

# 6 STRONGER TOGETHER: COLLABORATIVE WORK IN THE TECHNICAL WRITING CLASSROOM

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Group work is hard.<sup>1</sup> It requires careful planning, negotiation, and trust. Most of us, as students and teachers, have been in a situation when we were assigned a collaborative project and thought how easier it would be to do it alone. Collaborative writing projects are no different. Before even considering questions related to work distribution and fairness, it is very tempting to think of writing as a solitary act that a group setting slows down and makes more difficult. What we often forget though is that collaboration can be an asset by giving us more ideas to draw from to generate and shape the content for the audience. It also gives us opportunities to participate in bigger projects that could not be completed by one person alone and it helps to emulate workplace writing experiences. Collaborative writing is indeed a key component of many professions and a core competency in technical writing. Learning how to do it well does not just make for higher quality class projects, it can also offer space for students to work with clients and, consequently, become a line on a résumé to transition into post-academic contexts.

College classes often involve some level of collaborative work. Technical writing courses are no different. In fact, collaboration has long been identified as one of the key components of technical and professional writing courses (Allen and Benninghoff). Yet, many of us have experienced times of anxiety and even dread when we mark the days on the class calendar that precede the start of the group project. From communication issues to fear of unequal workload distribution or scheduling difficulties, let's be honest, there are many reasons for being leery about group work.

Because we tend to think of writing as a solitary act, collaborating on writing projects may seem even more complicated. How can one create

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and produce content as a team? How should the project be handled so that the final product is cohesive and reflects everyone's input? How can one make sure one group member does not end up handling most of the workload? And, perhaps most importantly, how can one use collaboration to their advantage to make the end product better than a solo-executed project? These are all questions that this chapter addresses. Specifically, this chapter provides strategies not only for developing content as a group but also for making a collaborative writing project meaningful and, yes, even fun. Really, what is the point of collaboration if a project is easier to complete alone?

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### WHAT IS THERE TO GAIN?

**T**he first step toward a successful collaborative writing experience is understanding **WHY** it matters and **WHAT** we can gain from it. The idea behind this is simple: once we understand the relevance of a task, we are more likely to be motivated and engage with it in a productive way.

The main reasons for learning how to write collaboratively are twofold: first, it is a way to make the writing more authentic and reflective of what it does and is outside of the classroom; second, it is a way to develop tangible skills for your résumé.

#### **REASON 1: CONNECTING WRITING TO ITS REALITIES OUTSIDE OF THE CLASSROOM**

Most writing performed in the workplace involves more than one person. As noted by scholar Kristin Woolever, “collaboration is the way work gets done today” (141).

Whether it is developing a report, a grant proposal, content for a website, or a series of instructions, professional writing generally involves input from different people at different stages of the process. Examples of such people can be:

- A subject matter expert (SME) whose expertise lies with a specific technical product or process and provides you with information for a technical report on a particular product or for instructions for a specific piece of software.
- A team member with whom you collaborate on the research and development of a grant proposal.

- Your boss for whom you are drafting an official email, letter, or any other document that will be sent within the company or go out to clients.

The prevalence of collaborative writing in the workplace also explains why it is used frequently in the technical writing classroom.

For example, speaking of the technical writing/communication classroom, scholar Liz Lane describes it as “wildly collaborative, in that we prepare our students to collaborate and test project management skills for eventual implementation in their professional lives beyond the classroom” (32). In their 2021 book chapter on “The rhetoric, science, and technology of 21st century collaboration,” scholars Ann Hill Duin, Jason Tham, and Isabel Pedersen describe collaboration as an imperative for today’s technical communicators and emphasize its importance in the classroom as means to prepare students for the workplace. In other words, think of collaboration not only as one of the key topics of technical writing but also as an activity that emulates the kind of writing you will encounter in your future professional lives.

## UNDERSTANDING COLLABORATION TYPES

Depending on the situation and the project, the collaboration will occur at different moments of the writing process and have different functions. It may also be more or less involved, ranging from punctual collaborative moments to projects that are entirely collaborative from the beginning to the end.

For example, going back to our first example of working with a subject matter expert (SME), let’s say you are tasked with developing instructions for a specific software. The SME may work with you during the planning phase of your document and again during the testing and revision phase. In this case, the SME acts as a source for the content as well as an editor, perhaps in an unofficial capacity but editor nonetheless since their knowledge is what will guide the development of your document.

