

# Chapter 18.1: Writing with your Peers

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## OVERVIEW

This chapter advocates for student writers to collaborate and coauthor.\* When opportunities to write together are offered—as part of in-class or outside-class writing assignments—students can benefit in a number of ways, including learning how audiences are addressed and how immediate feedback can become a dynamic element of writing together. In terms of the value of the experience, collaborative writing and coauthoring are technologically supported and often expected in many professional workplaces.

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*It was a good learning experience for me when my group members took their turns writing and ended up contributing things that I never would have thought of to the paper. All in all, I'd say that it was a positive experience, and a good assignment. Because writing in a group forces everyone to grow in some area that they are not good at. It's a different area for different people but everyone grows somehow.*

—First-Year Composition Student

Perhaps you would describe your experiences with collaborative work differently than Noah does. When we ask college students about their encounters with teamwork, group work, collaboration, cooperative learning, coauthoring, or cowriting, many students tell us those experiences were not very positive, especially in high school. They complain that, for example, the bulk of the work usually fell on one person, that slackers got credit for work they didn't do, that one person dominated the group, that some group members did not communicate well with the rest

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of the group, that some members did not contribute much or did not contribute at all, that the finished product did not meet their standards. They may have felt their own grade was adversely affected by the grade their group's work received. Some of you are probably nodding your heads as you read this list, but we can say with confidence that most of the students in our classes report positive experiences with collaborative work, including writing together. We are three experienced writing teachers who believe collaboration sometimes goes sour because students are asked to work together without first understanding the value of such work, or because they have not yet learned how to work together productively. Some have collaborated successfully in a group yet have never actually written with another person. But we have seen that when students understand writing together can deepen their learning and help them become better writers, and when they are shown how coauthoring works, they are more willing to set aside their skepticism and engage with their peers. Our goal is to get you thinking about the benefits of collaborating, and, more specifically, the benefits of writing with your peers.

It might surprise you to know that even though you feel you write better in solitude, you seldom actually write alone; writers, students, and professionals rarely do. Even the student in the dorm room in the middle of the night has access to the knowledge and experience of other writers through Internet searches, library databases, writing center tutors, other students who are also up in the middle of the night trying to finish an essay, and their own experience of reading the work of many authors. Two graduate students acknowledged this when they wrote (together), "We find solace, support, and success when we look outside ourselves, borrow ideas, remix other texts, talk to others, and collaborate with their thoughts. The Lone Genius author doesn't exist. And it never did" (Edwards and Paz 66).

We three coauthors believe all writing is collaborative in some way. The difference in a classroom situation is that you have what two scholars and coauthors in the field of writing studies, Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford, call an "addressed audience," or an immediate, rather than imagined, audience. That means you instantly have other people to give you feedback along the way, to add information and perspectives, to correct your mistakes, to push you to think hard, and to remind you that someone other than you will need to understand what you write. Yes, writing with peers can be fun and you can make friends and enjoy the experience, but mainly, writing with your peers offers a whole new way to approach your assignments and allows your thinking to become shaped by additional voices.

## OUR OWN EXPERIENCES WRITING WITH OTHERS AND IN OUR CLASSROOMS

We're not sure what comes to mind when you think of the term *cowriting* or *coauthoring*. You might think of it in a broad sense—writing together or writing collaboratively. Of course, that kind of collaboration might take any number of forms, but the form we're talking about here is in-person, in close proximity or online, real-time writing together—in other words, a scenario in which writers sit down together and create text together. We three are writing teachers who ask our students to do this kind of coauthoring every semester, but before they dive into that first coauthoring task, or perhaps test the waters tentatively, we spend some time sharing what we know about the value of coauthoring, including some stories about our own experience.

Neither Kami or Michele remembers coauthoring in high school or even as undergraduates, so their first coauthoring endeavors came in graduate school. The workload was heavy and the subject matter challenging, but the professors encouraged collaborative work, so they wrote with each other and with other graduate students. Working this way allowed them to divide up some of the research tasks; but while working side by side, they also found they could tackle complicated concepts and generate even more ideas than they would have writing alone. Because of all the talking they did while writing, they were constantly testing their understanding with another person, and that helped them learn better and faster. They quickly discovered that what they produce together is always better than what they can produce individually because they were able to combine knowledge, life experiences, writing styles, and vocabularies. One of them is skilled at creating vivid metaphors, one is adept at organization and transitions, one is spontaneous, one is a taskmaster, and for editing, they have double the assets to make sure grammar and usage is appropriate for their audience and for the task at hand.

