earlier in the paper? Or is this something different?
- When I read this section, I didn’t know what “x” was? Would your readers know?
- How do you know this? Did someone discover or find this? (might need a citation)
- You are using the word “x” here. I have seen the word used differently—to mean “y”. Is this the use you intend? Or do your readers have a well understood shared understanding of the term?
- I was not sure what “x” was? I felt an example would have been really helpful here. Would your readers need one, too?
- When I read the introduction, I expected to read about “x,” “y,” and “z”. However, further on, I encountered “a,” “b,” and “c.” How are these points related?

Suggestions for how to say it
How you convey your feedback makes all the difference. You can make the same comment in a very destructive way (e.g., “this does not make sense”) or in a very constructive, generous, and generative way that helps the writer reconsider and develop their work (e.g., “From reading the first paragraph, I got the sense that this paragraph here may be particularly important, but I can’t quite tell if you mean x or y here and what the connection is between this section and the previous section). Rather than an unhelpful judgment, a constructive comment helps the writer understand how their prose may come across and how
to generate new ways of shaping it more in line with their intention.

- **Begin with positive impressions.** Begin by pointing out the parts or aspects of the paper that are particularly intriguing, worth exploring further, clear, straightforward, well organized, easy to follow, or otherwise flowed well.

- **Describe your response to the paper.** Use “I” to indicate your response as a reader. Always own your response.

- **Focus on the paper**—its readers, its purpose, and its rationale, not on the writer. Every paper is a draft that reflects only a particular part of a writer’s thought processes at a particular time.

- **Be as specific as possible.** Rather than say “unclear,” for example, let the writer know what was difficult to understand and how you might interpret the passage in question.

- **Ask questions.** Questions help the writer clarify a point or explain a concept more clearly. The function of a writing group is also to get the writer to talk about the paper to continue generating ideas or to clarify a concept (for the writer and his or her reader).

- **Avoid “you should.”** To be able to write, writers must feel in control of their writing choices. You can help the writer retain control over their draft by asking questions or describing your interpretation of the paper. If you are not part of the intended readership of the paper, you can help the writer think about how a section of the paper might come across (e.g., “I would not understand the link between A and B. Is that link perhaps completely obvious to your readers and therefore does not need to be stated, or might they need a more explicit link as well?”)

- **Avoid judgment.** Explain your response as a reader to the paper (where you as a reader can follow easily or where you stumble, or where you have further questions, where you might like clarifications, where you wonder about a claim or evidence)

- **Help writers recognize assumptions about their writing situation.** Let the writer know about the readers and purpose you perceive in the paper (“I wonder if your readers know this term…”; do you think your readers are ready to accept this claim?”)

To summarize, the most useful feedback usually has these characteristics:

- situated (grounded in an awareness of the writer’s rhetorical situation—readers, purpose, focus, community, genre)

- responsive (to the questions and concerns expressed by the writer)

- generative (helps the writer develop the paper and his or her ideas),

- engaging and dialogic (inviting the writer to talk through their ideas)

- generous

**Exercise: The language of constructive feedback**
(adapted from on Giltrow, 2002, pp. 170-171)
Which of these feedback statements might help the writer rethink and revise their paper? Which ones are less helpful?

1. This is an ungrammatical sentence.
2. I’m having trouble with this sentence, John. I have read it twice, but still don’t quite understand it. … I don’t think I could summarize it and explain it to someone else.
3. This is the wrong word.
4. I’ve heard this word used differently. I wonder why it’s used in this way here.
5. Sam, I’m not quite sure how I get from this discussion of membranes to the discussion of Miller’s study. What’s the connection between these two ideas? Is it that … Miller showed how membranes do “x”?
6. I’m not sure what this word means.
7. This word seems to refer to an important concept, but I don’t quite know which one.
8. Your argument is not strong enough.
9. Your purpose is very clear here, Jane. I wonder, though, what you are trying achieve by introducing this new method? Will you show its strengths and weaknesses compared to previous
methods to help other researchers decide when they might best use it?

