



Writing as a Team

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Organizations form teams for a variety of reasons. The most obvious is that the quantity of work is too great for any one person to manage alone. Equally significant is that teamwork is the only way to access the collective wisdom of the organization as a whole.

Writing as a team is also called “collaborative writing.”

Collaborate – to work, one with another; cooperate, as on a literary work:

They collaborated on a novel.

~Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language. NY: Gramercy, 1996.

Broadly speaking, writing collaboratives exist in three types:

- Divide and conquer
- Expertise
- Consensus

Ideally, a project will move systematically between the three types at pre-defined stages.

Collaborative writing projects can have different types of leadership, such as:

Positional experts – authorizes decisions based on power within organization

Subject matter experts – authorizes decisions based on expertise

Project coordinators – schedules meetings and deadlines, works toward consensus

The leadership will help to determine what type of collaborative this will be and how smoothly (or whether) the project moves between collaborative types.

Regardless of the leadership type, teams can benefit from facilitators. A facilitator is an independent person whose role is to listen to the team, to reiterate and restate what the team says, to identify and rank priorities according to the team's wishes, and to remind the team of its objectives and priorities throughout the project.

Ideally, a good facilitator is a) sufficiently familiar with the organization to understand the context and purpose of their work, b) a great listener and critical thinker, and b) a writing expert.



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Best practices for team leaders include all of the following (from Lunsford and Ede – *Singular Texts/ Plural Authors*, pp 123-124, adapted for government):

- 1) Provide time and resources for the team to meet, to agree on key issues and strategies, and for natural leaders in various areas of expertise to emerge.
- 2) Provide time and resources for the team to develop their own behaviors, authorities, and responsibilities particularly within these four areas:
 - a) the group
 - b) the profession
 - c) the task
 - d) the writing
- 3) Encourage creative conflict and protect minority views.
- 4) Define strategic moments in the project to ask participants to monitor and evaluate individual and group performance and to reflect on the processes that made for (in)effective collaboration.

A collaborative writing project cannot proceed without defining its purpose. As team members work towards this definition, it is useful to distinguish among –

- Working objectives for team members in the process of producing the document
- Objectives for the document itself such as its content or its style
- Tangible objectives occurring in the world as a result of the written document

Both the project's purpose and the distinction among project purposes are vital to the project. They become the benchmarks whereby every other decision is tested. If these are unclear, it will be difficult or impossible to make the remainder of the decisions on the project.

If the team is having difficulty making decisions, return to the project's purpose and be certain these are clearly defined and that the entire team shares the same understanding of them.

All writing collaboratives share some common pitfalls. Here are just a few, with suggestions for how to resolve them:

- 1) **Time** – there is a pervasive sense that collaborative writing takes longer than individual writing. The only sense in which this is true is the effort it takes to schedule all the team members to be in one place at one time. *In reality, collaborative writing projects take about the same amount of time as individual writing projects.*

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Two reasons likely exist for this perception. One is that on a collaborative writing project, people are brought into the writing process much earlier than they would be if they were writing a document on their own. The team spends a lot of time planning; whereas an individual would do much of the planning work on the fly and would not consider such work to be part of the “writing process.”

The second reason is the perceived loss of control. In a team environment, consensus must be reached before the writing begins, while individuals are sometimes chomping at the bit to get started writing.

It is true that outside the constraints of a team, we have the freedom to write a document ourselves, the way we see fit, without waiting for consensus. However, in large organizations, an individual may write a document only to find it thoroughly revised or even vetoed by a superior. Once again, the decision-making is being front-loaded, which can make it seem that collaborative writing projects take longer than other documents to write.

- 2) Group-think** – Our brains work differently in a crowd than they do when we are on our own. For some people, this can be exhilarating. For others, it can feel claustrophobic.

A good facilitator can help to overcome this problem by providing space for the team to reflect on problems individually and then regroup to discuss the problem together. It’s also a good idea for team members to keep journals recording their own thought processes and the ways in which they diverge from or are influenced by the group.

