Although the group writing process may seem scary, it doesn’t have to be. With a little preparation and a well-developed strategy, a collaborative writing assignment can teach individuals the value of teamwork and offer group members the opportunity to improve their own researching, writing, and organizational skills. The process can also test an individual’s ability to think critically. Knowing how to successfully navigate the potential pitfalls of a group project is vital. This month’s issue of *The Portable Editor* offers a few strategies for collaborating on writing assignments.

**Getting Started**

**Sharing expertise**

So you have your assignment instructions, you know all the members of your team, and you know your deadline for submitting the final paper. So now what? Brainstorm! One of the great things about collaborative writing is the opportunity to gather collective intelligence. You share your thoughts and ideas about a project, and your team members are given the chance to offer the same kind of feedback. This process can be especially helpful when trying to narrow a topic or deciding what direction a paper should take. More specifically, brainstorming can help a group reach agreement on critical issues such as the argument your team paper will present, the development of a thesis statement, and the overall organization of the paper.

Once consensus is reached on these parts of the assignment, group members can focus on the actual writing process, including plans for how often the team will meet to discuss the project, the location of those meetings (will you meet face to face or via an online video chat?) and deadlines for submitting drafts for review.

**Writing**

**Division of responsibilities**

Among the challenges to team writing is ensuring that the breath of the work is spread evenly, when possible, among individual members. Although a group might consider sitting down to write the paper together, that approach can be agonizing, time-consuming, and might create unnecessary tension as writers dual over every word.

Still, there are no hard and fast rules for how to divide tasks. For example, a group might decide that one or more members should conduct needed background research, including lit reviews and data analysis, while other members are chosen to complete the actual writing of the paper. Another approach is to handle the research collectively and then to assign each team member a specific section of the paper to write (i.e., introduction and thesis, Methods, Results, or Discussion sections).

By planning early and clarifying each member’s task, the team is also more likely to ensure that coauthors avoid the frustration of duplicating work.

Regardless of the route taken to produce a paper, groups should consider collectively discussing research findings and agreeing on which studies and other evidence to use to support the paper’s primary argument. It is equally important that the group reach consensus on the main points and subpoints that will be presented throughout the body of the paper and that will be used to help frame the evidence.
Reviewing

Revising the drafts

Once the various sections of the group paper are written, team members can then focus on assembling the pieces together and starting the task of careful editing. A major challenge is creating a paper with a single voice, one that incorporates smooth transitions that blend the pieces into a seamless whole. To answer this challenge, the team must ensure that the writing and ideas are clearly expressed and that the thoughts are clearly connected between paragraphs and sections. In other words, the reviewing and revising process is generally the point at which the real dirty work begins.

How best to go about this task, again, is up to you and group members. Should one person do a hard edit of the paper and submit the revised second draft to team members for their feedback? Or is it best to have each coauthor independently review the first draft and make suggested revisions? On this matter, it may be best to take a vote to determine which approach members prefer.

That said, keep in mind that each team member brings different ideas, skills, and opinions to the project, which means you will not agree on everything. The goal is to offer constructive feedback without being unnecessarily critical. One suggested approach is to have everyone read the initial draft and talk first about what they liked about the paper. After that, consider tackling the larger problems, such as gaps in the evidence, missing citations, misuse of quotations, or unorganized information. Keep in mind that addressing these issues might require some additional work from individual writers.

Because writing styles differ, it may be helpful to have one author focus on smoothing out the rough edges to create a paper with a cohesive voice. It is likely that multiple drafts will be needed to remove choppiness and to enhance the overall flow of the paper, so plan your timeline accordingly.

Finally, have every team member carefully proofread the paper before submitting a final version. One great way of catching last-minute problems, including overly long sentences, is to print a hard copy and read the paper aloud.

Ultimately, the key to successfully completing a group writing project depends on a willingness to cooperate, a clear understanding of each team member’s role, and an ability to meet firm deadlines.

Sources: UNC Writing Center, UNA Center for Writing Excellence, The College of Education at the University of Texas at Austin

Need Writing Help???

Susan and Diane are here to assist! Contact the Writing Support Team:
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