



DON'T GO IT ALONE

An introvert's guide to building a writing community.

BY K. L. ROMO

Contrary to popular belief, a writer doesn't have to live a solitary life. Connecting with other writers can help you acquire traveling companions for your writer's journey, and it's easier than you think.

We need the camaraderie and support of like-minded individuals to keep us moving forward, especially when we're just starting out. If you're not a mega-seller or Pulitzer Prize winner, you might feel anonymous – just one of a billion writers out there. But even experienced authors need a shoulder to lean on.

It's quite validating to talk to people who understand what your journey is like. Other writers know firsthand how it feels to get a rejection – or two – or 200. They know what it's like to revise a manuscript so many times you wish your characters would jump off a bridge already and be done with it. Your writing companions can pull you from the plot hole you just fell into. They can listen to you cry, scream, and whine, without having to worry they'll either divorce you or hide.

When you connect with and help your fellow writers, the focus shifts from you to them. Caring for others cures the soul. And when you give yourself up to the journey, your trip might take some surprising detours, unexpectedly leading you to your perfect place.

Amy Impellizzeri, a longtime corporate litigator and former president of the Women's Fiction Writers Association, is now a published author. She agrees that a writing community has much to offer an otherwise lonely writer. Impellizzeri

says the most important things you can do as a community member are: "Share. Write. Support."

"Share your work. And your fears. Share your successes AND your failures. In order to share, of course, you need to write. And finally, support your peers. Don't just take," she says.

So if you want to energize your writing life and fortify your writer's journey, find some traveling companions. Here are a few ways to build your writing community. Try a few or try all. Just *try*.

Writers' groups

Join one of the many groups for writers out there:

- **Writers' associations:** There are bound to be associations for your genre (fiction, mystery/thriller, horror, sci-fi, nonfiction, journalism). For example, I belong to the Women's Fiction Writers Association (WFWA) and the Writers' League of Texas (WLT). I also love Out of the Binders, an organization that runs "Bindercon" conferences to advance the careers of women and gender non-conforming writers (see our profile on page 38), and administrates a private Facebook group. You might have to try a few to find one that you really connect with. But it's worth the effort.
- **Local writers' groups:** Google some local writers' groups. Writers' associations often have local chapters or members who might live in your area.
- **Critique groups:** Join a critique group, or find a critique partner through one of the associations or groups mentioned above. Although

the word *critique* sounds intimidating, all it really means is sharing your work with someone to get feedback, and giving feedback in return. And don't worry about whether you have an MFA in creative writing or journalism. I don't. But that doesn't stop me from telling an author what works from a reader's perspective.

What if you can't find a writers' group that's perfect for you? "Start it yourself," says Impellizzeri. "That's what the founding board of WFWA did three years ago." And just a few years later, the WFWA has almost 800 members.

Online websites, forums, and blogs

Join online forums or writers' chat groups. Leigh Stein, author and executive director of Out of the Binders/BinderCon, says that one of the most important things a person can do to build their writing community is to look online. She's built a "huge network of writing colleagues through the internet."

There are some stand-alone forums you can join, or you can participate in the chat rooms or private chat pages sponsored by your writers' organizations.

- Facebook is a crucial community-building tool. I love the online banter on the WFWA Facebook community page. I chat and share with people from all over the world without leaving my desk. And when I recently had a *my-writing-is-crap* crisis, WFWA members were able to provide a much-needed virtual boost to my literary self-esteem.
- Find websites and Facebook groups that feature articles on what it

means to be a writer, how to improve craft, and interviews with authors, agents, and publishers. Several of my favorites are “Women Writers, Women Books” and the Facebook group administered by Out of the Binders. *The Writer’s* Facebook page also posts articles and giveaways almost daily.

- Participate in online readers’ groups and book clubs. Goodreads is the Taj Mahal of the reading community. There are also Facebook groups: Some are public, like Readers Coffeehouse, and some are private, like Chick Lit Chat HQ, Bookworms Anonymous, and TLC Readers. But even if it’s a secret group, simply ask to join.
- For those self-published authors out there, the Writers’ Café at the Kindleboards forum is useful for all of those self-publishing issues and questions.

Pay it forward by volunteering

This will catapult you right into the middle of a literary community. Regardless of which groups you decide to join, volunteer to do whatever you can to help them in their cause.

- When I joined WFWA, I offered to help with its virtual new-release book launch parties. I also offer to read and critique as many articles, drafts, and books as I can. I’m paying forward my gratitude to those who give their time and energy to critique for me.
- I assist with Goodreads virtual author discussions whenever I can.
- I’ve even made brownies for a local WLT meeting. *Yes, that counts.*

Volunteering gives more purpose to my writing life. I’m doing my part, actively participating, and getting to know other writers. Not only is it a great way to accumulate good karma, it’s a great feeling, period.

Make contact with authors

- Contact the authors you love. Send virtual high-fives, telling them how much you enjoyed their book or article. Authors love to hear from fans.

- Read blogs by fellow authors and comment on them. Remember, being a virtual stalker or lurker won’t get you traveling companions. Show other writers you’re interested in what they have to say. Who knows? They may be interested in what you have to say, too.

Read & review books

- Support other authors by reading their books. Reading the work of your fellow organization and association members is a great place to start.
- Write and post reviews of the books you read. Sometimes organizations will even post your review on their blog. Add them to Goodreads, Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and anywhere else their book is sold. Who knows – you might just make an author’s day!
- Make arrangements with other authors to read and review each other’s books.

Social media

Use social media. But unless you’re a social media junkie, beware of using more than two or three platforms; these sites can go from networking tools to procrastination-enablers in a hurry.

- The social media sites I see used most by authors are Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and Instagram. But make it your own – if there are other sites you like, use them.
- Promote your fellow authors and others from the writing community as much as possible. Who doesn’t like to see a friend sending a *shout-out* to the entire internet?

In person

- Put yourself out there, and try to attend local literary events. If you’re somewhat of an introvert like I am, this is a hard one. I tend to shy away from mingling and getting involved in activities I’m not familiar with. I’d rather chat with you online than face-to-face. But once I actually put one foot in front of the other and force myself to attend, I’m always glad I did. In fact, I met my first critique partner this way.

- Chat with a fellow author. Even if you fear you might be short on “literary intelligence,” just blurt it out: *Where are you from? What do you write?* Those questions will get the conversation flowing.

Conferences

For some of you, attending conferences might feel like you’ve signed up to climb Everest. But once you arrive, you’ll realize others are just as nervous. Knowing you’re all there for the same reason quickly replaces anxiety with a sense of connection.

- Attend as many panels and workshops as you can.
- Try to mingle at an event cocktail party, circulating the room at least once.
- Build up the courage to chat with other participants.
- Steel yourself to throw your best pitch to some literary agents; after all, they’re people, just like you.

After you’re done, give yourself a high-five! You’ll be happy with the feeling of accomplishment that will travel with you all the way home.

So if you ever feel like you’re traveling alone on your writing journey, reach out and acquire some companions for the hard trip ahead. After all, two heads and hearts are better than one, and 200 are better than two.

“The honest sharing of successes and rejections makes me feel right at home. The raising up of one another helps propel me forward on this writing journey. And the fabulous writing I get to read from our members – both published and unpublished – inspires me to write more and better,” confirms Impellizzeri.

So what are you waiting for? Get out there and start your writing community. **W**

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