# Team Writing

Working in teams can be stressful, and when an assignment involves writing, a group needs to be as cohesive as possible. Sometimes, navigating group dynamics is tricky for a number of reasons. Members can potentially feel as if their efforts aren't recognized or rewarded, which can result in a struggle to continue putting forth effort. With an understanding of team collaboration methods, members can learn how to better cope with common group dynamic concerns.

*Preliminary Stage Considerations*

## Understand Collaboration Options

There are three main types:

1. Face to Face: The team sits down and writes together, meaning 1 or 2 people type while the others give input. This requires the most individual effort and often produces tension.

2. Divided: Each member individually writes a section of the document. This involves the least amount of collaboration, but it is the most time efficient.

3. Layered: Each person has a role in the group and works on the document, adding their own expertise over time. As everyone makes revisions and alterations, it becomes complete in layers. This collaboration method most closely resembles the kind that takes place in workplace settings.

Every group should discuss and decide which type of collaboration is best for themselves, the group, and the assignment. Although, the layered collaboration method is generally recommended, because it involves both face-to-face and divided interactions when appropriate.

## Consider Personal and Team Goals

Think and talk with members about the following:

- Measureable personal and team goals
- Individual commitment level
- Conflict resolution plans

- Any other specific concerns
- A group definition of "unacceptable work"

These ideas should be discussed within the first few meetings, so members can refer back to them at any phase of the assignment. Teams should contemplate creating a team charter document to formally outline this information.

## Create a Task Schedule

A task schedule is a document that outlines the following:

- Project deadlines
- Who completes each task
- Project stages
- Planned collaboration methods

This document helps ensure that team members have an awareness of major project tasks, which gives them time to balance the workload, comment on other members' work, and revise.

*Writing and Revision Stage Considerations*

## Communicate Constructively

Communicating constructively involves having a healthy, respectful debate of ideas and fully discussing differing solutions to problems. Consider the following strategies to create this kind of dialogue:

- Clarify roles and responsibilities up front in the task schedule
- Include time for revision in the task schedule
- Lay conversation ground rules, such as carving out brainstorming time and getting input from all group members
- Decide in advance how disagreements will be handled (majority rules, group consensus, supervisor decides, etc.)
- Establish team priorities

## Leave Time for Revision

Teams should always leave time to revise documents, perhaps more than once. All members will ideally feel comfortable critiquing and revising each other's work in the following ways:

1. Feedback: 1 person writes the text, submits it to others for comments, and makes revisions based on those comments.
   - *Pro*: A single author helps ensure consistent voice and tone.
   - *Con*: This creates more work for the writer tasked with composition.

2. Direct revision: 1 person drafts the text and gives it to another member who makes revisions and then hands it back.
   - *Pro*: This helps make sure that the overall unified style of writing represents every member.
   - *Con*: A greater time commitment is needed in order for the final product to be cohesive and complete.

Here are some suggestions for making revisions and providing feedback:

- Clarify the state of the draft and goals for it
- Review the assignment sheet and rubric
- When giving feedback, members should remember to praise, identify oversights, suggest or add material, revise misleading or inaccurate information, correct grammar or style issues, and check over organization, content, vocab, or formatting.

## Utilize Available Technology

Consider using available technology that may help your group communicate. Although many exist, these are a few of the popular ones:

- Email
  - *Pro*: It's an efficient way to send members broad written criticisms and suggestions.
  - *Con*: It isn't very helpful for minor comments pertaining to specific sentences.
- Microsoft Word's Commenting Features and Track Changes
  - *Pro*: Comments can be used to make larger suggestions while track changes can help revise small edits.
  - *Con*: Several team members may redundantly comment on the same section without realizing it, and writers have to be sure that they are not editing different versions of the same document.
- Google Docs

- o *Pro*: Teams can collaboratively share documents and presentations that can be worked on simultaneously by all members.
- o *Con*: There are significantly fewer formatting options than other platforms, like Microsoft Word for example.
- Wikis
  - o *Pro*: These are very useful for teams working with highly collaborative information, because multiple documents can be stored in one place at once.
  - o *Con*: Teams must continually tell one another what information was altered, because wikis don't automatically notify members of changes.

## Try to be a Considerate Speaker

There are commonly two types of speaking styles present in teams:

1. Competitive Style: This is a combative style where speakers are usually fighting to share their dissimilar ideas. Due to their passion, there are usually many interruptions and a readiness to self-support.

2. Considerate Style: This is a more supportive style. Speakers try to consistently acknowledge and support idea contributions. Disagreements are often indirect, which usually means interruptions rarely take place.

When speaking to your group, remember that being competitive can add to stress. Here are some tips on how to achieve a more considerate conversation style:

- Repeat and restate ideas before disagreeing with them
- Repair and backtrack when interruptions take place
- Prompt quiet group members to vocalize their thoughts
- Pay attention to non-verbal communication, like body language
- Develop an open, safe atmosphere for brainstorming sessions

If there is a lot of competitive speaking taking place, here are tips to adapt to the conversation:

- Speak within the first 5 minutes of a group meeting to establish your presence
- Find gentle, non-aggressive ways to interrupt a very talkative fellow member

## Presentation Styles

Both of the following styles are exaggerated and should be avoided when possible, because when they take place, teams can become hierarchical or pull the focus away from the actual work.

1. Self-promotional: A speaker aggressively displays confidence and expertise, which often results in criticizing others to help themselves.
2. Self-depreciating: Speakers are modest and often discuss their own shortcomings.

Remember, be honest about any shortcomings but try not to fixate on them.

## Problem Solving Styles

Similar to the presentation styles, the styles below are definitive forms. When possible, it is best to try and strike a balance between the two.

1. Action oriented style: People quickly jump into the details and immediately start working on potential solutions.
2. Holistic style: People look at the problem as a whole and don't propose possible solutions until the problem is completely understood.

Here are some tips to understand and balance problem solving styles:

- Holistic problem solving is usually best for the beginning of a project
- Be patient and strategic
- Remember to refer to the initial team goals or task schedule to help resolve conflicts

For more information about team writing, please consult the book *Team Writing* by Joanna Wolfe, which can be found at The Fredrik Meijer Center for Writing in Lake Ontario Hall room 120. Also, consider visiting GVSU's speech lab to work with a consultant specifically regarding speaking and presentation styles.