

The Writing Center at UNC-Chapel Hill

Group Writing

What this handout is about

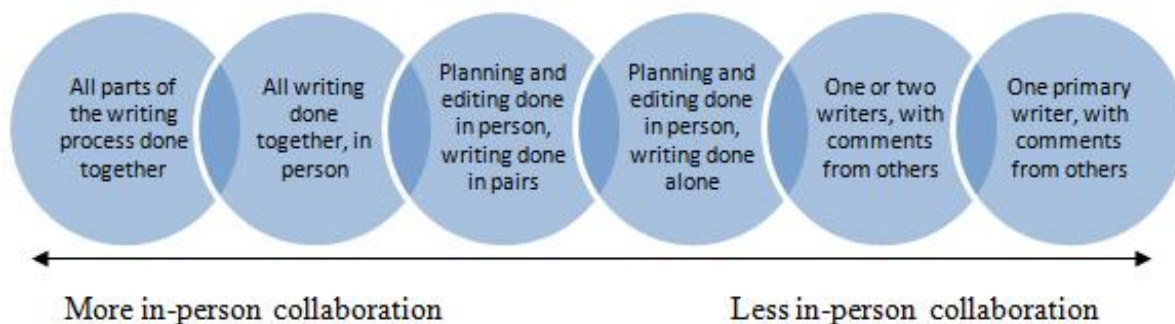
Whether in the academic world or the business world, all of us are likely to participate in some form of group writing—an undergraduate group project for a class, a collaborative research paper or grant proposal, or a report produced by a business team. Writing in a group can have many benefits: multiple brains are better than one, both for generating ideas and for getting a job done. However, working in a group can sometimes be stressful because there are various opinions and writing styles to incorporate into one final product that pleases everyone. This handout will offer an overview of the collaborative process, strategies for writing successfully together, and tips for avoiding common pitfalls. It will also include links to some other handouts that may be especially helpful as your group moves through the writing process.

Disclaimer and disclosure

As this is a group writing handout, several Writing Center tutors worked together to create it. No tutors were harmed in this process; however, we did experience both the pros and the cons of the collaborative process. We have personally tested the various methods for sharing files and scheduling meetings that are described here. However, these are only our suggestions; we do not advocate any particular service or site.

The spectrum of collaboration in group writing

All writing can be considered collaborative in a sense, though we often don't think of it that way. It would be truly surprising to find an author whose writing, even if it was completed independently, had not been influenced at some point by discussions with friends or colleagues. The range of possible collaboration varies from a group of co-authors who go through each portion of the writing process together, writing as a group with one voice, to a group with a primary author who does the majority of the work and then receives comments or edits from the co-authors.



Group projects for classes should usually fall towards the middle to left side of this diagram, with group members contributing roughly equally. However, in collaborations on research projects, the level of involvement of the various group members may vary widely. The key to success in either case is to be clear about group member responsibilities and expectations and to give credit (authorship) to members who contribute an appropriate amount. It may be useful to credit each group member for his or her various contributions.

Overview of steps of the collaborative process

Here we outline the steps of the collaborative process. You can use these questions to focus your thinking at each stage.

- **Pre-writing process**

- Share ideas and **brainstorm** together.
- Formulate a draft **thesis** or **argument**.
- Think about your assignment and the final product. What should it look like? What is its purpose? Who is the intended **audience**?

- **Planning and logistics**

- Decide together who will write which parts of the paper/project.
- What will the final product look like?
- Arrange meetings: How often will the group or subsets of the group meet? When and where will the group meet? If the group doesn't meet in person, how will information be shared?
- Scheduling: What is the deadline for the final product? What are the deadlines for drafts?

- **Research/data collection**

- How will the group find appropriate **sources** (books, journal articles, newspaper articles, visual media, trustworthy websites, interviews)? If the group will be creating data by conducting research, how will that process work?
- Who will read and process the information found? This task again may be done by all members or divided up amongst members so that each person becomes the expert in one area and then teaches the rest of the group.
- Think critically about the sources and their **contributions** to your topic. Which evidence should you include or exclude? Do you need more sources?
- Analyze the data. How will you interpret your findings? What is the best way to present any relevant information to your readers-should you include pictures, graphs, tables, and charts, or just written text?

- **Drafting/writing**

- Separately (each group member has his/her own portion of writing to do)
 - Note that brainstorming the main points of your paper as a group is helpful, even if separate parts of the writing are assigned to individuals. You'll want to be sure that everyone agrees on the central ideas.
 - Where does your individual writing fit into the whole document?

