# Group and Collaborative Writing Assignments and Assessment

Meg Gorzycki, Ed.D.

## Purpose
In the team setting, researchers learn from those who have knowledge, expertise, and perspectives different from their own. Collaborative learning, including collaborative writing, is an exercise in constructing knowledge (Bruffee, 1993). The purpose of group writing assignment is to introduce students to the skills and procedures necessary to produce a composition through collaboration. It is an opportunity for instructors to help students form habits of mind and practice that contribute to their ability to work with others, assume responsibility for discrete tasks, and fairly and accurately critique other's work.

## Collaborative Writing
There are many forms of collaborative writing, and each can be used in tandem with others.

- Think-pair-share writing exercises requires partners to students to reflect upon a question or assertion, discuss their thoughts, and then respond in writing to that question or statement (Millis & Cottell, 2003). This exercise generates material for class discussion or other writing assignments. It may also be a warm-up exercise to introduce a new or controversial topic.
- Progressive writing calls for students to respond to prompts, write their reactions and thoughts on paper, then pass the paper to the next student who will continue the process (Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2005). This exercise is also useful in creative writing courses, wherein students may explore the process of creating a narrative and discussing the rationale for taking a story one way or the other.
- Peer-reviews of students' writing is collaborative in the sense that students may receive critiques of their work based not only on their peer's knowledge of grammar, syntax, formatting, and semantics, but on their peer's understanding of the topic and familiarity with various perspectives on the issues at hand. In this instance, students are collaborating not only for the purpose of correcting mechanical errors in writing, but offering insights about how one might improve or correct one's thinking about the subject.
- Research papers organized around a thesis represent complex compositions that may embody distinct segments, such as a review of the literature or discussion of research methods. Some teams assign writing tasks to individuals based on their expertise in a given aspect of the research. Collaboration in this instance is not only concerned with generating a "product," but ensuring that the "voice" of the paper remains consistent throughout the work, that the logic used to develop the narrative in one part of the research paper is the same as that throughout the paper, and that the piece speaks with the authority of all authors (Wiener, 1988).
- Writing research papers that do not require the scientific gathering and analysis of data might include writing reports that require evidence for assertions. The complexity of the writing team's job is increased by the need for all team members to effectively examine and understand the evidence. In some instances, the group may be required to produce a paper that represents the group's consensus, and in some cases, the group may write a report on their own experiences that explore the lack of consensus.

**Knowing and Trusting**. Group cohesion is essential for the success of a writing team (Ede & Lunsford, 1990). Especially in courses wherein students may not be familiar with each other, and yet, will depend on each other to produce academic work that represents high levels of achievement, it may be important to engage the class in trust-building exercises, such as ice-breakers.

**Evaluating the Work**. It is also important to introduce students to the processes of evaluating each other's work Peer reviews can be difficult for some students and sometimes they lack the validity of an expert opinion (Brammer & Rees, 2007). Formative assessments (that do not generate grades of record) are opportunities to guide students' thinking about the elements and standards of academic writing (Smith, Cooper, & Lancaster, 2002). Having students compose a short response to a prompt, for example, can generate writing that may be evaluated by using a rubric. In turn, discussing the scores that students awarded each other based on the rubric is an opportunity to introduce students to the important differences between the way novices and experts in the field write. In making the rubric for grading the papers regard only what is presented in the paper, instructors may avoid controversy over the effort that each individual did, or did not exert. They may also underscore the reality that each member of the group is equally responsible for proof-reading the final product.

A critical decision regards whether instructors will grade the group's process. Prior to the submission of the final paper, instructors may want to assess the level of each team member and the quality of each team member's contributions to the document's development. If the learning outcomes for the collaborative writing project includes demonstrations of students' ability to collaborate, instructors may want to examine evidence of students' contributions, such as on-line chats, lists of source material that will be used to developed the essay with notes, or group discussions in which instructors may learn more about the level of clarity and understanding about the process and the topic that each team member presents. Some instructors require students to keep a journal of their collaborative writing experiences, and use this to assess student engagement and understanding (Goldstein & Malone, 1985). What students learn as a result of participating in peer reviews of work can be captured in journal entries, focus groups, or short reflection papers. These requires prompt students to distill from their group work personal insights about writing, the construction of knowledge, and their own learning processes (Gebhardt, 1980).

