

# Chapter Four: How to Collaborate and Write With Others

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## Why Collaborate on Writing?

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In my teaching experience, students have mixed feelings about collaboration. Many of my students initially say they don’t want to work with their classmates on their writing. When it comes to in-class peer review sessions or more involved collaborative project such as small group work, they believe there is nothing they can learn about their writing from their classmates; “After all, “they tell me, “the teacher gives the grade.”

However, most of my students tell me *after* the course ends that the times in which they collaborated with their classmates were occasions where they felt they learned a lot about writing. While they might enter into collaborative exercises and writing projects reluctantly, it’s been my experience that most students end up finding them worthwhile.

Collaborating in different ways on writing projects is a good idea for several reasons. First, composition and rhetoric teachers and scholars have known for a long time now that one of the best ways for students to improve their writing skills is to have them share their writing with other students. If you think about it for a moment, this is common sense. If you never show your writing to other readers, or if you limit your audience to simply the teacher, how will you as a writer learn about the effectiveness of your writing beyond a grade in a class?

Second, almost all “real writing” is the product of collaboration. Of course, you probably don’t collaborate on your diary or journal entries, letters to relatives, or emails to your friends. But almost all of the writing you read in academic or popular publications has involved different levels of collaboration, sometimes in surprising and hidden ways. For example, while I am indeed the author of *The Process of Research Writing*, this book has been a collaborative project in the sense



that I received a lot of advice and ideas from my wife, friends, students, colleagues, and editors.

### **Considering (and Balancing) the Two Extremes of Collaboration**

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Collaboration always implies people working together toward a goal, but I like to think of the way collaboration actually works as being somewhere between two extremes.

One extreme is what I call "*very immediate and intimate*" collaboration, where writers collaborate *extremely* closely, literally sitting together in front of the computer keyboard or the pad of paper and going over each sentence of each paragraph together.

The **advantages** of this very close collaboration include:

- An equal and immediate sense for everyone involved about how the project is going;
- Writing projects that are more seamless: that is, all of the different parts fit together clearly as one complete text; and
- A greater sense by individuals within a group of their roles, since all the group members are working together in the same time and place.

The **disadvantages** of this type of collaboration include:

- "Hard workers" in the group might resent the group members who do not seem to contribute an equal part, or some members of the group might feel they are being silenced and manipulated by more forceful group members;
- It can be difficult to coordinate times and places to meet; and
- It is extremely time consuming, especially if the group is collaborating on creating a more detailed writing project.

The other extreme of collaboration is what I call "*very distant*" collaboration, where writers divide up the labor of a particular project into smaller tasks that can be then assigned to members of the group and put together later, assembly-line fashion.

Some of the **advantages** of this type of collaboration include:

- It is easy to set up tasks so each group member has the opportunity to contribute equally without duplicating the work of others;



- It can be done with few (if any) meetings where all of the group members need to be present; and
- Tasks can be accomplished quickly since all group members are simultaneously working on their parts of the project.

The **disadvantages** include:

- Because it is being done in parts, the completed project may seem disjointed and uneven;
- It can be difficult to manage this sort of collaboration since the individual parts of the project have to somehow be put together, usually by a group leader, someone who is named by the others, or someone who takes on the role; and
- There can be resentment within the group, either from leaders who other members of the group feel are doing a poor job, or of those within the group perceived as not doing their share of the work.

Where most collaborative projects end up on the "collaboration spectrum" depend on the nature of the collaborative task. For example, things like in-class peer review of each others' rough drafts, in-class reading and writing assignments, or shorter collaborative writing projects tend to end up closer to "very immediate and intimate" collaboration. Things like collaborative research writing projects, research oriented web sites, or to other longer and more detailed writing projects tend to be closer to the "very distant" collaboration side of the spectrum.

Clearly, one sort of collaboration isn't automatically "better" than another; it depends on your purposes. The best approach to any collaborative project is to be conscious of the strengths and weaknesses of both sides of the collaborative spectrum and strive to emphasize the strengths of the approach within which you are working.

For example, one way to avoid some of the pitfalls of the "very immediate and intimate" types of collaboration is to make sure that each member of the group has a clear sense of their role in the writing project and is allowed to contribute. Conversely, the disadvantages of "very distant" types of collaboration might be avoided if members of the group strive to work on producing writing in a similar style and if there is frequent communication among group members.

### **Peer Review as Collaboration**

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One of the most common types of collaboration done in writing classes comes in the form of in-class "group work" or as peer review sessions. Peer review has



become a common practice for contemporary composition and rhetoric classrooms. Basically, it is the process where small groups of students read, comment on, and make suggestions for other student's work.

