

Working in Small Groups: Ways to Collaborate

Oftentimes, students who are asked to collaborate on a piece of writing believe that there is only one way to do so: debate the material as a group until the most persistent (or loudest) person finally “gets to say things his [or her] way.” In fact, there are many other ways to write in groups so that everyone’s voice can be heard.

Here are some strategies for working with others:

- Set a regular meeting time, and devise a system for contacting one another.
- If you can work over a computer network, trade e-mail addresses, and consider exchanging ideas and drafts electronically.
- Establish ground rules for the group. The first might be that every member have an equal opportunity—and responsibility—to contribute.
- Assign duties at each meeting: one person to take notes, another to keep the discussion on track, and so on.
- With final deadlines in mind, set an agenda for each meeting.
- During early meetings, work together to break down your assignment and figure out how to gather the information you need in order to write your paper.
- At later meetings, establish your purpose and your thesis, then determine an appropriate organization for your material.
- Listen closely to what each person says during group meetings, and consider all ideas carefully.
- Expect disagreement, and remember that the goal is not for everyone just to “go along.” The best collaborative papers are the result of spirited debate, of arguing through many possible approaches to the material.

Once you are ready to prepare your group-written document, you’ll need to figure how to share drafting duties. If you and your classmates have plenty of time to get together, you can “talk out” your entire paper as a group—that’s certainly one viable option. But when time for working together is limited, there are ways to divide your tasks. You might consider some of the following options as well:

- Everyone writes a different section of the essay, then the group meets to edit each portion of the paper and suggest addition/deletions/etc.
- Everyone writes his/her own version of each section, then the group meets to combine the best of each version and suggest additions/deletions/etc.
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Don’t forget that you can also subdivide your group to share tasks. For example: two members of a four-person team might write the first half of the paper, while the other two write the second half; subsequently, all four members of the group can meet to share and edit what each pair has written.

After each part of the paper is written, you’ll want to spend some time “ironing out” the final draft—you should probably revise together a couple of times, working to achieve a consistent tone throughout the essay. Reading the draft aloud can help with this.

When a complete draft is ready, everyone should proofread it; someone can then make the necessary corrections and print out the final product.