- Together (the group actually meets to compose text collaboratively)
 - Writing together may not be feasible for longer assignments or papers with coauthors at different universities, and it can be time-consuming. However, writing together does ensure that the finished document has one cohesive voice.
 - Talk about how the writing session should go BEFORE you get started. What goals do you have? How will you approach the writing task at hand?
 - Many people find it helpful to get all of the ideas down on paper in a rough form before discussing exact phrasing.
 - Remember that everyone has a different writing style! The most important thing is that your sentences be clear to readers.

- **Revising, editing, and proofreading**

- If your group has drafted parts of the document separately, merge your ideas together into a single document first, then focus on meshing the styles. The first concern is to create a coherent product with a logical flow of ideas. Then the stylistic differences of the individual portions must be smoothed over.
- Revise the ideas and structure of the paper before worrying about smaller, sentence-level errors (like problems with punctuation, grammar, or word choice). Is the argument clear? Is the evidence presented in a logical order? Do the transitions connect the ideas effectively?
- Proofreading: Check for typos, spelling errors, punctuation problems, formatting issues, and grammatical mistakes. [Reading the paper aloud](#) is a very helpful strategy at this point.

Helpful collaborative writing strategies

Attitude counts for a lot!

Group work can be challenging at times, but a little enthusiasm can go a long way to helping the momentum of the group. Keep in mind that working in a group provides a unique opportunity to see how other people write; as you learn about their writing processes and strategies, you can reflect on your own. Working in a group inherently involves some level of negotiation, which will also facilitate your ability to skillfully work with others in the future.

In addition to an appreciation for the collaboration of the group-work process, it is worth mentioning that a little respect goes along way! Group members will bring different skill sets and various amounts and types of background knowledge to the table. Show your fellow writers respect by listening carefully, talking to share your ideas, showing up on time for meetings, sending out drafts on schedule, providing positive feedback, and taking responsibility for an appropriate share of the work.

Start early and allow plenty of time for revising.

Getting started early is important in individual projects; however, it is absolutely essential in group work. Because of the multiple people involved in researching and writing the paper, there are aspects of group projects that take additional time, such as deciding and agreeing upon a topic. Group projects should be approached in a structured way because there is simply less scheduling flexibility than when you are working alone. The final product should reflect a unified, cohesive voice and argument, and the only way of accomplishing this is by producing multiple drafts and revising them multiple times.

Plan a strategy for scheduling.

One of the difficult aspects of collaborative writing is finding times when everyone can meet. Much of the group's work may be completed individually, but face-to-face meetings are useful for ensuring that everyone is on the same page. [Doodle.com](#), [whenisgood.net](#), and [meetingwizard.com](#) are free websites that can make scheduling easier. Using these sites, an organizer suggests multiple dates and times for a meeting, and then each group member can

indicate whether he or she is able to meet at the specified times.

It is very important to set deadlines for drafts; people are busy, and not everyone will have time to read and respond at the last minute. It may help to assign a group facilitator who can send out reminders of the deadlines. If the writing is for a co-authored research paper, the lead author can take responsibility for reminding others that comments on a given draft are due by a specific date.

Submitting drafts at least one day ahead of the meeting allows other authors the opportunity to read over them before the meeting and arrive ready for a productive discussion.

Find a convenient and effective way to share files.

There are many different ways to share drafts, research materials, and other files. Here we describe a few of the potential options we have explored and found to be functional. We do not advocate any one option, and we realize there are other equally useful options—this list is just a possible starting point for you.

- *Email attachments.* People often share files by email; however, especially when there are many group members or there is a flurry of writing activity, this can lead to a deluge of emails in everyone's inboxes and significant confusion about which file version is current.
- *Google documents.* Files can be shared between group members and are instantaneously updated, even if two members are working at once. Changes made by one member will automatically appear on the document seen by all members. However, to use this option, every group member must have a Gmail account (which is free), and there are often formatting issues when converting Google documents back to Microsoft Word.
- *Dropbox.* Dropbox.com is free to join. It allows you to share up to 2GB of files, which can then be synched and accessible from multiple computers. The downside of this approach is that everyone has to join, and someone must install the software on at least one personal computer. Dropbox can then be accessed from any computer online by logging onto the website.
- *Common server space.* If all group members have access to a shared server space, this is often an ideal solution. Members of a lab group or a lab course with available server space typically have these resources. Just be sure to make a folder for your project and clearly label your files.

Note that even when you are sharing or storing files for group writing projects in a common location, it is still essential to periodically make back-up copies and store them on your own computer! It is never fun to lose your (or your group's) hard work.

Try separating the tasks of [revising](#) and [editing/proofreading](#).

