



Coworking for writers

at the Northwest Institute of Literary Arts

9:30 to 4:30 every Wednesday
5611 Bayview Road in the Old Bayview School
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Coworking for writers is a member benefit of the Whidbey Island Writers Association, which costs \$50 per year. Not a member? Join at wiwa.nila.edu.

What is Coworking?

When you work for an employer, you and your colleagues strive toward the same goals because you're employed by the same company. When you cowork, you share space with people who are working toward different goals, but who share your values.

Why cowork? Because it addresses the isolation that so many writers and other creatives feel, enables you to avoid the distractions of home, and gives you like-minded people to hang out with. It's an in-between spot that's neither home nor a public place like a coffee shop.

Coworking isn't just about work. It's about the community you create in the process. The core values are:

- Collaboration
- Openness
- Community
- Accessibility
- Sustainability

Still not sure what coworking is? Check out the coworking wiki at goo.gl/wT3lfS, watch a coworking video at goo.gl/Zuoged, read an article on coworking for writers at goo.gl/am9lZO, or stop by on Wednesday.

But before you come, please read the rest of this document. And if you're a regular, please reread it from time to time. These are the values we embrace as coworkers at NILA. They were written by Lori Kane, who founded a coworking space in her home in Seattle.

10 Hints for Working in an Informal Coworking Space

As a full-time writer and indie author, I've spent 6 years working only in in-between spaces. The first two of those years I failed almost every day. I struggled to stay focused in coffee shops and was far too individual-self and individual-work focused to tap into the value of formal coworking spaces. Back then I tended to blame the places and shift to new ones. But it wasn't the spaces that had to change. I had to change.

The next two years I succeeded beyond my wildest dreams as a weekly host of a free community coworking space—in our home—called Collective Self. That space recreated me from the inside out. It still connects me to my neighborhood, my city, my coast, and my world in ways unimaginable to old Lori. It taught me to invite chaos and order into my routine and value both deeply. It shows me my true priorities and surfaces life-long friends of all ages, perspectives, and persuasions. It set me free. For the last couple of years, I've spent 3 days a week in silence, focused and working/playing in my home office alone, and another 2 or 3 days a week happily working/playing with strangers and friends in libraries, book stores, coffee shops, ferry boats, fields, beaches, park benches, cars, artist and maker cooperative spaces, forests, other people's homes, airport terminals, community gardens, and, one day/month, back at Collective Self Coworking, which is run by others now and such an extraordinary little place I get happy just thinking about it.

0. Welcome to the in-between

Informal coworking spaces aren't just work spaces. They're in-between spaces that invite stretching past normal and fully comfortable. Everyone who enters has to use their instincts, imagination, courage, and stranger trust muscles, so informal coworking spaces hold great potential to be magic places. For me they are reimagination stations. Schools of unlearning. Pillow forts with slightly more stable footings. I'm admittedly biased now. I adore the in-between. I feel more creative, flexible, accepted, whole, and safe here than anywhere in the real work world. Here, being human is fun again.

1. Be a bit fluid with your personal space and personal plans

Informal coworking spaces—and in-between spaces in general—ask us to prioritize community a little more than formal work spaces and solitary work spaces in the grownup world do. Prioritizing community involves releasing your own innate willingness to flex slightly outside what's comfortable. At first, working in an informal space feels a bit weird. I'm trying to find my grownup words here... We all have to non-verbally micro-collaborate to create the just-right-for-right-now space for those present. Imagine kids playing or birds flying together, in sync—this is what we remember we can do here, by watching it happen, doing it, and without talking about it). Unlike in grownup land, nobody can do this for us, it's on us. We make micro-adjustments repeatedly as people arrive and leave. This may feel cumbersome, at first, or unnecessarily time consuming. Yet when we stick with it, the rewards for us personally, and for our communities—both in the moment and long after—are far beyond worth it. Just keep thinking about that group of kids or flock of birds getting their full kid/bird groove on. Even for a quiet, focused, introverted, writer-nerd like

me, eventually informal coworking became a warm, fun, mostly comfortable chaos, and I find it almost always just works out somehow. Eventually it began to feel like magic. Later, I began to feel magic. I've become a mobile informal coworking space generator now. Which just rocks.

Example non-verbal micro-collaboration: At the big round 10-person table in this particular space, if three of us are here, we naturally spread out to work. When a 4th and 5th person show up together, we intuitively shift, making space for them to be together. When a 6th person shows up, we shift a bit again. And we just keep on shifting a little bit at a time as things change. This happens fluidly, without people being told when or how to shift. We just do. If two people need to have a work meeting, they may shift away from the main table, ask if their meeting disturbs others, or just start talking. It's up to those present—as individuals, small groups, or whole group—to recognize when something is not working for the others, and to shift silently, or suggest alternatives, as needed.

