

At some point during your college career, you might be asked to work collaboratively on a group paper. These assignments will require you to work with others to produce one cohesive final essay. Group essays allow students to develop teamwork skills and enhance collaborative thinking through co-authorship. This handout offers strategies for successful collaborative essay writing and provides advice for how to address the challenges of writing a group paper.

Tips for Writing a Group Essay

Keep these thoughts in mind before the first group meeting and throughout the collaborative writing process.

- **Identify individual strengths/weaknesses**

Since every group member has different skills and talents, recognizing each member's unique strengths is essential to maximizing the group's collective productivity.

- **Balance power within the group**

In order to ensure success, all group members must be given equal power and authority to both write and modify the paper. Each individual in the group should assume the same level of responsibility for the entire paper. Designating a "lead" writer to be primarily responsible for the project significantly limits the potential of the paper and often causes problems within the group. Open discussion and idea mapping are two methods through which the contributions of all members can be balanced and integrated into a cohesive whole.



- **Write collaboratively, NOT cooperatively**

Two minds are better than one. Resist the temptation to immediately divide the essay into sections and have each person be responsible for one portion. Although it initially may seem more difficult, continuously working together on all parts of the essay increases overall productivity. This approach allows writers to build on the ideas of others and use each other's perspectives to create a more well-rounded and fluid paper.

The Group Writing Process

- 1. Brainstorm** – Make a map or list of ideas. All group members should contribute with the goal of generating as much initial material as possible. No suggestions should be dismissed at this point. All ideas should be equally valued, even if they may not seem possible or relevant. Be sure to discuss the goal of the paper. What does the prompt ask? What approaches could be used to address the prompt?
- 2. Outline** – Organize the ideas in a structured outline that could be used as a framework for the paper. Arrange the ideas in a way that addresses the prompt and the goal of the paper.
- 3. Research** – Conduct any necessary research on the topic. For this step, dividing the work among group members would be beneficial.
- 4. Discuss** – Meet to exchange research findings with group members, and brainstorm about how to integrate the research into the essay. What research will go in which sections? Does any information change the essay's main point? Should the essay structure be altered to accommodate research findings? The goal is to establish a concrete and specific plan for the essay.
- 5. Write** – Write the essay. GoogleDocs and Wikis are online tools that enable multiple users to edit a document online, which may be useful if members cannot meet in person to write the draft. If the essay is very long, members may be designated to initially draft a certain section. However, all members are equally responsible for the paper as a whole, not just the section that they initially wrote.
- 6. Read** – Each member should read the entire draft, from start to finish. Does it sound the way the group intended in the initial plan? Are there rough transitions? Sections that require more sources? Sharp contrasts in tone?
- 7. Revise** – Meet again (preferably in person or via conference call) to discuss any aspects of the paper that stood out after reading. Reconcile differences in style, voice, and tone to make the paper fluid and cohesive. If ideas clash, talk out the pros and cons of each approach until the group reaches an agreement.

The reading and revising steps should be repeated until all group members are satisfied with the paper.

Common Frustrations An imbalance of power within the group is the most common source of frustration among collaborative writers. This inequality can take many forms, the most frequent of which are outlined below.

- **Free Riders** – Group members who do not contribute constructively to the group. Generally, there are two types of free riders.
 - *Apathetic Free Riders* do not contribute because they are not interested in the topic or goals of the paper.
 - *Self-Inhibiting Free Riders* do not participate because they do not view themselves as knowledgeable enough about the topic of the paper (or about writing itself) to have the authority to contribute. Their lack of confidence in their ideas hinders interaction with group members.

General Strategies:

- Group members can address the issue of an apathetic free rider if the professor has a group assessment exercise built into the assignment sequence. Such exercises will enable group members to inform the professor about the apathetic free rider in their group.
- Group members can also address an apathetic free rider without involving the professor by staging an intervention in which they inform the free rider that such non-productive behavior is not appreciated in the group.
- Suggestive questioning can create an open space into which the self-inhabited free rider can voice his or her ideas. Encourage the quiet member by showing that you value his or her contributions.
- Discuss a controversial statement or question and suggest as many alternate perspectives as possible, even if they are absurd. This creates a non-judgmental environment in which to propose ideas, and it makes members feel more comfortable participating in discussion. As a follow-up activity, each student should pick a group member's response to the controversial statement and validate it to themselves or a partner, either verbally or in written form.



General Strategies:

- Model thoughtful listening and successful collaboration in order to illustrate that self-assertion is unnecessary.
- Practice collaborative writing in a completely hypothetical, risk-free context by doing an activity that consists purely of discussion and writing. Invent a prompt and discuss how the group would structure a body paragraph for this imaginary assignment.
- Encourage discussion and collaboration throughout the writing process, even if the self-asserter insists on assigning individual piecemeal tasks.

Helpful Links:

http://trc.virginia.edu/Publications/Teaching_Concerns/Spring_1993/TC_Spring_1993_Young.htm

A timeline of what group members should accomplish during each meeting in order to successfully and efficiently produce a group essay.

<http://writingcenter.unc.edu/resources/handouts-demos/specific-writing-assignments/group-writing>

An overview of the group writing process as well as a list of some common mistakes to avoid when writing a collaborative paper.

<http://voices.yahoo.com/writing-co-author-tips-having-successful-610998.html>

Additional tips on how to avoid frustrations and work effectively with group members

Image Sources:

Image 1: Balanced Group Discussion: http://blogs.msdn.com/b/willy-peter_schaub/archive/2010/02/23/mvp-global-summit-from-a-rangers-perspective.aspx

Image 2: Propose Ideas and Respond to Others: <http://www.freshnetworks.com/blog/2011/02/five-ways-to-encourage-online-engagement/>