Kami, an introvert, had always preferred to work alone, so she understands the misgivings some students might have about writing collaboratively. But because of her graduate school experience, she learned how her own work could be enriched by the ideas and perspectives of others, and she encourages any reluctant students to be open to the possible rewards of writing with their peers. Most of her students are willing to try, and most, like Noah, have a positive experience with coauthoring during the semester. They find themselves in what Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky calls the “zone of proximal development.” In that zone, peers learn from each

other, bringing together their individual knowledges and experiences to create a deep pool of ideas, expertise, and possibilities.

Raquel did write with others in her undergraduate years, but this writing was often outside the classroom with her sorority sisters. Some of it was personal, but often it was for sorority and organizational business purposes. During that time, it became natural for Raquel to cowrite with others. However, even in this context, she often took the lead or was particular about how the writing came to be. It wasn't until she went to graduate school and cowrote with others that it felt truly like a collaborative endeavor.

Now that she is a composition instructor, one of Raquel's goals in asking her students to coauthor is that her students learn to write as members of an ability-diverse team to experience community problem solving. She acknowledges that group writing tasks do not always turn out "successfully" if "successful writing" is defined as it has been traditionally. Her students' collaborative writing is often all over the place; sometimes one person takes over the writing while others contribute, or they really struggle with coming up with a cohesive written response. However, she keeps asking students to write together because she thinks the students' discussions as they share their different views are so important, and such discussion really helps build community. Students are also able to find others in the course they can be supported by or people they will choose to work with when they have to self-select for other group activities.

## STUDENTS WRITING TOGETHER

Here, we offer a snapshot of what a face-to-face, in-person coauthoring interaction might look like and sound like. Imagine a scenario at a midwestern community college in which students are coauthoring. One group of four has chosen to write about a proposed change in the school's nondiscrimination policy, a revision that would add *sexual orientation* and *gender identity* to the policy. The group is diverse: one member is a straight, non-traditional student (a student who has come back to school at an age that is not typical for new students) whose age and experience have exposed her to many different views; one identifies as queer and has experienced harassment and discrimination on campus; one straight male identifies as a Christian with rather conservative views; one male identifies as straight and liberal. Their majors range from elementary education to business to English to chemistry, their writing abilities from fluent and confident to tentative and inexperienced, their ages from eighteen to thirty-five. Two

students identify as Black, one as white, and one as mixed race. It would be possible to fill several pages with all their differences. You can probably imagine the challenges this project would present, and because their views and perspectives differ, the group, after a great deal of discussion (coauthoring involves a lot of talk), decides to write an essay that explores these different views rather than takes one specific position. In this way, everyone's perspective is voiced but also challenged.

The following exchange captures part of the group's process; a few minutes of a final editing session might go like this:

Student 1: Okay, so the next section starts with "This change in the policy may cause trouble. There might be heated debates, demonstrations, and even violence."

Student 2: That doesn't sound right . . . kind of choppy. How about a colon after "trouble"?

Student 3: What's a colon supposed to do? I've never really understood that.

Student 2: Well . . . it usually comes before a list, but it can add more about the first part of the sentence too.

Student 4: What about one of those lines . . . a dash . . . after "trouble."

Student 2: Why?

Student 4: Well, a dash can be used like a colon but it sort of sets off . . . emphasizes something more than a colon does.

Student 1: Okay, so if we put in a dash it looks like this (typing) . . . "This change in the policy may cause trouble—there might be heated debates, demonstrations, and even violence."

Student 3: Yeah, I like that better, but what if we take out "there might be"?

Student 1: Okay, if we do that it looks like this (deleting) . . . "This change in the policy may cause trouble—heated debates, demonstrations, and even violence."

All four students: Yeah—that sounds good! (high fives all around)

You might be thinking "Oh, that wouldn't happen—too corny." But we have seen and heard many such exchanges, including in-person and virtual high fives.