10. Awkward!

11. Jane, I wonder if one reason is sufficient for your readers to accept your claim. Are there any other reasons that could persuade them?

12. Your paper doesn’t have a point.

13. Pat, I have read through the first paragraph, but I’m not quite sure what the focus of the paper is. I think the paper takes three different directions. I’m not quite sure what the main emphasis is in the paper.

14. Repetition!

15. I think I read this earlier in the paper. Is there something different about this point now?

16. You don’t need to explain this because most engineers will know what “x” means.

17. There is no logical connection here, no transition.

18. So your readers currently don’t believe this? How novel of an idea might this be for them? How resistant might they be to the idea?

19. This sounds like a compelling rationale. What do we gain from extending the model to multiple-point scenarios, though?

20. How to proceed

There are many ways in which writing groups work. You will need to find procedures that you are most comfortable with. To some extent, your procedures will also depend on the size of your group (you probably would not be able to discuss 6 papers all at once and may need to break up into smaller response groups and perhaps share your observations with the group at the end).

I suggest that you use the writing group space available on WebCT to post your paper and then to post comments and suggestions to which others can respond. This way, as a writer, you will also have the comments written down and available whenever you’d like. In addition, you can also use the “Review” tool in Word for Windows to add comments next to the writer’s text.

You may not always all respond to each paper in the group. Perhaps begin working with one writing partner and then switch to another one. Or you may exchange your papers in a round-robin fashion and then again in order to read another paper.

As you do so, you may find this procedure helpful:

• As the writer, explain the rhetorical situation your writing addresses (e.g., for / with whom are you writing this, why, and what for) and specify what kinds of comments you would like to ask for. It’s important that you take control over your writing. You know best what you are struggling with and what you are trying to accomplish with your piece of writing.

• As a respondent, read through the paper once with the writer’s questions in mind, then read the paper again to provide written comments.

• Think about how to articulate the comments (e.g., in the form of questions or specific comments on sections that struck you as worth exploring more deeply or that you were confused about, etc.)

• Discuss the comments with the writer.

• As the writer, take careful notes and ask for clarification of comments.

• Thank each other. Reviewing can be hard work.

Then switch to another writing partner and repeat the procedure.

How to make decisions about what to do with the feedback you receive

Once you have received feedback on your writing, either from a colleague, from your supervisor, or from a journal peer reviewer, you still need to decide what to do with it, how to respond to it, and how to benefit from it in your revisions. To be sure, the most important step is thanking your colleague, etc., as engaging in someone else’s work is hard work. Overall, though, how you answer those questions depends
largely on the theory you have of writing, that is how you understand what you do when you write. If you think about writing rhetorically, then you understand writing in particular ways, which has particular implications for how you request and think about feedback.

First, if you understand writing as a rhetorical act, you understand what you do as a way of being, participating in, and contributing to an ongoing collective knowledge-making endeavour with colleagues, who, like you, care deeply about advancing knowledge in a particular subject area and perhaps advancing change and who have—over time—developed shared practices of going about that knowledge work. That is, if you think of your writing rhetorically, you think about how you locate your work in that ongoing collective endeavour, what kind of contribution you are making—what purpose you are pursuing, what kind of purpose will be considered valuable in the ongoing research endeavour. In other words, you pay particular attention to the rhetorical situation (which you explored in your prospectus and are exploring throughout the semester in our disciplinary genre and culture project) in which you locate your work.

So, drawing on a rhetorical understanding of writing, key questions you might ask when you request and assess feedback are questions about how your reviewers perceive your contribution and purpose, how your readers (the ones with which you are engaging) might perceive it, how different sections of your paper work to advance that purpose or contribution, etc. Just even hearing your readers report to you what they think the paper is doing will give you lots of insights into how you might shape and rearticulate your contribution. For example, a peer reviewer may suggest that you eliminate a section in your manuscript. That suggestion may either indicate that the reviewer perceives the section as unnecessary for your readers to follow your argument, that the section is not valued for various reasons, or that the rationale and significance of that section may not have come across. Accordingly, if this section is perhaps what you intended the whole paper to be about or to be a vital argument in your overall purpose, your response might well be sharpening that section and working out its significance in the overall argument. Still, you have lots to thank the reviewer for as their reading helped you see that something that was critical to your argument may not have come across that way.