2. If you have specific needs for the day, tell people what your needs are for that day

If you show up and need two hours of quiet to meet a deadline, say that out loud. If you need help with brainstorming for 30 minutes, say that out loud. If you'd like to bring a client in and have a 2-hour meeting next week, say that out loud. If you don't want to say it out loud, hold a sign up. Or ask somebody else to say it out loud. If your head will explode if you don't get coffee soon, but you don't know where to go, ask that out loud. You may or may not get what you need, but saying what need, out loud, at least once per visit is still important. This habit—saying what you need out loud and listening to others doing the same—can make your whole life better. Some spaces will have a place where you can write down what you need for the day—so you don't have to repeat yourself as new people show up—or a way to share or gather around what you need ahead of time. Personally, I'm a fan of simply repeating saying what we need occasionally or when new people arrive. That's my years of working as part of these spaces speaking: I love chaos a lot more now when I'm working with others (and I've carved out big chunks of solitary time for myself now too).

Usually, if all people present are being intentionally quiet for a period of time to support focused individual work, then new people coming in will pick up the vibe and act accordingly. In that case, telling them at what point the quiet period is scheduled to be finished is a quick and kind act. If it's really, really, really important to you to get exactly what you need on a particular day (for example, a client will be meeting you for two hours and you need to be able to talk to each other between 8 and 10), then understand that getting *exactly* what you want comes as a result of community: your own efforts to listen, make friends, and contribute to the community come first. True, close, personal community makes getting exactly what you need, exactly when you need it, possible. For everyone. Some things are so vital to us that there are no shortcuts. True community takes considerable time. Period. And it is so very worth it that these puny words, in prose form, can't capture how worth it our true community is.

3. Try leading with thinking “How can I contribute?” And when you can’t, move.

This idea came from my sweet friend Susan of Office Nomads in Seattle. They’ve noticed that people who show up asking themselves “What can I give to this community?” or “How can I contribute?” end up happier, staying longer, making more friends and connections, etc. than people who show up leading with the thought “What can this space/community do for me?” This hint doesn’t just work in a formal coworking space. It’s a direct path to recognizing or remembering that I have community and that I myself am valuable and vital to my community. The people around me in my life can tell me that I’m valuable and even try to show me how much I matter, but nobody can make me see this. I have to experience it for myself. The best way I know how to get to that *personally experienced feeling of being vital to a community* is to contribute—to give something, no matter how small: a coffee shop recommendation, an idea about how to grow better vegetables, a tip about the best route for someone on a bike to get somewhere, cookies you made yourself, a library book recommendation, the name of the person they should know, or 10 minutes of your time to brainstorm on somebody else’s project.

My addition is that if you’re not naturally inclined to think “How can I contribute?” in a particular space, that’s a pretty good sign that moving is a good idea. Moving can mean anything from taking a walk and then returning to standing up and dancing in place to leaving to find a different coworking space entirely to changing country codes. I use this tip often now. When I’m feeling invisible or not listened to, instead of worrying about it (most days), I contribute something. This helps me navigate where I’m needed and valued most—which is where I want to be—and also helps me figure out where I no longer need or want to be. So useful. Susan’s a genius.

4. If you stay, prepare to be wowed. And loved.

From my perspective today, people who show up willing to be a bit fluid with their personal space and personal plans—and spend even half a day working fluidly with others doing the same in an informal coworking space—often fall in love with each other almost instantly. Friendship love, I mean. Eventual work-partnership and community-partnership love, I mean. Love of sexier varieties can be gently re-directed to the more fertile grounds of park benches or coffee shops down the street so the rest of you can get some work done. Or not. It’s your pillow fort.

Those who chose to stay and micro-collaborate as needed to work in an informal space together tend to become friends quickly and become connectors for each other quickly too, exponentially expanding each other’s communities in very smart, efficient, and I-know-the-exact-perfect-person-for-you-to-talk-to kinds of ways. We often connect online too so we can visibly stay in touch outside physical space and connect others in our communities. We tend to fall in love with each other, the informal work space, and the neighborhood simultaneously. Those who don’t, don’t. I’m not using the word *love* lightly. People who become friends within these spaces both love and are loved by at least one person here, if not by everyone here. And it usually happens fast. Like love at

first sight, only love at first visit. It feels similar to the almost instant camaraderie that happens in a hostel among travelers.