These students are not working in an ideal coauthoring situation—no classroom ever is. Ideally, students who already know each other well would choose to write together, but in a classroom, even if you have gotten to know a few students, you usually do not know anyone very well and

you are often assigned to groups. So, how do you participate in a group to help everyone work successfully together? You might find yourself in a class where groups are assigned, or you might be told to put yourselves into groups with little preliminary preparation. We encourage you to take some time to get to know each other. Of course, you can introduce yourselves, but we also ask students in a new group to come up with a list of things they have in common beyond the obvious (we are all mammals, enrolled in the same class, etc.). What usually ensues is a lively conversation, a relaxing of tensions, and the beginnings of a productive group. Even if your instructor did not ask you to participate in such an exercise, you could do it on your own. Sometimes we make random pairs and have students interview each other with questions that get beyond where they are from. One question that works to move the conversation toward writing is: How would you describe your relationship to writing? The answers here are often metaphorical and revealing, such as: My relationship with writing is long distance!

Group writing can also help you gain experience as a facilitator and as someone who can take on different roles and responsibilities. Some groups assign roles like scribe (takes notes or types), shepherd (keeps the group on track), whiner (to get problems out in the open so the group can move on, or to take questions to the teacher), the spokesperson (if the group is asked to report), and so forth. The members of some groups just naturally fall into taking on roles as they need to (actually, this happens most of the time in our classes). Sometimes one voice is heard more than the others, but we have experienced very few problems with domineering students or students who say nothing. In many cases, highly verbal extroverted students seem to understand they are instrumental in drawing quieter or less confident students out, and students who would never say a word in a large class discussion are more willing to participate in a less threatening small group whose members they trust and feel somewhat comfortable with. Students have told us they learn more about themselves through the co-authoring experience; they realize their strengths and gain self-awareness of the ways they can contribute to collaborative work, sometimes as idea generators, sometimes as editors, sometimes as taskmasters, and sometimes as the person who keeps the group laughing.

Ideally, you will be given time in class to coauthor. But you might be required to do your coauthoring outside class. In either case, we recommend the role of scribe is rotated with each session—it can be a powerful position to hold the pen or control the keyboard. When we first had computers in our classrooms (1990s!), groups gathered around one monitor and the

scribe was on the keyboard. In current classrooms, it is more likely you will have your own device, laptop, or tablet, or there is a projection screen for the computer. The kinds of tools now available to share screens and documents (like Google Docs), whether students are in a classroom together or meeting virtually, allow the process of writing together to be more visible and accessible for all writers to participate (Hewett and Robidoux).

The questions below can be used in the group as icebreakers but we place them here to give you a chance to reflect on your thinking about co-authoring so far.

1. Would your friends characterize you as someone who works and plays well with others? Why or why not?
2. Write the recipe for your successful individual composing process. For example, does it include six cups of time and a teaspoon of inspiration? Then develop a recipe for a successful coauthoring process for a four-person group.
3. Describe how a piece of writing might be enriched by having more readers and writers involved. It might help your thinking process to imagine you are starting to write a research essay. What is the question you want to ask?

## FINAL THOUGHTS: BEYOND CLASSROOM WRITING

Our purpose in writing this chapter was to help you feel more open and comfortable with the possibilities of writing with your peers. Writing together can impact your learning and engagement in a class but also prepare you for future opportunities, beyond your undergraduate experience, to write with others.

From the students in our classes over the years, we have heard just how much writing and coauthoring takes place outside of class, especially within clubs and organizations, student government, activist groups, and athletic events. All of our interactions with people, whether close friends or strangers in public life, require the ability to negotiate and compromise and *writing* with others can help you develop and practice ways of *listening* and *learning* with others. In some workplaces, team writing is the way all the work is done and there are many guides to doing team writing (an example is *Team Writing: A Guide to Working in Groups* by Joanna Wolfe, who researches collaborative writing in technical communication). Pattie Wojahn, Kristin Blicharz, and Stephanie Taylor, who write about virtual

collaboration, point out that because workplaces expect and support virtual collaborative writing, an understanding of the “care, coordination, and cooperation” that must go into coauthoring will be an asset (66). In addition, engaging with writers through writing projects has the potential to make the work more meaningful (Bleakney 2020).

To gain more experience, it might even be possible for you and a group of your peers to propose a coauthored project for this or another class, or to establish “interest groups” of students who are working on similar projects so you can share research, insights, and even do some blog writing or *Wikipedia* editing together (Lockett). We hope that by the time you enter the workplace, you will have had experiences working well and writing authentically with other people. Twenty-first century learners like you have access to amazing technologies, access to other writers around the world, and access to multiple literacies and modes of communication. All of these support collaboration and coauthoring—in school and beyond.

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