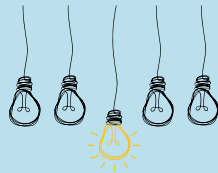


# COLLABORATIVE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

## HOW TO MAKE THEM WORK FOR YOUR STUDENTS AND YOU

### 1) MOTIVATE YOUR STUDENTS

Make sure your students know **why** you are assigning a group writing project.



**Why does it make sense for this assignment to be collaborative?** Share your reasoning with your students, who may initially be resistant to a group project.

What **learning outcomes** will be achieved by the collaborative process? Tell your students what skills you are hoping they will develop in this project.

Provide students with a thorough writing assignment that outlines **requirements for success**, including *formative* assessments and rubrics they can use along the way to evaluate their group's work.

### 2) FORM STUDENT GROUPS

**What's the ideal group size?**

- No more than six students, and ideally fewer if they need to meet outside of class time.
- The group should be small enough to allow all students to participate fully, yet large enough for a diversity of perspectives.
- Complicated and time-consuming assignments may require larger groups.



**Do I assign groups or allow students to choose?**

- Allowing students to choose groups tends to be more efficient, and students may feel more motivated to work with peers they know. Students can be more intentional about these choices if you provide in-class activities where students rank topics they would like to work on or share more about their work style.
- Assigning groups yourself allows you to look at mutual interests and relevant experience. Consider asking students to write you a short letter about the topic they would like to work on and previous group-work experience.

**Support students in developing their group dynamic**

- Help students be intentional in shaping their group culture by asking them to explicitly discuss expectations, the structure of their work (how will they communicate, when will they meet), and how they want to manage conflict.
- This conversation can happen as part of a class session, or teams can be given an assignment to write a contract or develop a work plan.

### 3) FACILITATE RESEARCH AND WRITING



Help students navigate when to use a **divide and conquer method** and when it's best to **work together**.

Help them see that different types of writing require different approaches, and that they will need to decide together after an initial period of familiarizing themselves with the material which works best for particular parts of the project.

**Create structures and activities** that will help students work collaboratively:

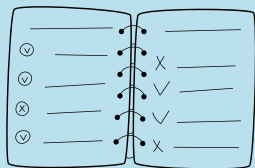
- Do a short in-class collaborative writing assignment (write a paragraph on X with the person next to you), and reflect on the experience.
- Suggest or require that student-groups do a substantial amount of writing in person, together. Start them out with a class period in which to get started together.

Prepare students for the fact that **starting up a project can be chaotic**, and normalize conversation about the emotional arc that comes with working collaboratively.

Throughout the writing process, **revisit the expectations** groups have set for themselves. Encourage them to revise expectations and remind them that these agreements can help them navigate ambiguity and conflict.

#### 4) ASSESSMENT

Consider providing both a mid-process check-in evaluation and a rubric for final assessment of the entire project.



##### **MID-PROCESS evaluation**

- Should be both self and group driven.
- Should require that students discuss criteria on which they evaluate each other and their group, including metrics such as dependability, cooperation, ability to meet deadlines, attendance at group meetings, etc. Review these with each group to help rechart their course, if necessary.

##### **MID-PROCESS peer writing review**

- Provide student groups with in-class time to review other groups' work.
- Support the review process with a return to the rubric you provided in your writing assignment, but also ask your students to brainstorm elements that make a finished project exceptional.

#### **FINAL assessment**

Separate process and product in evaluation, providing clear guidelines for what constitutes success for each element.

- **Process:**

- Tie final assessment of the groups' processes to the ways in which you supported groups in developing collaborative skills throughout the project.
- Ask group members to evaluate each other's performance based on a series of metrics (such as those listed above in "mid-process evaluation").

- **Product:**

- Refer back to the rubric established in the original writing assignment.

Consider a 2- or 3-part grading structure, such as 50% for the group report, 50% for the section the student was principally responsible for, or 50% group report, 25% student's section, 25% based on the student-peers' evaluation of the subject's dedication to the project.

#### 5) FURTHER RESOURCES

**The Jacobson Center** employs a Writing Studies specialist who works directly with faculty on writing pedagogy, and many teachers of writing with decades of experience. Contact Assistant Director Sara Eddy for information and to set up a consultation ([seddy@smith.edu](mailto:seddy@smith.edu)).

**The Wurtele Center** supports collaboration of all kinds on campus, and offers consultation and tools, including resources to help navigate conflict in groups, a "user's manual" for collaboration, and card deck designed to facilitate collaborative work. Contact Assistant Director Megan Lyster for information and to set up a consultation ([mlyster@smith.edu](mailto:mlyster@smith.edu)).