Micro-hint: If you don't fall in love with your first space visit or set of humans, keep trying. My first years I sucked at impromptu coworking. Failed often. I had a lot of expectations of myself and others to drop. I practiced my way into what I can experience today: being able to work at ease almost anywhere, with almost anyone, and finding new ideas and friends and work almost everywhere. The world didn't have to change. I did. Still do. Impromptu coworking helps make that happen. Now I don't imagine I'll ever give it up. The friends I make, and the shaking up of my routine, are beyond valuable.

5. Prepare to be needed

Most people who come into an informal coworking space—at least on my little part of the planet—are really busy. Busy people are needed in an informal coworking space in part because their intense focus on their own work means the space doesn't become too loud from excessive talking. Other people who show up aren't too busy—for example, some retired people, in-between-jobs people, travelers from other places, people who intentionally clear time just to be present for others or to show up to offer gifts to those present, and people from parts of the world where the value of full presence in a physical space is understood. The not-too-busy are a huge gift to an informal coworking space too. Full presence is awesome: it feels great for those willing to slow down into noticing. These days, many of us where I'm from need reminders and visible, tangible lessons in the power of simply being fully present with those around us. So if you walk in the door of an informal coworking space even once, no matter who you are, you are needed. Each time you choose to come back and engage, you make others who choose to work in the space feel needed too. It's remarkable to be regularly reminded that everyone is needed and contributing something. Even the people who piss me off. And—very, very fortunately—even me.

6. Notice your impact on others

What does your presence add? What happens when you share things? When you change your behavior? What would your leaving do? What happens when you suggest going to get coffee together? Experiment. There will be different people from day to day in informal coworking spaces—especially in easily accessible, public places and spaces being reimaged from private to public, which is happening everywhere now for those inclined to look—have you noticed? If you do experiment, you may find that you're more important to the community than you thought you were. Two people experimenting together can be even more fun. One approach to noticing your impact on others is to directly ask about your impact on others. Simple. Not easy. Worth it.

7. Surface a personal belief, frustration, or goal and use each visit to an informal coworking space to improve on it just a tiny bit.

For example, my small personal frustration 3½ years ago: “Stop constantly apologizing for just being yourself.” eventually came to include “and don't expect others to

apologize for being themselves either.” With time, this evolved into: “In the immediate space around me, people are invited to be their whole, wonderful, weird, annoying, frustrating, beautiful, angry, messy, awe-inspiring selves. All people. Even me. Without fear. And with zero need to apologize for just being who we are.” My years of working as part of informal coworking groups not only eliminated the original frustration I had with myself, it eliminated most of my frustrations with others. Informal coworking still helps me evolve my beliefs, skills, listening abilities, concept of self, and work plans. Incrementally, often invisibly, working in these spaces makes me strong enough to work with other people making this true for themselves too, one little space at a time, almost no matter where I go now or who I’m with.

8. If you feel unsafe, trust yourself and do something immediately

For example, move, say something, ask for help, leave, yell, scream, and/or cry. Leaving and reflecting on what made you feel unsafe, then communicating about it somehow later in your own time, and then trying again elsewhere or later, is a brilliant approach too. Another brilliant approach is leaving a particular space and never coming back, with no regrets. Another brilliant approach is showing up and telling others what makes you feel safe, or unsafe, right from the beginning, so others in the space know up front. I rarely do this myself—mostly because I forget to. But I’ve seen others do it. I like this approach because it holds within it great potential for rest from carrying your burdens alone. The more people who know what makes us feel safe and unsafe in a work space, the more individual burdens are lifted from us as individuals and shifted onto the space/community. Shifted, they become shared understandings and responsibilities, which are so much lighter to carry than individual burdens.

9. When uncomfortable, reflect on why you think being uncomfortable is a bad thing.

If you feel somewhat annoyed, angry, stupid, frustrated, jealous, sad, or lost, for example, reflect on why you think feeling this way is a bad thing. Huzzah for extended reflection! The superhero power of mortal adults! *Uncomfortable* is not the same thing as *unsafe*. Discomfort causes us to reflect and usually stays with us until we do. In a coworking space where anyone can walk in anytime, you have considerably more small chances from moment to moment to encounter discomfort. This also means a lot more tiny decision points where you must think about and decide what you’re going to do about feeling discomfort. This means that coworking in impromptu spaces can be a little more uncomfortable, especially at the beginning, than a traditional day job or solitary private work space, because fewer choices—about who gets in, who does what and how, who stays, who doesn’t, and when—have been made for you. Here we make more of those choices for ourselves and we know it.