It may be helpful to assign giving feedback on specific items to particular group members. First, group members should provide general feedback and comments on content. Only after revising and solidifying the main ideas and structure of the paper should you move on to editing and proofreading. After all, there is no point in spending your time making a certain sentence as beautiful and correct as possible when that sentence may later be cut out. When completing your final revisions, it may be helpful to assign various concerns (for example, grammar, organization, flow, transitions, and format) to individual group members to focus this process. This is an excellent time to let group members play to their strengths; if you know that you are good at transitions, offer to take care of that editing task.

Your group project is an opportunity to become experts on your topic. Go to the library (in actuality or online), collect relevant books, articles, and data sources, and consult a reference [librarian](#) if you have any issues. Talk to your professor or TA early in the process to ensure that the group is on the right track. Find experts in the field to interview if it is appropriate. If you have data to analyze, meet with a statistician. If you are having issues with the writing, use the online [handouts](#) at the Writing Center or come in for a face-to-face meeting: a tutor can meet with you as a group or one-on-one.

PITFALLS

Immediately dividing the writing into pieces. While this may initially seem to be the best way to approach a group writing process, it can also generate more work later on, when the parts written separately must be put together into a unified document. The different pieces must first be edited to generate a logical flow of ideas, without repetition. Once the pieces have been stuck together, the entire paper must be edited to eliminate differences in style and any inconsistencies between the individual authors' various chunks. Thus, while it may take more time up-front to write together, in the end a closer collaboration can save you from the difficulties of combining pieces of writing and may create a stronger, more cohesive document.

Procrastination. Although this is solid advice for any project, it is even more essential to start working on group projects in a timely manner. In group writing, there are more people to help with the work-but there are also multiple schedules to juggle and more opinions to seek.

Being a solo group member. Not everyone enjoys working in groups. You may truly desire to go solo on this project, and you may even be capable of doing a great job on your own. However, if this is a group assignment, then the prompt is asking for everyone to participate. If you are feeling the need to take over everything, try discussing expectations with your fellow group members as well as the teaching assistant or professor. However, always address your concerns with group members first. Try to approach the group project as a learning experiment: you are learning not only about the project material but also about how to motivate others and work together.

Waiting for other group members to do all of the work. If this is a project for a class, you are leaving your grade in the control of others. Leaving the work to everyone else is not fair to your group mates. And in the end, if you do not contribute, then you are taking credit for work that you did not do; this is a form of academic dishonesty. To ensure that you can do your share, try to volunteer early for a portion of the work that you are interested in or feel you can manage.

Leaving all the end work to one person. It may be tempting to leave all merging, editing, and/or presentation work to one person. Be careful. There are several reasons why this may be ill-advised. 1) The editor/presenter may not completely understand every idea, sentence, or word that another author wrote, leading to ambiguity or even mistakes in the end paper or presentation. 2) Editing is tough, time-consuming work. The editor often finds himself or herself doing more work than was expected as he or she tries to decipher and merge the original contributions under the time pressure of an approaching deadline. If you decide to follow this path and have one person combine the separate writings of many people, be sure to leave plenty of time for a final review by all of the writers. Ask the editor to send out the final draft of the completed work to each of the authors and let every contributor review and respond to the final product. Ideally, there should also be a test run of any live presentations that the group or a representative may make.

Entirely negative critiques. When giving [feedback](#) or commenting on the work of other group members, focusing only on "problems" can be overwhelming and put your colleagues on the defensive. Try to highlight the positive parts of the project in addition to pointing out things that need work. Remember that this is constructive feedback, so don't forget to add concrete, specific suggestions on how to proceed. It can also be helpful to remind yourself that many of your comments are your own opinions or reactions, not absolute, unquestionable truths, and then phrase what you say accordingly. It is much easier and more helpful to hear "I had trouble understanding this paragraph because I couldn't see how it tied back to our main argument" than to hear "this paragraph is unclear and irrelevant."

Writing in a group can be challenging, but it is also a wonderful opportunity to learn about your topic, the writing process, and the best strategies for collaboration. We hope that our tips will help you and your group members have a great experience.

Works consulted

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout's topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on

this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the [UNC Libraries citation tutorial](#).

Cross, Geoffrey A. 1994. Collaboration and conflict: a contextual exploration of group writing and positive emphasis. Hampton Press, Inc.: Cresskill, New Jersey.

Ede, Lisa and Andrea Lunsford. 1990. Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing. Southern Illinois University Press: Carbondale & Edwardsville.

Speck, Bruce W. 2002. Facilitating Students' Collaborative Writing. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report 28(6). Jossey-Bass A Wiley Company: San Francisco.



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