

Assigning and Managing Collaborative Writing Projects

Overview

There are many reasons why you might want to ask students to collaborate on a writing project. Perhaps collaborative research and writing is the norm in your academic field, or you believe it represents a type of writing students will be asked to do in the workplace. Perhaps you want to assign a project that is too complex to be accomplished by a single student in the time available. Whatever your purpose, sharing your reasoning with the students will help them see how this assignment aligns with the larger goals of your course. It is important to be aware that many students approach group assignments with suspicion, knowing that their grades will depend partly on the work of others. Setting guidelines for the collaborative process and offering clear expectations for what the final paper should look like cannot only help them get as much as possible out of the assignment, but also make your life easier when it comes time to grade.

General Considerations

As with any assignment, a collaborative writing prompt should specify your learning goals and criteria for evaluating the final product. When grading group work, however, evaluation can become complex. For example, you need to decide whether all of the students will necessarily receive the same grade, and if not, how to determine who gets what. These decisions depend largely on what you want the students to learn. If one of your goals is to have students learn how to allocate tasks fairly, it might make sense to allow them to write their paper in sections and to grade each section separately. If, on the other hand, you want them to learn how to create and revise their work as a team, you may want to assign a single grade to the entire project. Either way, your students need to know these expectations in advance.

Managing Student Interactions and Expectations

From the students' perspective, one significant difference between collaborative work and an individual paper has to do with time management. It can be complicated for students to find time to meet outside of class. Another difference, as noted above, is that students must depend on their peers to help them earn their desired grades. Instructors can help students manage these concerns by checking in with them at key points. For example, soon after you assign the paper you might ask each group to submit a work plan specifying how and when they will meet, who will complete what tasks, and how they will exchange drafts or files (Google Docs? Dropbox?). A sample of a simple form they might be asked to submit can be found in **Supplement 1: "GroupWork Plan."**

Depending on the duration and complexity of the assignment, you might also ask them to submit portions of the assignment or progress reports along the way. Finally, you might let students know in advance that you will solicit their input in determining each group member's grade and distribute a form you will ask them to use for this before they begin working together. Such forms might be simple, asking only what each group member contributed, or more detailed, listing a variety of categories for which you expect each participant in the group to demonstrate involvement. A sample of one such form is available in **Supplement 2: "Assessment of Individual Contributions to Group Project."**

Evaluating the Project

Ideally, if you have set out evaluation criteria in advance, including the extent to which you will or will not take student input regarding their peers' contributions into account, grading a collaborative writing project should be no more difficult (though also no easier) than grading an individual paper.

Resources:

Speck, Bruce. *Facilitating Students' Collaborative Writing*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001. Print.