If you write a grant in a team environment (cf. previous example 2), you probably will be working as a team throughout the whole process. Depending on the team members’ area of expertise, one member may analyze the requirements for the grant (grant analyst), another may research the grant’s target audience and their values (researcher and fact checker), while another one may take the lead on developing the content of the proposal (the grant writer and editor).

Though it may be less evident to think of it as such, the writing of a correspondence document sent by a company to its clients also involves a

form of collaboration (cf. earlier example 3). Even in this case, you are not writing alone and for yourself but with and for someone else. Your collaborator's role may then be limited to being a gatekeeper (that is, the person approving and signing off the document to be sent/published) but the fact remains that they are part of the writing process. The document that you produce speaks for and reflects someone else's purpose besides your own.

### **MAKING IT MATTER**

The three previous examples are good reminders of the inherently collaborative aspect of writing in the workplace. In this regard, collaborating on writing projects prepares you for what writing is and does outside of the classroom. It makes your coursework more tangible and authentic by connecting it to your future professional life. Keeping in mind this bigger picture can also help you set your own learning goals. For instance, remembering how a project helps you to gain practice with the kind of communication you will encounter in your future career will make it easier to focus on what you want to take away from a project. This may also give you an extra source of motivation, besides earning a good grade.

### **REASON 2: DEVELOPING TANGIBLE SKILLS FOR YOUR RÉSUMÉ**

Beyond these immediate writing-specific learning outcomes, working on a collaborative project is also a great practice for developing the kinds of soft skills that employers value.

### **DEVELOPING SOFT SKILLS**

Collaboration can be a catalyst for the development of soft skills such as being a good listener, showing empathy, learning to see situations from different perspectives, being able to negotiate different points of view, and being able to problem solve and resolve conflicts. For instance, a solo writing project can make it difficult to think about how a specific audience may interpret your text or react to your ideas. But when you develop content with a team, you must confront your ideas with others early in the process, and thus gain experience with editing as well as listening and negotiating. If such skills are sought after by employers, it is not always easy to provide evidence on your résumé for how and why you possess them. Listing a group project as evidence and example can do just that.

## WORKING WITH OUTSIDE AUDIENCES

Collaboration may also give you opportunities to work with communities and clients outside of the classroom. For example, if your technical writing course entails a service-learning component (that is, a project with an off-campus community partner), your team may be paired with a client such as a small nonprofit and be tasked with developing content for their website. Research has shown that class projects involving partners outside of the classroom are stronger motivation factors for collaboration than projects that remain inside of the classroom (Rebecca Pope-Ruark et al.). This relationship is yet another way of thinking about the WHY of collaboration in the technical writing classroom: besides giving you easy ways to get feedback on your work and to strengthen your communication and listening skills, it can also open up exciting possibilities for client projects that can be listed as experiences on your résumé.

So, when you are assigned this pesky group project, make it count and connect it to your long-term goals. This is not much different from any other class assignment, really. One of the challenges of class assignments is that they may feel artificial or disconnected from our immediate lives or future careers. How often did you write a paper, thinking “no one will ever care about this work except my instructor?” or “how does this connect to what I will do later?” Of course, this can affect your motivation. This is where thinking of an assignment beyond the immediacy of the classroom helps. It is a way to remember the WHY of the assignment and to emphasize WHAT you want to gain from it in the long run, even if in the end your instructor is your primary audience. Most importantly, it will make the work more meaningful and possibly ease worries you may have about it. For a collaborative project, always keep in mind how it will give you important skills for your résumé and future career. If you are not convinced, do a quick online search on “workplace collaboration” before starting your group assignment and see how many results you get and check what job recruiters say about it in your own field.

### WHAT IS AN EFFECTIVE TEAM?

Once the relevance of collaborative writing is clear to you, the next step is to understand HOW to do it successfully. In other words, the question becomes: what makes a team effective?

## PROJECT COMPLETION AND TECHNICAL SKILLS MATTER BUT THEY ARE NOT ENOUGH

It may be easy to equate team effectiveness with project completion. While submitting a project that is complete and on time is part of success, it is not all there is to it. Indeed, a project with one team member carrying out most of the work can hardly be considered a success or a model for future collaborations. Research has shown that communication and team cohesion are fundamental elements in a team's success (Lam; Murphy et al.). Even more so, lack of group cohesion and dealing with non-contributing members are the elements students mention most often as reasons for disliking group projects (Hall & Buzwell; Lam; Williams, et al.).

