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Crucial Co-Writing Considerations

| Strategies to strengthen your team and your product.

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What is your gut reaction when you hear “group project”? If you’re like many high-achievers who end up in graduate school, you may roll your eyes, sigh deeply, or even groan aloud. Many of us own the mantra of if I want it done right, I’ll do it myself, but academia is critically reliant upon the ability to work collaboratively with others. Even so, co-writing a manuscript with a research team is a unique form of collaboration, due in large part to the process of writing as opposed to giving a presentation or creating a different type of product. Gradhacker’s many [writing tips](#) are applicable whether you’re writing alone or in a group and we’ve shared plenty of reasons and methods for [collaborating](#) broadly. But what about the actual writing? How can your group stop rolling your eyes and start rolling up your sleeves to write a strong, publishable, collaborative article?

Clarify roles and responsibilities early

Your research team is full of experts with different skills to contribute to the co-writing process. This is far from “just writing”—synthesizing the literature, delineating the methods, and discussing the results are all distinctly different, as are the skills needed to draft, revise, proofread, and format your manuscript. Before you ever start writing, have an honest conversation about the strengths of each team member (try the [Strengths Finder](#) if you need help identifying them!) and lay out your roles and responsibilities. This is a good time to [determine your authorship order](#) as well, since this is typically tied very closely to the amount of responsibility taken on by each author.

The [division of writing labor](#) can look different from group to group, but may include one primary

writer with feedback from others, assignment of specific sections to specific people, or writing done entirely together in-person. Responsibilities for the writing itself will vary depending upon which co-writing approach you choose, but don't forget to assign non-writing tasks, like keeping meeting notes, formatting for submission guidelines, and keeping the group on track for deadlines. Assigning team members one or more roles like drafter, reviewer, editor, and team leader can help to structure and clarify responsibilities from the beginning to the end of the writing process.

Set up your organizational systems

Co-writing at a distance has become much simpler with a variety of **digital collaboration platforms**. These can help not only with sharing documents and resources, but also with communicating, providing feedback, and tracking changes over time. Once you choose one or more systems for your team, make certain that you are all familiar and comfortable with it, quirks and all. Creating a plan for naming documents, overwriting or archiving drafts, and tracking edits and comments can save you from lost work and headaches later on. If different people are writing different sections, you may want to keep them in separate documents to begin with and then assign one person to pull them all together into a complete draft when you're ready. Otherwise, you might end up with "too many cooks in the kitchen" working in the same document all at once. Different systems will work for different teams, but it is vital that your entire team be on the same page.

Communicate constructively, not critically

All of your collaboration should focus on being constructive, whether you are providing feedback or receiving it. Faculty and mentors on your team likely have an established publication record, so their suggestions carry a lot of weight. If an editor teammate makes what feel like significant changes to your portion of the draft, remember that you assigned roles for this specific purpose. Every team has differences of opinion, but you can **respond to feedback professionally** even then. Build in plenty of time for feedback and revision throughout the writing process and keep in mind that every writer, no matter how experienced, goes through these cycles.

In my co-writing activities, I have learned that I tend to become very attached to my own particular writing style, but it doesn't always align with the styles of my co-authors. To ensure a singular group "voice" throughout your paper, consider assigning a group member to the task of reading the full draft not for content, but for style, and tweaking the language to improve the flow and linkages. A role like this can help your team avoid too many comments on writing style during the drafting process because you will know that it will be addressed purposefully at the appropriate time. Sometimes it will feel like you're giving up your personal expression, but remember that it's for a greater good—together, you are creating a group product that you and all

of your co-authors can be proud of.

For more great tips on collaborating within writing projects, check out [How and When to Write Collaboratively](#), [Collaborating and Co-Authoring](#), and [Group Writing](#). What other strategies do you use for graduate school group work?

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