

TIPS FOR COLLABORATIVE WRITING

General

Many MDEe writing assignments require that you work in a collaborative writing group or participate in a peer review project. Collaborative writing and peer reviewing are not the same tasks, although they are often both treated as collaborative writing. Collaborative or team writing is the process of producing a written work as a group where all team members contributed to the content and the decisions about how the group will function.

Group assignments can be difficult for many adult students with busy schedules because they require planning, coordination, and frequent communication with other students. However, teachers nonetheless view group work as good preparation for the types of complex assignments you are likely to receive on the job. Also, collaborative assignments offer students the benefits and experience of building on existing knowledge through the dynamic interplay with and among other students, the subject matter, and the teacher. With careful coordination and communication, group writing assignments can yield excellent results and valuable experiences. This appendix presents some strategies that can help you make collaborative writing assignments successful.

COLLABORATIVE WRITING

The Writing Plan

The collaborative group assignment is intended to be one where the entire team contributes to writing the assignment. The key ingredients of successful group work are leadership, planning, effective communication, equal division of labor, and equal sharing of responsibilities for results, as well as courtesy, thoughtfulness, and dependability. For group writing projects, planning is especially important because writers tend to write in solitude from established plans and directions. When a group agrees on the nature and scope of the writing project and develops an agreed-to plan or outline, responsibilities are clear. When due dates are met, the work stays on schedule. A writing plan should include the following:

- description of the final project
- criteria for success
- content outline
- assignment of responsibilities for sections of content
- schedule for finishing parts
- editing and reviewing strategy
- production information.

Issues to Resolve

In addition, writing groups should discuss and resolve ahead of time some of the following considerations:

- when and where to meet as a group or how to meet when the participants are in a distance education class
- how to send materials between participants in the most efficient way
- what to do if someone has to drop out or falls behind
- what the group expects to get as a grade and how they will evaluate one another
- who communicates with the teacher, and how that will occur
- how differences of opinion will be resolved
- what roles the group members will assume

Groups should also plan to exchange contact information and should discuss technical considerations, such as how the writing will be merged into a single project, what word processing and graphics software will be used, what style guide will be followed, and who will make decisions about editorial and content disputes. Often, following workplace standards for collaboration will lead to success. However, remember that the purposes for college writing differ from the purposes of workplace writing. In the workplace, for example, strong group members often carry

weaker members in the interest of getting the work done. College writing emphasizes and values both the learning and writing processes as well as the final product.

Assignments to Accompany the Group Project

Often, a team can manage the collaborative assignment by using some group reporting techniques from the workplace. By planning the writing and reporting regularly to your teacher, you can keep the project on target and get guidance from your teacher when you need it. As a team, your collaborative writing group should plan to write the following for your assignment:

1. progress report memo (written and submitted after the first group meeting) with subsequent informal progress reports submitted weekly
2. editing strategy for your group project
3. information plan to manage the project
4. formal progress report
5. review draft
6. final project
7. evaluation for each team member.

Methodology

When the major writing project is a collaborative writing assignment, first form a writing team and work together as a team to produce a collaborative project. Each member should plan to be responsible for at least two roles on the writing team: to write a specific section of the project and to serve as a specialist in one or more areas concerning the project. In addition to learning how to write this project, each member will learn to coordinate his or her individual effort, knowledge, schedule, and work habits with those of the other members of the group. This requires courtesy, thoughtful communication, and dependability on everyone's part.

Each student should keep his or her own copy of the entire assignment, with its parts, together in a portfolio or notebook as the group completes the individual assignments. The group then turns in the completed project in hard copy. If a Web format is required, then prepare an HTML version for the Web. Include the URL and instructions for accessing it with the hard copy. Each student should keep his or her own copy of everything. Each team member should plan to write a specific section of the project - some members may write more than others depending on their roles. Roles may overlap or be shared, depending on team members' skills.

Each student should take on two or more of the following roles:

1. **Writer:** Everyone in the group writes and revises a specific part of the project.
2. **Group Leader:** This person coordinates the team, organizes the writing plan and schedule (especially for group meetings), and picks up loose ends.
3. **Editor:** This person edits and proofreads final drafts, provides stylistic standards for the group as a whole, and guides the group in using stylistic conventions and formats.
4. **Graphics Layout Artist and Production Manager:** This person is responsible for project design, illustrations, layout, hardcopy and Web formats, and the printing of the final project.
5. **Subject Matter Specialist:** Each person is responsible for research on technical topics, assisting team members with technical problems, and testing the final project for accuracy. All members must become subject matter specialists in at least one area.
6. **Webmaster:** This person is responsible for putting the project on the Web and administering it.