**Expectations and Rules**. Many of the problems students encounter in collaborative writing projects stem from their limited preparedness to undertake the task (Sutton, 2007). Teams may benefit from a pre-assignment discussion about expectations. Dedicating class time for students to discuss their own experiences with group work in which each group member shared a grade is a reasonable place to begin a conversation. The discussion should culminate with students identifying their own expectations and rules relative to sharing the work load, respectful communication, meeting deadlines, and sharing notes or information.

**Division of Labor**. There are many ways to organize the work that goes into composition. Onrubia and Engle (2009) observed five distinct strategies that all relied upon robust digital communication between team members, each with its own unique distribution of responsibilities:

- Parallel construction takes a "cut and paste" approach, whereby each team member submits one part of the whole, which are then assembled by a designated individual
- Parallel construction may also take a "puzzle" approach, whereby team members submit a completed essay, which is then synthesized into one by a designated individual or team

- Sequential summative construction requires one person to lead the process of composition by proposing a resolution for completing various tasks, followed by the construction of the whole document by way of the team's integration of the pieces each team member generated
- Sequential integrating construction requires a lead writer to present whole segments or compositions for review of the group, followed by the lead writer's completion of the final draft
- Integrating construction enlists all team members to review drafts submitted by a lead writer, and via online chat, the lead writer is able to fold into the document text from other team members or make editorial adjustments in the composition

Instructors may permit writing groups to select their own preferred approach to the project, and may also overlay their approach with some requirements. For instance, instructors may require that all team members participate in the exploration phase of the project; and then, the instructor might designate class time for group explorations of the literature, and brain-storming on the matters such as the line of discussion the group will follow, which sources are vital to the essay, and whether graphic illustrations ought to be used. The class activity provides instructors with the opportunity to observe groups at work, and to note each student's level of participation.

**Literature Reviews**. The quality of students' research papers is often impacted by their proficiency with reading scholarly works and understanding the role of the literature review (Boote & Beile, 2005). In preparing students to be successful in their writing, they must often introduce students to the literature review and its role in:

- Framing the issue at hand
- Shaping key questions for research
- Clarifying concepts and controversies
- Illuminating the significance of current research and knowledge
- Revealing the limitations of what is known about a given topic
- Communicating the strength of consensus among experts in the field about an issue or topic
- Helping students confront assumptions and biases
- Appreciating the complexity of research methods and standards of validity

Class readings of samples of literature reviews that represent work on a spectrum of exemplary to mediocre or poor may improve students' sensitivity to the writer's accuracy, depth of understanding, ability to address the meaning, relevance, significance, and applications of research, biases, and awareness of implications. Such exercises can be facilitated with instructor-generated (mock) literature reviews that embody errors or limitations that instructors want to students to detect.

In collaborative writing, the quality of students' work is contingent upon each team member understanding the literature, as a substantial grasp of prior research will help to prevent team members from making erroneous assumptions and contributing ideas or text that contradicts current research.

Sample Rubric
The following rubric is based on a collaborative writing assignment that required students to:

- Research a current social welfare policy
- Compose an essay of 10-12 pages (not including cover and reference page)
- Discuss the current policy, its intentions, and its historical context

- Discuss the pending or developing policies related the policy, and identify the stakeholders in the matter, who is most vulnerable, and who stands to benefit the most
- Identify the group's position on the policy, or lack of consensus on the policy, and explore the rationales for opinions on the matter
- Format the paper as follows: 1 inch margins on all sides of the page; 12 point Times New Roman font; double spaced; APA formatting
- Proof read the essay mindful of exemplary use of grammar, syntax, semantics, tone, and spelling