Depending on the class and the specifics of the project, you may be able to select your team yourself or you may be put in a team by your instructor. If the goal is to have everyone contribute, it may be tempting to think then that the most important element for a successful collaboration is a team whose members have the right technical skills for the project. Though important, it is (sadly) not enough to guarantee a successful collaboration. If it were, it would make collaboration much easier to plan since it would pretty much just be a matter of adding up the right technical skills. From experience, most of us know that it is far more complicated.

Imagine a project for which a team creates a series of instructions for a specific online application. A skill-based approach to the team's composition could involve questions such as:

- Who has experience with this specific app?
- Who has previous instruction writing experience?
- Who has information and document design experience?
- Who is a strong writer and editor?

While these questions must be discussed by the team at some point, they cannot be the only consideration. They should not even be the first questions asked during the planning phase. Indeed, even if a team is composed of members with all the appropriate technical skills, the team will not be effective if the members do not manage to work together as a cohesive group. Even if the end-product is completed and delivered, a project environment riddled with conflicts and tensions cannot be described as successful.

Ultimately, what makes a team effective cannot be measured by the addition of specific technical skills or even by the delivery of an end product.

Rather, it should be assessed by the ability of its members to collaborate and complete the project as a team. Differently put, what makes a team effective is the capacity to manage a project, to develop common goals, to get along and trust each other.

If equitable work distribution and effective contributions from all team members are key factors in a team's success, they are also the most difficult challenges to overcome. This also explains why the issue of non-contributing members, often referred to as social loafing, has become an area of research. For instance, scholar Chris Lam conducted a study that identified "communication quality and task cohesion" as key factors for reducing social loafing (454). Lam's conclusions and his focus on communication quality and team cohesion are on par with what Google discovered in its study on collaboration.

## GOOGLE'S PROJECT ARISTOTLE

Because collaboration is a crucial aspect of today's workplace, questions related to effective teamwork are of interest to many companies. The tech company Google, who is well known for its reliance and promotion of teamwork, launched a project in 2012 named Project Aristotle with the goal of determining what makes a team effective. The name Aristotle is a reference to the famous Greek philosopher and specifically to one of his famous quotes, "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." The quote can be read as an evocation of what makes collaboration complex and the fact that a team's success is not simply determined by the individual skills of its members. Differently put, understanding collaboration requires understanding what makes the togetherness of a team successful. And this was precisely Google's goal for launching Project Aristotle.

Following two years of studying over 180 teams and intense data collection, the project identified 5 key characteristics and drivers for team effectiveness. In order of importance, the characteristics are as follow (Duhigg; Re:Work):

- Psychological safety: this refers to how safe a teammate feels to take risks without being considered ignorant or incompetent (Edmonson).
- Dependability: team effectiveness is also driven by members being able to rely and count on quality work from their teammates.
- Structure and clarity: an effective team establishes a clear structure for the collaboration and sets clear goals for the project.

- **Meaning:** in an effective team, each member finds a sense of purpose.
- **Impact:** team effectiveness is also driven by members identifying the “impact” that the work makes (Grant). Another way of thinking about this is to say: team effectiveness is driven by members’ ability to identify the “so what” of the work.

One of the main and, perhaps surprising, findings of this study is that a team’s effectiveness depends greatly on how safe team members feel. That is, for group work to be effective, team members must know that the team is a safe space and that they will not be mocked or rejected for speaking up and sharing their ideas. In many ways, Project Aristotle gives us additional and measurable data that confirms not only our experiences with group projects but also writing studies research results and the importance of communication quality (Lam; Wolfe).

### **WHAT ARE THE STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION?**

Teams often go through stages to find what works best for them (Tuckman). However, understanding the differences between an effective vs. ineffective team as discussed in the previous section can serve as a guide to develop steps for planning and deploying your collaborative process.

#### **STEP 1: ESTABLISHING COMMON GROUND AND VERBALIZING INDIVIDUAL EXPECTATIONS**

Making time to get to know everyone and establishing common goals should be the first step of your collaboration. Whether or not this is required by your instructor, think of this step as an opportunity to establish common ground with your team members. This is also the time when team members should talk honestly and openly about their expectations and possible worries.

Setting expectations and creating a culture where everyone feels comfortable sharing ideas and setting their own learning goals will make your collaboration not just more enjoyable but also more effective.