While successful peer review can be hard and takes practice, it really can work. But first, you have to be willing to accept two premises.

- ***Your fellow students have valid comments to make on your writing projects.*** Students often assume that the only person whose opinion really matters is the teacher because, after all, the teacher is the one who assigns the grade. I understand the logic of the assumption that the "teacher is always right," but I don't think it's true.

The best writing projects are ones that strive to fulfill a purpose and reach an audience that is beyond a particular class and a particular teacher. But beyond that, your classmates represent an audience you should be trying to reach. You should listen to your classmate's suggestions because they are in same writing situation as you. After all, they too are trying to reach an audience that includes their fellow classmates, and they are also writing a project that will have to be read and evaluated by the teacher.

- ***All writing projects can be improved by revision.*** Sometimes we have an overly romantic view of writing and of writers who are able to create "great works" without ever having to make any real changes. Rarely (if ever) has this been the case. Any writing project can be improved with revision.

As straightforward as these premises might be, they can often be difficult to accept. But with practice, patience, and work with your classmates, seeing these premises as valid becomes easier.

### **How peer review can work, step by step**

I offer the following advice on how to get started with peer review sessions as a "recipe" where ingredients and methods can be altered to fit the particulars of the class, the writing project, time limitations, and so forth. After all, you and your teacher probably have ideas on what will or won't work for peer review in your specific contexts.

- ***With the help of your teacher, break into groups of three to five students.*** Groups of five work well only if the writing project you are considering is short or if you have a lot of class time to go over each project. I would also recommend not working in pairs since that overly limits the size of the audience.



Some students and teachers like to work with the same peer collaborators for the entire semester, while others like to work with different collaborators with each project.

- **Exchange a copy of your writing project with each person in the group.** You should come to the peer review session class with several copies of your writing project to share with others in your peer review group.
  
- **Select someone to start, and have that person read their essay out loud while the other members of the group read along.** The extent to which you will be able to read your essays out loud will vary according to the particular circumstances of your class and of the assignment, but I would encourage you to try to include this step in the process of in-class peer review. Actually reading your writing out loud to others gives the reader and writer a real sense of the voice of an essay and is a great way for writers and readers to catch small grammar errors.
  
- **While the writer "up" is reading, the readers should read along, marking comments in the margins of the draft they are reading.** As a reader, you should note points you hope to come back to in group discussion. You can also mark any grammatical errors you might notice as you read.
  
- **When the writer is done reading, the readers should provide their comments.** This is **not** the time for the writer to explain things that the readers say they didn't understand. Rather, this is the time for the writer to *listen* to what the other members of the group have to say.

This is a crucial part of the process because the questions that readers have are ones that point to changes the writer should make in revision rather than being answered in person. After all, you will never be able to be there when other readers (your teacher or other people in your audience) try to understand your writing project. Readers' questions have to be anticipated and answered in the writing itself. So, the role of the person who just finished reading is to try and be as open-minded (and open-eared!) to their classmates' advice as possible.

Giving good advice to classmates in peer review sessions can be a tricky process. Readers often have a hard time expressing their comments to the person who's writing is being discussed. On the one hand, it isn't productive or nice to say things that might hurt the writer's feelings; but on the other hand, it also isn't productive to be *so* nice as to not say anything that can help the writer. So the goal here should be to somehow balance the two: advice that is "nice," but also constructive.

Here are two suggestions to help make this step of readers giving writers constructive advice a bit easier:



- **Try to keep the focus of the constructive advice on the big issues.** By "the big issues," I mean things like the clarity of the points the writer is trying to make, the use of evidence, the points where readers are particularly persuaded or particularly confused, and so forth. This is not to say things like grammar and proofreading and such are not important—far from it. But those issues are more about "proofreading" than they are about changing the substance of an essay.
- **Consider some of the questions I have at the end of each of the chapters in Part Two of the book, "Exercises in the Process of Research."** Each of the chapters in this part of the book end with sections titled "Questions to Ask While Writing and Researching" and "Review and Revision." The questions you should consider very according to the writing exercise, but the goal is always the same: what changes can you make to your writing project to make it more accessible to your readers?

Making revisions as a result questions like these (and the ones provided by your teacher) will make it much easier for you and your group members to give each other useful advice, and it will also help keep the group on task.