Your teacher may act as Manager or ask that you manage your own team writing assignment.

In either case, you should plan to meet as a group and decide which roles each of you will fulfill on the team and which sections of the project each of you will write. Your group may even write a contract for each member to agree to and sign. Be sure your instructor gets a copy of the team contracts.

The assignments described below should help you manage your team writing. Plan to write all or some of them as a

group

1. An informal progress report in the form of a memo. Memo 1: At the first group meeting, group members present their backgrounds and what they are most interested in doing for this project. At the end of that meeting, the team writes a group progress report identifying each person's background, and desired roles, describing briefly your group's technical writing/editing and production environment, and any questions, problems, or bright ideas that emerge. Subsequent informal progress reports: T hereafter, use the content guidelines provided by the teacher for submitting a weekly informal progress report for your meetings or devise one of your own. One person should act as recorder for the group during your discussion and take notes for the progress report, rotating this role of note taker among the group members equitably. Every group member should read and sign the informal progress report before it is turned in to the teacher.
2. An Editing Strategy. To plan for reviewing and revising the final draft, your team must think of ways to evaluate and edit your team writing. Usually this step involves some quality control measures and a cycle of reviews for the project. This editing strategy should address the needs of hardcopy as well as Web formats. Your editing strategy should address the following:
 - the project's readers, purpose, and uses and whether the goals were accomplished
 - editing objectives by identifying both substantive and copyediting problems
 - a schedule for reviews and editing
 - final implementing of the changes

In essence, your team will have to anticipate many of the pitfalls of writing your project and address the editing objectives from that standpoint. Since most editing strategies are focus on copyediting (editing for mechanics, grammar, and usage edits) or a substantive edit (editing for concept and content, organization, methodology, form, and style), your editing strategy can be written before your project is complete.

3. An Information Plan. An initial planning tool, this information plan includes a purpose definition, scope definition, audience analysis, objectives of your writing project, a tentative outline by section, a description of how the project will be produced and distributed, a tentative schedule for completing the different pieces of the project, and a list of specific tasks assigned to each group member. Discuss and write this plan as a group. At this point, your team should check with your teacher for final approval of your project or recommendations for changing your project concept and scope.

Remember that your information plan is intended to help you plan the writing process and can be adjusted as you actually write the guide. The integrity of an information plan, however, is in its planning: you should have very few amendments to it. The more detail that you have here, the more likely that your project will prove to be well designed.
4. Formal Progress Report or Updated Revision of Information Plan. This describes the project status and significant deviations from the initial plan and presents a revised project schedule. Submit the revised plan with a one-page memo that describes what the changes are.
5. Review Draft. This includes drafts of each section of your assignment with an example of the final project design and any graphics. If you have not yet completed a section, make space for it in your project and describe what will be in that section, how you will implement the content, and when you think it will be finished. Include a sentence or two to indicate what yet has to be finished in that section. At this point, your teacher can approve or make recommendations or both for improvement based on this draft.
6. Final Project. No doubt, there will be content requirements for your final project. For example, a formal report might include a title page, a transmittal letter, a table of contents, the body of the report, and any appendices. For the Web format, your Web project should follow conventions appropriate for that type of project.
7. Evaluation for each team member. Every member of the team should plan on evaluating the other members in a brief paragraph. You will need to be specific and honest here so that your teacher can grade the project fairly.

Sample Informal Progress Report

The informal progress report should be in the form of a weekly memo that tells your teacher the progress on the assignment. Use a standard memo format, but consider designing your own group logo or style for the memo. The progress reports should contain the following information:

1. who attended the meeting and who missed it and why. Was the absence excused?
2. list of agenda action items
3. what was decided about your action items

4. status report to date for each participant
5. list of tentative action items for next meeting

Members of the team should initial or sign off on each progress report. Include members' names and contact numbers, including phone numbers and email addresses, so that your teacher can easily contact you or your group as needed.

Peer Evaluation

Your group should discuss the criteria on which you will evaluate one another. Items to include might be:

1. fulfillment of agreed-upon responsibilities
2. dependability
3. cooperation
4. effort
5. quality and level of work
6. able to meet deadlines
7. attendance at meetings
8. timeliness of contributions

You should decide what it means to meet these criteria successfully and what constitutes failure. Your team might consider a separate evaluation form for your leader. The criteria to consider for a project leader's evaluation might be:

- ability to lead
- fairness in assigning tasks
- ability to resolve conflicts
- ability to motivate
- attendance at meetings

Conclusion

Learning to collaborate in a team project is an invaluable skill to have in today's workplace. Although many students will benefit by this experience, many will struggle to participate successfully. It's in everyone's interest to have a strong project team. By following these guidelines, your collaborative team project can be successful.