Scholar Joanna Wolfe describes the importance of these preliminary conversations and provides a list of questions teams should address before starting their work together. The general spirit of these questions is to help team members to establish common ground by having honest conversations about everyone’s goals and attitude toward the project. Here are some examples of questions based on Wolfe’s approach that you may consider:



- What do you want to learn and get from this project?
- What level of effort are you willing to commit to this project?
- How interested are you in this project?
- What grade are you aiming for?
- What are specific concerns you have right now?
- What are your areas of expertise? What do you feel most comfortable doing?

Ideally, this conversation is held internally among team members, and not shared with your instructor.

## STEP 2: ASSIGNING ROLES AND CHOOSING YOUR COLLABORATION METHOD

Depending on how your instructor sets up the team, this step may be completed prior to forming the teams. The goal is essentially to define how you will distribute the work. The method used, of course, should be appropriate to the project. In this regard, this step is also the opportunity to discuss and analyze together the main goals and requirements of the project. In other words, think of this step as the first close reading of the project's guidelines as a group.

What follows are some roles you may want to consider for a writing project:

- The project manager (sets the schedule; centralizes the communication within the team and between the team and the supervisor/instructor)

and, depending on the project,

- The researcher
- The content developer/writer
- The editor
- The designer

While the roles concerning the technical skills can be more or less flexible (ex. the editor can also be a researcher during the first phase of the project), the project manager should remain the same throughout the project. Assigning roles will not only allow you to use the team members' expertise to your advantage, but it will also make it easier to divide and distribute the work in a way that maximizes everyone's skills.

Dividing the work into different tasks with specific roles for each team member is the first step toward:

- Understanding the different components of the projects. Example: a technical report involves research; content development; design; editing.
- Making the project more manageable since team members can focus on their own areas of expertise and rely on their team members' contributions and expertise.
- Keeping the project cohesive, with input from all team members throughout the process.

Such an approach is sometimes called “a layered approach” because it involves team members taking turns in working on the final deliverable, adding their expertise at different stages of the process (Wolfe 6–8). “Norming” is another way to think about this approach, since each component of the project gets reviewed and worked on by all team members at different stages of the process (Richard Johnson-Sheenan 61–62). This is also a good reminder that the writing is never just done by one person; everyone does it at some point during the project. Assigning roles based on the project's goals and individual expertise keeps your work also more consistent with the realities of writing in the workplace.

### **STEP 3: IDENTIFYING THE RIGHT TOOLS**

Sometimes the biggest hurdle for a sound collaboration is to find the right tools. Fortunately, today's technology offers many options to work together without having to share physical artifacts or having to be physically together all the time. Regardless of whether the project involves word-based writing, visual design, or web development content, here are a few key questions to consider before choosing a specific tool:

- What are the collaborative features?  
Many online word-processors or content management systems have sharing options that enable team members to work together online, whether it is by adding content, editing, or commenting.
- How easy/difficult is it to archive everyone's contributions?  
A feature “showing the document's history” is interesting not only to document everyone's contributions but it is also a nice safeguard against accidental deletion or changes during the editing process. Think of this feature as a way to save your work as well as to document your input throughout the process. Having evidence of the work that you did, even if some of it may not end

up as is in the final version of the project, not only helps to feel a sense of accomplishment but it may also work as a motivating factor and deterrent against freeloading.

- Does the tool guarantee that all team members have access to all the drafts?

Saving drafts only locally is generally a bad idea. You want to make sure that your team sets up a shared folder where all the work related to the group project gets saved. Doing so will ensure that team members have equal access to all the drafts. Just like for the archive feature, this helps to give everyone a sense of ownership over the project by allowing members to intervene and comment as the project develops. Think of this element as the technical support for building and sustaining sound communication throughout the project.

When you discuss tool options with your peers, remember that the tools will not only help you to accomplish the tasks required by the project, but they will also allow everyone to participate and stay connected. In other words, consider the tools as another element for establishing common ground, building trust, and keeping everyone involved.

#### **STEP 4: ESTABLISHING COMMUNICATION AND MEETING PROTOCOLS**

While it may be tempting to say, “we will decide on meetings as we go and as the project develops,” it is paramount to establish a clear communication and meeting schedule at the onset of your project. Think of this as your communication framework for deploying your actual collaboration once you selected a tool (cf. earlier step 3). The goal is not to create more work but to facilitate your collaboration with regular check-ins. Here are a few elements to consider:

- What is the team’s preferred communication method?

