

Sharon O'Boyle
March 28, 2021
Comm 303
Feature News Story

One Quiet Hour in a Very Tumultuous Year

It's 10:00 on a Friday morning, and Lisa Leibow is scanning the matrix of faces on her computer screen. Fourteen faces today! Men and women. Various ages. Various ethnicities. One new. The faces are chatting among themselves now. But in a few minutes Leibow will do what she is there to do. She will tell everyone to "Shut up!"

That is, she will tell everyone to "Shut up and write!"

Leibow is facilitating an online session of the [Shut Up & Write!® Washington, D.C.](#) meetup group. For the past turbulent year, the group has been meeting virtually three times each week and has provided writers of all kinds with a reliable time and a safe space where they can escape into their writing.

Besides helping members with their writing, the group has helped members cope with the isolation of the pandemic. Quinn Meadows, 27, says that "it's a way to meet other writers and commiserate with them in a time when it would be particularly hard to meet people otherwise." She adds that "it's definitely helping me stay sane during isolation."

Will Madden, 43, appreciates the sense of community that the group provides. "Whether it's expressing an idea that's been bottled up, or just listening to other human voices talk about their concerns for a while, it helps to hold on to a sense of normalcy," he says.

Leibow, 54, says that "on days I might be inclined to curl up on the couch and wallow, I turn on the computer and greet a wonderful group of creatives, and then dive into my fiction writing – a world I can control. It's a lifesaver."

Shut Up & Write!® Washington, D.C. is a member of [Shut Up & Write](#), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization whose goal is "to ensure that every writer - regardless of genre or skill level - has access to the resources, community, and accountability that they need to be successful in their personal writing goals."

Leibow, a professor at George Washington University and Northern Virginia Community College, organized the Washington group in March 2018 after she moved into the District. "I wanted to feel part of my new neighborhood and meet other writers in the area," she says. "Of course, I also wanted to carve out time for my own writing projects."

Originally, the group met twice a week at the West End Public Library in Washington. After the pandemic hit, the group switched to an online format, meeting Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday at 10:00 am.

In addition to providing motivation for writing and helping lessen the pandemic isolation, the group's dependable schedule helps give some organization to the endless hours spent at home. "Shut Up & Write has provided more structure to my life during the pandemic," Leibow says. "Because I lead the group, people are counting on me to show up and share my creativity."

Meadows agrees, saying that the meetings "add some structure to my week, which is helpful, since I'm self-employed and work from home." And Madden says, "The start time aspect really helps during the pandemic... Creating a sense of time has done a lot for my mental health."

Members of the group have diverse writing goals. Meadows is a freelance web content writer. But during the sessions, she is likely to be working on a short story. She says the group “provides a window of time when I can prioritize my fiction writing, which is lovely.”

Lou Thomas, 43, a postdoc in the Urbanism Lab at the University of Chicago, generally does academic writing related to his job.

Leibow, who sometimes works on the same writing assignments that she assigns to her students, explains that the group includes “novelists, memoirists, poets, bloggers, and essayists” as well as “speech writers, travel writers, job seekers, PhD dissertation candidates.” She adds that other creatives such as composers, photographers, and web designers have attended the group. She says that “the format really lends itself to any creative project.”

While members appreciate the ability to attend the virtual writing sessions, some see disadvantages of the online format. Madden says, “The chief advantage of the in-person group was, since everyone could see each other, you felt pressured to appear to be working, and that helped with productivity. Virtually you do not get that degree of accountability.”

Thomas agrees that meeting in-person is advantageous. “Small talk is easier afterward in-person, because you can talk to the person next to you which is not possible in a virtual format,” he says. “So while I find the virtual meetings helpful, I find the in-person meetings much more helpful and fulfilling.”

So now that the pandemic situation is improving, how will the group meet in the future? Leibow has been contemplating her options. She says that it will likely be a combination of in-person and online. While she is looking forward to resuming the sessions at the library, she will definitely retain some virtual component.

It’s the end of the hour, and Leibow invites everyone to share how the hour has been. Some members have completed their intention; others have not. Some had a productive hour; others did not. But, regardless of the writing outcome, for one hour everyone was able to *shut out* everything else in this crazy world and just *shut up and write*.