This also means that we get really good, relatively quickly, at moving with our own—and others—discomfort. Eventually we begin to automatically adjust without thinking about it—moving on instinct in the space. Learning to deeply trust our instincts. This can crack wide open where you are able to feel comfortable working in the future. For example, I can write everywhere now: outside, sitting on the ground or at the end of a dock or walking the dog, in public spaces of all kinds, other collaborative spaces, on

the ferry, in waiting rooms, in other people's homes, and even within online conversations. I can write happy, angry, tired, scared, heartbroken, or sobbing. Four years ago, the only place I could get any writing work done was in my home office with the door shut and alone and only when I was feeling inspired. I write on everything now, too: sand on the beach, using driftwood and rocks, grocery receipts, paper notebooks, dirty car windows, post-its, phone, laptop, etc. And I don't just write anymore. Thanks to regularly coworking with a variety of others, I also paint, draw, sew, create collages, needle felt, and I've begun playing the piano again. The biggest creative gift—poetry—came after two years of hosting weekly informal coworking. I now turn discomfort into poetry. Actually, I turn most things into poetry now. It's who I am.

Creativity has gotten easier for me thanks to the discomforts of working in a variety of coworking spaces with a variety of people and letting go of individual control of the space. Discomfort is my friend now, most days. Viva la disruptions! Disruptions are a chance to stretch, play, and improvise. I've learned to trust play entirely, which is especially useful for too-focused-on-work me and on the days I forget to trust myself.

10. If the space doesn't work for you, before you go, ask about other options.

Maybe the space you're trying to work in is consistently too loud for you but the noise level is ok with everybody else. Or maybe it's too quiet. Or too hot. Or too dark. Or too pink. Or it smells like feet and that's not your thing. Whatever.

You can work with others to try to change the space yes, and another great option is to simply go find or create another impromptu coworking space. If that's your choice, before you leave, consider spending a couple of minutes sharing what you want in a space and asking all present if they have any ideas for you. People who work in informal spaces regularly tend to be full of other options: local tea and coffee shops, back rooms in libraries and bookstores, extra rooms in transit centers, park benches, in-home spaces, artist collaborative spaces, and more formal coworking centers, for example. We also tend to be in need of closer-knit community. Asking about other options surfaces help and direction for you, and it also surfaces connections across those working in the space—making visible strands of the community that might be invisible to you and others. You will have left giving the space a gift. And you'll be remembered as such.

11. Bonus hint: Don't just work in the space.

Don't be afraid to play in a coworking space. "Coworking" as a term is so useful right now and won't last forever, IMO. It's lovely, so it'll last a while. Yet "coworking" doesn't come remotely close to what these in-between spaces really are, even now. Creator spaces. Friendship incubators. Reimagination stations. So play like you mean it. Ask for vacation ideas or parenting tips. Share hobbies, recipes, and information about upcoming concerts, events, rallies, and friends' art openings. Offer to host a movie night or a cake-baking contest or a bike ride or whatever your gloriously strange non-work self is in to. Dream about a better neighborhood and your part in making it happen. Grab tea, coffee, lunch, or a beer together outside the space. I learned that

“not-working time” is my favorite part of informal coworking. This is often true for those who work alone or those who’ve spent years feeling invisible or trapped in impersonal day job spaces.

If playing at work makes you feel guilty, remember that by playing we reveal things that we wouldn’t otherwise reveal about ourselves. As a result, we’re shown things about ourselves that we hadn’t considered or expected—things that point us toward a new way of thinking, or to a new idea, or in a new career direction, or to a new group of friends or clients. I only mention this because you’re likely an adult working in the real world and most adults working there tend to have bought the utter-crap idea that playing, for the pure fun of it, while at work, shouldn’t be done. Well fuck should. We’ve tried the serious, heads-down-means-business, don’t-bring-your-whole-self, work-means-work-not-fun way. And the adult world went to shit as we did.

An informal coworking space is an in-between place. A place to unlearn those utter-crap ideas about ourselves and the world while remembering ourselves as the creators and dreamers and self-reinventers and community revealers and artists we actually are. Humans are cool. And we’re just ridiculously creative and fun. Remember?

Nothing shows an in-between space the respect it deserves like playing within it does. Ask anyone. Or better yet, friend. Show them.

10 Hints for Working in an Informal Coworking Space © 2015 Lori Kane. Lori is a poet, care partner, and author of *Reimagination Station: Creating a Game-Changing In-Home Coworking Space*. Thanks to coworkers Tim, Jane, Nicole, and Susan for their thoughts supporting this work and to Ronald who first suggested that we turn parts of *Reimagination Station* into mini books available to more people. I love you guys.