Is it email, phone, text messages, instant messaging, social media messaging apps, or face-to-face meetings? You may also use a combination of methods. For instance, a team could use instant messaging for staying connected and reaching out when needed while also scheduling weekly face-to-face check-ins.

- How often will you check in with each other?

Depending on the course and its modality, your instructor may give you time at the beginning of each class period to check in

with your team. Regardless of whether or not you are given time in class, it is always a good idea to set your own check-in schedule. For example, for a month-long project, you probably want to have weekly check-ins. These check-ins may be time to share project updates, make sure everyone is (still) on the same page, and discuss next steps. They may also be time for seeking input from your peers on your contributions, asking questions, and solving eventual issues as a group (ex. The information you were supposed to gather is not available; your schedule changed, and you did not contribute as much as you had hoped this particular week). Check-ins not only streamline the work, but they also keep the stress level low since each team member will always know where the project is at.

### **STEP 5: WRITING THE ACTUAL GROUP CONTRACT/CHARTER**

This step is the outcome of steps 1–4. Think of this contract as the first collaborative content that your team will develop and share with your instructor. As such, it should reflect everyone’s input and vision. While the exact content may vary depending on the project, or how groups were formed, what follows are some basic elements that a contract should address:

- A summary of the team’s main goals and the individual goals of each team member.
- A list of everyone’s areas of expertise and their role/position.
- A description of your collaboration and communication methods.
- A list of the tools/technology you will use for the different components of the project (including for communicating, scheduling meetings, etc.).
- A project schedule with specific deadlines and outcomes for each component of the project. This also includes a schedule for reviewing each other’s contributions and revising. (Refer here to your discussion about your communication protocols from step 4).
- Your teamwork policies. This should include a clear description of: the basic expectations; your approach to conflict resolutions and breach of contract (define together what this would be).

Once you have a detailed team contract, you are ready to start the work. Look at your contract as a map for initiating, planning, and deploying your collaborative process.

Table 6.1. Examples of Post-Collaboration Reflections Based on Whether or Not Each Step Was Followed.

	Did not follow the step	Followed the step
<b>Step 1</b>	I feel I did more than my peers. It was hard to ask questions. We worked but never really talked. During the whole project I felt I was just trying to go through the motions. I am glad it is done.	I was never afraid to ask questions or say something when I did not agree with a particular decision. We became friends, even though we had never worked together before.
<b>Step 2</b>	I never knew who did what or what I had to do exactly. It was a constant guessing game. At the end, we just assembled our different sections. The whole exercise just felt disjointed.	I always knew what my responsibilities were. Each of us contributed based on our strengths. Making time to edit and discuss what we had contributed really helped.
<b>Step 3</b>	One of us did the design and kept all the files stored on their computer because they had access to Adobe InDesign and that's what they wanted to use. So when they couldn't make it to class or to a meeting, we had no way of accessing the drafts. Plus, I couldn't edit because I do not have the program. This became super stressful in the end.	Having a common online folder with all the files for the project was very helpful. We could access the different drafts at all time. Working in an online setting that allowed us to comment on each other's work saved us so much time. Plus, I could work at my pace before class. We'd leave comments during the week on the draft and then take turns editing.
<b>Step 4</b>	We basically only interacted in class. While it was OK, we often wasted time trying to figure out who did what during the week. Not knowing if my team members were going to be in class or what they had done that week made the whole experience more stressful than it needed to be. We could have done a better job managing our time.	Deciding early on how we would communicate made it much easier to let each other know when something was not working or needed to be changed. We ended up meeting only once outside of class but we communicated almost every other day via text messages and in our online doc draft.
<b>Step 5</b>	We wrote a contract but never really followed it once we started. Looking back, I wish we had taken more time setting up how we would work, including how we would handle absences and such. Not having good policies made it difficult to have conversations about workload and absences.	There were a few times when some of us dropped the ball, but we knew each other well enough then to know how to handle it based on the policies we had agreed on. Having a plan in place helped us to adjust our roles when needed.

## WHAT DOES A COLLABORATIVE WRITING PROJECT LOOK LIKE IN ACTION? THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS VISUALIZED

Figure 6.1 shows an example of what a collaborative writing project that uses the methods outlined previously looks like in action. Note that your team contract would be effectively written during the 3<sup>rd</sup> stage as the first content document after stage 1 and 2.

### COMMON PROBLEMS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The methods outlined earlier offer a framework to build sound collaborative practices. They are, however, not full proof shields against every issue. What follows are some potential issues and solutions to keep in mind.

