

## 1.5.1: Collaborative Writing

### Learning Objectives

- Describe the process of collaborating with others to create a business message
- Discuss digital tools for collaborative writing

The term **collaborative writing** refers to projects where written works are created by multiple people together rather than individually. Collaborative writing is also an approach for teaching novice authors to write, or for experienced writers to stretch their creative potential into modes that would be less accessible to each writer operating alone.

Using collaborative writing tools on projects can provide substantial advantages, from increased commitment to the project to easier and more effective processes for collaboration. It is often the case that when users can directly contribute to an effort and feel that they've made a difference, they become more involved with and attached to the outcome of the project. The users then feel more comfortable contributing time, effort, and personal pride into the final product, resulting in a better final outcome.

Teams may select from several methods of collaborative writing. It is important that the team discuss which style they will use for their project.

- **Single Writer.** In all groups, there are those who are stronger in certain areas—such as conceptual thinking, leadership, public speaking and writing—than others. The group may elect a single individual to complete the actual composition of the document while everyone else contributes to the thinking and research that goes into it and also review, edit and possibly rewrite. This style leads to consistent voice for the document.
- **Writing by Committee.** Teams should discuss individual team skills related to conceptual thinking, organizational structure, writing skills, subject expertise and proofreading skills. Ownership of the output belongs to all, no matter how individual work steps are completed. An example of this might be found in the parallel activity of creating sales proposals. There is a sales leader for the project, but operations team members, legal team members, and others have important input to the costs and description of the proposal.
- **Multiple Writers.** Other projects are created using more of a divide and conquer method. In this style, each team member writes one or more assigned sections. This division of work is usually based on individual expertise. While expertise is important to each section, it may lead to some significant writing style complications. Final editing must consider these issues. Without a strong outline, there may be duplication or oversight in content when reviewing the entire document. The team may schedule some preliminary reviews to ensure the entire writing project is on track.

No matter how a group decides to divide labor, the outline for the document should be the first thing completed. The next step is developing the writing plan—who is writing what and how the work will be revised. Additionally, there may be a need for more team work to fill in missing components if the work requires knowledge or skills outside of the group. These discussions should have at least one member actively taking notes on the conversation to ensure all important components are included in the final document.

As the team gathers to structure the document's writing, be sure to use the team skills discussed earlier in this module: communication and conflict resolution are key to a group project's success. In many situations, the team has completed much work and research already. That feeling of "that worst is over, we only have to write it down" may cause the team to let down its team-process efforts. Writing the document can cause as much—or more—stress as reaching the conclusions. Good team member skills are still needed.

As with all team activities, working in a group takes more time than working alone. With group writing, the initial drafting may go quickly, but the coordination before writing and the review after writing requires substantial effort. The output will be better with this effort, but to achieve that success takes time. There must be time for input from all relevant parties and the time to hear input on document content and structure.

Combinations of these styles are possible. How the writing takes place should be determined by the team in considering:

- Individual writing skill
- Length of time to final product
- Expertise in subject matter

Note that writing is a separate step in the document's preparation. Other steps such as outlining and editing have similar considerations.

One thing all group writers should remember: your name is on the document indicates your ownership and agreement with all content. Your reputation is on the line, so as a group member, it is your responsibility to be engaged regardless of the role.

## Tools for Collaborative Writing

As mentioned earlier in the module, many groups are not physically located together. Collaborative writing would be nearly impossible for team members who are not co-located without the technology we have access to today. Social media and technology are changing the ways we communicate in groups. Even in co-located teams, this rich technology enhances teams' ability to produce well-written group documents.

In addition, collaborative writing tools have made it easier to design better work processes. These tools provide ways to monitor what users are contributing and when they contribute, so managers can quickly verify that assigned work is being completed. Since these tools typically provide revision tracking, it has also made data sharing simpler. Users won't have to keep track of what version is the current working revision since the software has automated that.

### ? Wikis

In order to write collaboratively, we need suitable tools. Wikis (such as Wikipedia) are perhaps the most evident example of collaborative writing online: they are uniquely collaborative, as their existence is based on open editing and evolving as the community contributes.

Initially collaborative writing began with a file created by one person and then emailed to the group. Each member of the team typed in the document and shared with others. This created many confusing copies of a document each of which had modest to major modifications. With significant edits, a large team, or a large document, it could be very confusing as to which was most current.

With this method, if a group is using Microsoft Word, there are several valuable features that can help. Microsoft Word has a Track Changes feature that allows each user's changes to be highlighted and noted by other contributors. Track Changes can be coupled with the feature Compare Documents to show the original document next to the edited document. Work can then be combined into a new document with components of either revision.

If this sounds time intensive and sometimes complex, it can be.

Google Docs is software that allows multiple users to work in a single document. Like Microsoft Word, individual user contributions are collected by each user. Users can look forward and backward through revisions to select the best choice for the document.

Dropbox is a piece of software designed more for file storage than for editing. However, it also allows documents to be shared across platforms. Many companies have similar shared platforms for group document creations. SharePoint is one additional example.

With any of these choices, it is important to review organizational security and sharing protocols. Group member roles related to editing should be established.

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