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### **A few final things to remember about successful peer review**

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- **Peer review takes practice.** If you don't think peer review works that well for you and your classmates the first time you try it, give it another chance with a different writing project. Like most things in writing (or life!) that are rewarding and useful, good peer review takes practice and time. If you stick with it, you'll see that the peer review sessions you have toward the end of term are much more productive than the ones at the beginning of the term.
- **If you don't get good advice about your writing projects in class, seek out advice elsewhere.** Show a draft of your writing project to someone who's opinion you value—friends, family, classmates—and ask them for suggestions in making the project better. If your school has a writing center, writing lab, or other sort of tutoring center, take a copy of the writing project to it and have a staff member look at your work.
- **It is always still up to you to choose what advice you want to follow.** Inevitably, you will receive advice from your reviewers that is conflicting or that is advice you simply don't agree with. That is okay. Remember that you are not under any obligation to incorporate *all* the suggestions you receive, and part of the process of becoming a better writer is learning for yourself when you need to follow advice and when you need to follow your own instincts.

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### **Collaborative Writing on Larger Projects**

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Collaboration on large and ongoing writing projects can be a rewarding experience for both teachers and students for several reasons.

- *Collaborative groups provide a "support" mechanism that can often times be very important when working on a research project.* Writing and researching are hard work, and it can be comforting and encouraging to have the support of classmates to help you successfully complete projects.
- *Collaborating with others can often make more elaborate and sophisticated research projects possible.* Simply put, by "putting their heads together," writers working in groups can usually do more research and more analysis of a topic than someone working alone.

### **Collaborating With Computers and the Internet**

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Two of the most significant obstacles to collaborative writing, especially collaboration on larger writing projects, are time and place. It can be difficult to set up a meeting outside of class time that fits into the schedule of all the members of the group. This can obviously make for a frustrating and unpleasant collaborative experience.

Computers and the Internet have dramatically extended the possibilities of collaborative writing projects. With tools like e-mail, chat room, and instant messaging, students can collaborate "asynchronously:" that is, they can work with each other without having to meet in a specific place or at a specific time. While "live" communication tools like chat and instant messaging require participants to be interacting at the same time, students can still collaborate with each other without having to be in the same place.

Chances are, you have already used email or instant messaging to do a form of "collaboration" online. Most of my students are familiar with these technologies, and many of my students use things like email or instant messaging to plan meetings or evening plans, even to do homework. Collaborative peer review doesn't need to be any more complicated than this: emailing each other (usually by including a group of email addresses in the "to" line) or chatting with each other with one of the many commercial chat and instant messaging services.

The Internet also has a lot of potential as a collaborative writing tool. For "very immediate and intimate" styles of collaborations, writers can work together on the same web site, but they can do it asynchronously. For projects that tend toward the "very distant" side of the collaboration spectrum, web writers can work on parts of a web site individually and then assemble them later. For more detail on creating collaborative web projects, see chapter 12, "The Web-based Research Project." **This title will change...**



Of course, collaborating with each other with computers and the Internet is slightly different than collaborating "face to face" with each other. Here are some things to be think about and some things to avoid as you try to collaborate asynchronously:

- **Make sure everyone in your collaborative group is included in the discussion.** This can be a problem with some email applications since automatically replying to the sender of a message doesn't necessarily mean it will go to all of the members of your group. To make sure no one is left out, make sure that all members of the group have everyone's correct email address, and make sure all of these addresses appear in the "To:" line of your email software. To include multiple email addresses in the "To:" line, separate each email address with a comma.
  
- **Make sure everyone in your collaborative group understands how to read and write messages in the format they are being sent.** For example, if you and your group members decide to send attachments of writing projects to each other, make sure that everyone has access to the appropriate software and understands how to use it.
  
- **All of the group members need to read and respond to each other's messages in a timely fashion.** If some group members are in the habit of checking their email once every other week, that person will have to change their habits for the purposes of this project. Collaboration with email works best when each member of the group checks their email at least once a day.
  
- **Keep in mind the rules of good "netiquette" when working with your group members.** In chapter two, "Understanding and Using the Library and the Internet for Research," I provided a brief guide to the practice of good online etiquette, or "netiquette." I would encourage you to review those guidelines as you work with your group members online. Remember that simple misunderstandings and miscommunications, the sorts of things that are usually easy to clarify in "face-to-face" interactions, can sometimes become arguments or "flames" online. So be sure to use common sense courtesy, and remember that there are "real people" behind the emails that you are sending.
  
- **Remember that some things are better done "face-to-face," so be prepared to schedule some more traditional collaboration time.** Computers and the Internet are rarely suitable to serve as a *complete* substitution for more traditional "face-to-face" collaboration experiences. While collaborating via e-mail is extremely convenient, it often isn't very efficient. Writing and reading tasks that would only a few moments to discuss "face-to-face" can take days or longer to discuss online. So while using electronic tools like email can minimize the number of more traditional collaboration meetings you will need to have with your group members, it probably won't eliminate them entirely.