### Social Loafing/Freeloading

If you end up with a non-contributing member, start by addressing the issue during one of the check-in moments. Give the person a chance to explain the situation first. Incomplete or no work is not always a sign of a freeloader.

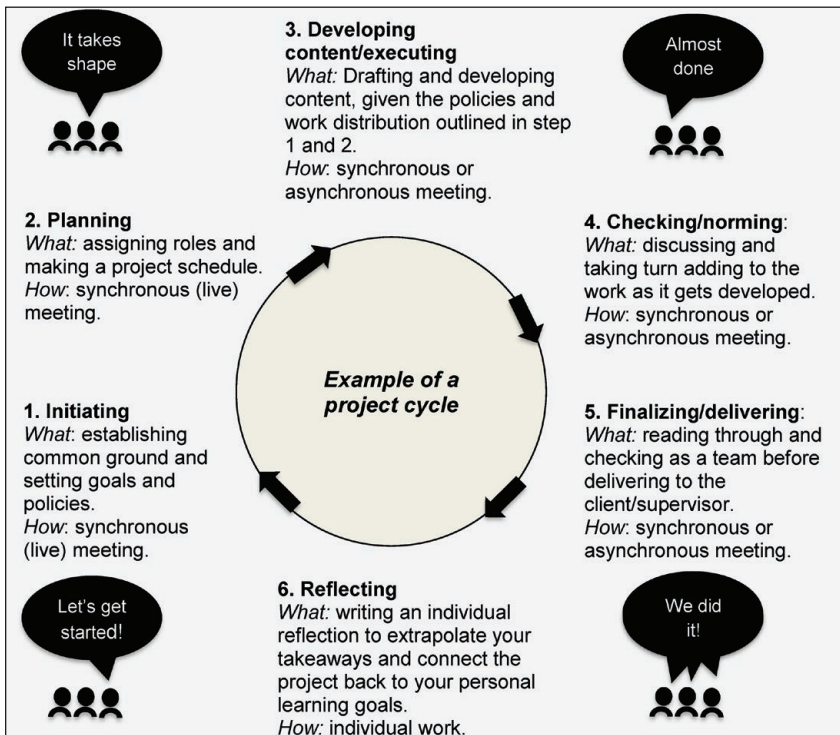


Figure 6.1: The Collaborative Process Visualized

Sometimes, a person does not contribute because their schedule or other unexpected factors get in the way. Sometimes they may also have difficulties finding the information for completing a task, or they do not fully understand what is expected from them. Having a conversation as a group will give you a chance to identify the source of the issue, provide support, and make necessary adjustments.

What started as a problem can then become a chance to build cohesion and trust. This may be enough to make a struggling team member a productive member. If these adjustments do not resolve the issue, consult your contract, which should have specific information regarding what constitutes a breach of contract and what procedure to follow. This may mean issuing a warning (with potential point deductions) and/or contacting your instructor. It may be helpful to organize a team meeting with your instructor as a facilitator. Remember to keep the focus on the problematic behavior and its consequences for the project, rather than on a particular individual. Make the outcome of the conversation what is needed to benefit the group and the project.

### **Unresponsive Team Members**

To deal with members who go radio silent, apply the same steps as you would for non-contributing members. That is, start by giving a chance to the person to reconnect. Use the team's preferred communication method and keep in mind that their silence may be due to circumstances outside of their control. Someone may also withdraw because they are struggling with the work and need encouragement. If the silence persists, consult your contract (and schedule) and reach out to your instructor.

### **Conflict Between Team Members**

Sometime disagreements or domineering personalities can create conflicts. If this happens, use your check-ins to have a conversation as a group. Give everyone a chance to speak without interruption and respect each other's ideas. Remember that the goal is not to be individually right or wrong; the goal is to be successful as a team. That is, understand that succeeding as a team may mean negotiating and compromising. Your project may include a peer assessment as one of the deliverables to be submitted at the end of the project. Such documents are helpful too for reflecting on collaboration issues and drawing lessons. However, if they are used as replacements for punctual assessments and check-ins during the project, group cohesion may suffer, and problems encountered during the project may become a major source of resentment and stress. In other words, do not delay and try to address issues as they arise.