Second, thinking rhetorically about your writing also means that you see your drafts less as collections of “weaknesses” perhaps compared to some presumably universal standard, but more as gradual efforts of shaping a more compelling contribution to a particular collective research endeavour. Accordingly, in terms of feedback, you might look for insights that help you better understand what constitutes a compelling contribution here, why (given the current conversation, the values, and commitments of a community), what shared context you might invoke to shape and position your contribution, etc.

Third, if you understand writing rhetorically, you might look for different kinds of feedback from different readers as they are located in different disciplines, communities, etc., all of which have different shared knowledge-making practices and expectations that they have developed over time. So, comments from someone outside your discipline, for example, may well engage you in talking through your work and compel you to see or question aspects of your work that you might not normally question. They might report readings, e.g., gaps they experience in the argument, lost threads, difficulties understanding the significance of something you might say that might inspire you to think more deeply about the ways in which the readers you wish to engage might think about your text and how you might shape and revise accordingly.

Most importantly, regardless of the discipline, however, as your contribution to a particular research endeavour, your work remains your responsibility and privilege and thus requires your decisions based on what you are pursuing. Naturally, there are questions of power relations (e.g., you write for readers who have the power to reject or exclude your work, not to grant funding, not to grant the degree, etc.), but even here in many cases, writing involves dialogue, understanding the communities and commitments that inform revision requests (e.g., those of peer reviewers) and engaging those in ways that make sense to these readers.

Fourth, a rhetorical understanding of writing also means seeing writing as a highly political act involving
participants with various—often competing—epistemological, ideological, theoretical and other commitments. These are not just neutral backgrounds, but rather reflect the values, subject positions, and various alignments with different factions and groups, some in more marginal and others in more central locations in disciplinary and institutional landscapes, some more aligned with dominant paradigms, others with alternative or emerging paradigms. Viewed rhetorically, writing as a knowledge-making practice, then is about staking out, advancing, confirming, contesting, celebrating, extending, etc. knowledge claims that are rooted in these competing commitments.

For feedback, this rhetorical nature of writing has a number of implications: To begin with, long-term members of a research community are not merely neutral experts in the field, but rather experts with particular epistemological, theoretical, and ideological commitments, who align and identify themselves with particular schools of thought and factions that may compete with those you are developing or with which you feel compelled to identify. So, from a rhetorical perspective, you might understand comments as being informed by such commitments and therefore either as less relevant for you, or as excellent opportunities to engage members of those factions in your argument, or as opportunities to reconsider your alignments.

A rhetorical understanding of writing would also inform how you respond to peer reviews. To be sure, you can’t know who will review your work (although with time, you will likely be interacting with a group of colleagues who work in this particular specialized area and roughly guess who might be assigned to your paper based on their work). Nevertheless, if you understand who is who in that collective endeavour, e.g., with what commitments, etc., you can engage the editor and reviewers accordingly in how you have used their comments and why rather than simply seeing the comments as indicating that there is some inherent weakness in your writing.

Fifth, a rhetorical understanding of writing calls for patience in learning all of this because as someone new to a particular endeavour, you learn gradually through participation in the group’s activities what purposes and contributions are valued, how writing works to get the knowledge work of the group done; what work different genres do, how knowledge claims are shaped and advanced, and so on. And because feedback is instrumental in seeking out insights into readers and their disciplinary cultures, feedback is very intimately related to identity formation—for shaping how you will understand what you do, with whom you will align yourself, what practices you will adopt, and who you will be in a particular research endeavour.