

Tips for Creating Collaborative Writing Assignments

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Collaborative writing requires students to work in a group to produce a written work, in which each member of the group has contributed more or less equally to the content of the text. As with any good writing assignment, the collaborative one needs to be well-planned and carefully designed. Here are some tips to make your collaborative writing assignment effective and engaging.

- **Before assigning a collaborative writing assignment, spend time getting to know your students, and allowing your students to get to know each other.** If you choose to form the groups, the time spent getting to know your students will let you decipher which students will work well with each other. It will also allow you to create groups with students of diverse intellectual capabilities, so that "A" students will work with "C" students, leveling the playing field for all groups. If you allow students to form the groups themselves, give them in-class activities in the first few weeks of the course that will encourage them to get to know their classmates so that they can develop a sense of which students will be best for them to work with.
- **What is the best size for groups?** Research has shown that groups of students work best together if they have 5 or 6 members. Anything less and the members will either pair off with each other or isolate a lonely group member. Anything more and the group will be too diluted for an effective participatory experience.
- **Design a writing assignment that is best completed collaboratively.** One option could be a labor-intensive assignment so that the task can be divided into subtasks for each group member to work on. If you wish your students to work more dialogically, create an assignment that requires interdependence of the group members. Assignments more focused on the generation of ideas rather than research tend to promote more dialogue amongst the students.
- **Devote some class time to group work.** Especially at large public universities and community colleges, in which many students are commuters, and several of them might have jobs and families outside of school, planning to have time for students to work together in class will give them the opportunity to discuss their project and devise an approach for completing it together. You may also wish to hold conferences with groups to discuss their progress and work.
- **Ask students to prepare a Group Proposal for the assignment.** This will help students devise a plan to tackle the assignment collaboratively. The proposal could include a brief abstract or explanation of the topic, meeting and due-dates schedule, and a list of responsibilities for each group member. You can also assign progress reports and draft reviews.
- **Consider using online collaborative writing tools.** You may wish to encourage your students to use a wiki-based platform to write their group essays. Google Docs is a great online tool that allows students to write and edit collaboratively. Changes can be tracked by each contributor, and the revision history is automatically saved.

- **Be clear about grading.** Tell your students exactly how you will grade the project. You can assign a single group grade for the final product, and then ask the group members to assess each other based on their contributions to the assignment.
- **Prepare for resistance.** There will indubitably be instances in which group members conflict with each other. Establishing a fair grading scheme and encouraging groups to meet deadlines and responsibilities can help alleviate tensions. Remind students that creative conflict is often a part of a successful collaboration. Be willing to listen to students' concerns and address them appropriately.

Other Informational Resources

- John C. Bean. *Engaging Ideas: A Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking and Active Learning in the Classroom*. Chichester: Wiley, 2011.
- Kenneth Bruffee. "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind.'" *College English*, Vol. 46, No. 7 (Nov., 1984), pp. 635-652.
- Larry K. Michaelsen et al. *Team-Based Learning: A Transformative Use of Small Groups in College Teaching*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2004.
- Rebecca Moore Howard. "Collaborative Pedagogy," in *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 54-70.
- Bruce W. Speck. *Facilitating Students' Collaborative Writing*. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report. Vol. 28 No. 6. San Francisco: Wiley Subscription Services, Inc., 2002.
- Neomy Storch. "Collaborative writing: Product, process, and students' reflections." *Journal of Second Language Writing* 14 (2005), pp. 153–173.

Assignment Idea

To prepare my undergraduate students for their essay-based examinations, which consist of image comparisons, I assign in-class weekly assessed reviews that ask students to write a short comparative essay about two works of art from the previous week's lecture. Initially, for the first few weeks of the semester, I assign these reviews individually, so that I can help guide each student on developing the correct essay format.

The first review, in fact, is not yet a comparison, but instead asks students to write about the works separately so that they become accustomed to describing the significance of a work of art [see below: "Review"]. Afterward, I introduce them to the concept of the art historical comparative essay, guiding students through the writing process by clearly explaining my expectations for their responses. As a class, we collaboratively discuss a comparison [see below: "Comparison Essay"], and I write the ideas they generate on the whiteboard. I focus particularly on helping the students structure a strong thesis statement, which is a skill that is transferable to other disciplines and writing situations. From this point onward, all reviews are comparison essays.