But remember that the value of a team is in its multiple perspectives, and these emerge through dialogue, which brings us to our next point.

- 3) Single-mindedness** – Sometimes one (or more) member of the team has one perspective that tends to dominate the discussion and that tends to shut down other productive modes of inquiry. Here are three strategies that a team can use to deal with the problem:

a) Probe – It may be useful to ask probing questions to determine why this issue is so prominent in the team member’s mind. In this way the team may be able to redirect the discussion into other, more productive areas of inquiry.

b) Purpose – Teams should constantly be evaluating their discussions in terms of the purposes they defined at the outset. Ask the group member which of the team’s purposes his or her issue addresses. The issue can thus be re-framed into an area of inquiry that is relevant to the entire team instead of the one team member.

c) Postpone – The team may need to carve out time to address the issue and request that discussion be tabled until that time.



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Ideally, team members will participate from every level within an organization. Each team member deserves to know, as early as possible, what his or her roles or responsibilities will be. Remember that those may change depending upon the project stage. Regardless, team members as individuals are responsible for ensuring that –

- different perspectives are encouraged
- commitment to the team is maintained
- reflection is made on personal contributions

Best practice for team members: *“Listen ultra intensely; don’t let your feelings get hurt by criticism; don’t hesitate to ask questions or change styles; and be verbose. It’s always easier to erase than to go back and reconstruct original thought processes.” (Lunsford and Ede, 65-66).*

References:

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

Nilsen, Alleen Pace. “Men and Women: Working Together in Changing Times.” *School Library Journal*. 27 (Sept 1980): 29-32.

Gere, Anne. *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1987.



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Hello,

This is L. Michelle Baker, PhD, the Corporate Writing Pro. I created this presentation as a service to you because I understand that the work you do is complicated and requires the expertise and efforts of multiple writers.

I teach government biologists how to write more clearly in courses such as [Eight Weeks to Writing with Clarity](#), [Keys to Effective Editing](#), and [Argument for Scientists](#). I've been working with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service since 2007, and I teach regularly at the [National Conservation Training Center](#) in Shepherdstown, WV as a course instructor in classes such as [Critical Writing and Critical Thinking](#) as well as [Scientific Writing for Publication](#).

I also work as a writing coach and a team facilitator. And it's in that capacity that I'd like to say a few words to you.

Writing as a team is hard. It can often feel as though there are too many cooks in the kitchen, as though there is insufficient time to make a document cohere the way we would like, or as though it is inevitable that someone will walk away feeling hurt or discouraged by the process.

Writing as a team will always be a challenge. But done well, it can be an exciting, invigorating, and exhilarating challenge. Writing teams can produce documents that reflect the best an agency has to offer in both expertise and policy. And team members can walk away from the experience with greater knowledge and power as well as a deeper sense of commitment and belonging.

Best of all, it does not require a single, strong leader to make this happen. Teams can work effectively when they engage in these practices as teams:

- Engage as a team from the earliest possible stage of the project.
- Involve team members consistently as appropriate to their responsibilities.
- Inform team members of all actions being taken.
- Establish project purposes and priorities clearly and refer to them often.
- Allow leaders to emerge based upon the project stage and the expertise required.
- Reframe and redirect issues that appear to be off-topic.
- Encourage different perspectives.
- Relinquish ownership of the project to the organization and its mission.
- Maintain high degree of personal responsibility as individuals to the team.
- Reflect on the process and on each member's personal contributions.



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These practices are easier to maintain when teams work with a facilitator. A good facilitator-

- is independent from the project.
- is familiar with your organization and the context in which you work.
- understands what motivates your team members.
- is a writing expert.
- is a great listener.
- thinks clearly and critically.
- sees the big picture.

If you're engaged in a collaborative writing project now, or if you will be part of one in the near future, give me a call. I'm here to help.

Sincerely,

L. Michelle Baker

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Because communication is key!

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