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

Collaborative writing projects are hard, as are any group projects, really. It is easy to focus only on the negative and the challenges and forget the benefits. However, as this chapter shows, there is much to gain from collaboration, including opportunities to develop relevant skills for the workplace, to get to know your peers better and make new friends, and to make your classwork more meaningful. In technical writing, group projects also offer unique opportunities to develop the kinds of skills required by today's professionals in the field.

Although there is no magic recipe for a successful collaboration, there are however specific strategies that one can use to plan and develop an effective group project. The key elements to remember is that collaboration is a process that takes time, effort, genuine engagement, and dialogue. In closing and just in case you may still be tempted to avoid collaboration at all costs or dislike the process no matter what, let's reflect on the words of scholars Cathy Davidson and Christina Katopodis: "Ditching group projects now, as the world increasingly depends on them, does not prepare our students for life beyond college." So, let's keep working together on opening the classroom door and making your writing count.

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## TEACHERS RESOURCES

### OVERVIEW AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

Student collaboration does not have to be limited to full-fledged group projects. It can also be implemented at different stages of an individual project in a writing course:

- During the invention process of an individual project: students can work in groups to brainstorm and pitch their individual ideas to each other. Exchanging and testing their ideas among each other will make the benefits of collaboration more tangible.

- During the drafting and editing phase: creating peer review groups for students to assess each other's drafts is another way of taking advantage of collaboration for improving a written piece.

This essay can be taught to discuss and illustrate the benefits of collaboration for any stage of the writing process. By giving students ways to connect the *WHY* of collaboration to outside contexts and outlining specific strategies, the chapter can be used as a means to introduce a group project and/or to discuss at a more general level the value of peer learning in the writing classroom.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Though collaboration is used in many classes, it often is only introduced as a method that students are supposed to master without really being taught *HOW* to collaborate. Therefore, it is essential that teachers address the *HOW* and the *WHY* of collaboration before asking students to develop any project in a group.

Here are some preliminary questions to introduce and contextualize collaboration as a learning topic and outcome:

1. What experiences do you have with collaboration?
2. What are the biggest obstacles to and disadvantages of collaboration?
3. What are the main benefits of collaboration? Why do you think group projects are assigned? What makes group projects particularly relevant in the technical writing classroom?
4. How would you define effective collaboration?

Such an introductory discussion encourages students to share their experiences (bad or good) and makes collaboration not just a method but a topic and tangible learning outcome.

This discussion can be supplemented with a short article on collaboration in the workplace and what makes teams effective (ex. The Google Aristotle Project). Doing so will help emphasize that sound collaboration does not just happen but needs to be taught and developed over time. Another activity that can be combined with this introductory discussion is asking students to do an online search on “collaborative skills” and describe what employers and recruiters say about it in their respective fields.

Questions pertaining to specific collaborative strategies could include:

1. This chapter describes specific strategies for implementing a successful collaboration. What are some examples?

2. What is the goal of a group contract? What should it contain?
3. How can a group distribute the workload so that it is efficient and remains collaborative?
4. What are some communication strategies a team can use to resolve conflicts?

By inviting students to reflect on collaborative practices (including the importance of communication), the chapter gives students ways to plan a project and shows them that there are specific strategies for making collaboration effective.

### TECHNOLOGY ACTIVITY/DISCUSSION

This activity can work as a complement to an introductory discussion on collaborative writing projects. It can also be assigned as an exercise requiring students to analyze specific writing technologies and identify their effectiveness in collaborative settings.

1. What software programs have you used for collaborative projects? List their pros and cons.
2. What are the differences between synchronous and asynchronous collaborative mode? Which technology can you use for each mode?
3. What kind of software programs does the project require? List a few options. Test and rank them based on their collaborative options.

### RESPONDING TO COLLABORATION PLANNING EXERCISE

Scenario-based exercises can also be used as application of this essay. Here is an example: a group of students was assigned a project requiring them to develop instructions for an online application of their choice. After reading the project guidelines individually, they were given time to plan their collaboration. Consider the following exchange:

**Student A:** “It looks like we have a lot of leeway to choose the application we want to use. I have an idea that I can make work easily. I will start writing something and we can look at it during our next class. What do you think?”

**Student B:** “This sounds good. I will look up images that we can use. I like doing that kind of stuff anyway.”

**Student C:** “Cool! Let me know when you have something for me to look at. I’m happy to edit. Just let me know how I can help.”

How does this initial exchange work or does not work for planning the project? What are the pros and cons of such an approach? Discuss these questions with two or three peers and share the feedback you would give to this group with the rest of the class.