**A Rubric for A Collaborative Essay on a Social Welfare Policy based on Maximum of 50 Points**

| Aspects of Essay | Exemplary (10) | Accomplished/Sufficient (9-8) | Emerging (7-6) | Nascent (5-1) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intro | Clearly and accurately describes the current policy, its historical origins and context and significance; rich detail and insights concerning stakeholders | Clearly and accurately describes the current policy; historical origins, context and significance are explored in some detail; adequate scope and understanding on stakeholders | Somewhat clear and accurate description of the current policy, its historical origins and context and significance; narrow conception of stakeholders | Vaguely describes the current policy; historical origins and context underdeveloped; significance not apprehended; emerging grasp of stakeholders |
| Developing & Pending Action | Thorough and accurate account of recent developments; acute sensitivity to wide scope of stakeholders; excellent and abundant insights to implications to pending action or inaction | Largely thorough and accurate account of recent developments; some sensitivity to some scope of stakeholders; some insights to implications to pending action or inaction | Somewhat and accurate account of recent developments; sensitive to narrow scope of stakeholders; few insights to implications to pending action or inaction | Underdeveloped and somewhat inaccurate developments; emerging understanding of stakeholders; little awareness of implications of pending action |
| Position | Clearly identifies position or describes lack of group consensus; offers abundant, relevant, and accurate justification | Clearly identifies position or describes lack of group consensus; offers some, relevant, and accurate justification | Vaguely identifies position or describes lack of group consensus; offers few relevant or accurate justifications or is convoluted | Vaguely identifies position or describes lack of group consensus; justification is underdeveloped or missing |
| Grammar, Syntax, Semantics, & Spelling | Outstanding use of grammar, syntax, semantics, and spelling; error-free | Accomplished use of grammar, syntax, semantics, and spelling; few minor errors | Fair use of grammar, syntax, semantics, and spelling; many minor errors | Nascent use of grammar, syntax, semantics, and spelling; many major and minor errors |
| Formatting, Organization & Citations | Excellent logic in organizing discussion; strong topic sentences always followed by information immediate to topic; citations abundant, well-used; No errors in formatting | Strong or sufficient logic in organizing discussion; strong topic sentences usually followed by information immediate to topic; citations sufficient, well-used; Few minor errors in formatting | Inconsistent logic in organization and strength of topic sentences and sue of information immediate to topic; citations limited and sometimes well-used; several formatting errors | Confusing; vague topic sentences sometimes followed by information related to topic; few citations, some inappropriately used; some major formatting errors |

References

Barkley, Elizabeth, K. Patricia Cross, and Claire Howell Major. *Collaborative Learning Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005. Print.

Boote, D. N. & Beile, P. (2005). Scholars before researchers: On the centrality of the dissertation literature review in research preparation. *Educational Researcher*, 34(6), 3-15.

Brammer, C. & Rees, M. (2007). Peer review from the students' perspective: Invaluable or invalid? *Composition Studies*, 35(2), 71-85.

Bruffee, Kenneth. *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge.* Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1993. Print.

Ede, Lisa, and Andrea Lunsford. *Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing.* Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1990. Print.

Gebhardt, R. (1980).Teamwork and feedback: Broadening the base of collaborative writing. *College English*, 42(1), 69-74.

Goldstein, J. R. & Malone, E. L. (1985). Using journals to strengthen collaborative writing. *Bulletin of the Association of Business Communication,* 47: 24-29.

Millis, Barbara, and Philip Cottell. "A Cooperative Learning Structure for Large Classes: Think-Pair-Share." *Small Group Instruction in Higher Education: Lessons from the Past, Visions of the Future.* Eds. James L. Cooper, Pamela Robinson, and David Ball. Stillwater, OK: New Forums, 2003. Print.

Onrubria, J. & Engle, A. (2009). Strategies for collaborative and phases of knowledge construction in CSCL environments. *Computers & Education*, 53(4): 1256-1265.

Smith, H., Cooper, A., & Lancaster, L. (2002). Improving the quality of undergraduate peer assessment: A case for student and staff development. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 39(1), 81-81.

Snyder, Lisa Gueldenzoph. "Teaching Teams about Teamwork: Preparation, Practice, and Performance Review." *Business Communication Quarterly* 72.1 (2009): 74-9. *Business Source Premier.* Web. 27 Oct. 2010.

Sutton, Mark. "English 4090: Collaborative Writing at Work." *Composition Studies* 35.2 (2007): 101-15. *MLA International Bibliography.* Web. 27 Oct. 2010.

Weiner, Harvey. "Collaborative Learning in the Classroom: A Guide to Evaluation." *The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook.* Eds. Gary Tate and Edward Corbett. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. 238-47. Print.