

Student Notebook: Beginning Your Collaborative Writing Journey

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Being an academic requires a high degree of versatility. It is not only about conducting research and teaching—it's also about navigating collaborative relationships and getting published. You cannot truly identify as an academic nowadays if you do not have a decent number of publications supporting your academic resume. And though writing can be a solitary voyage, students are often encouraged to work and publish together.



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Unfortunately, many graduate students don't realize the power of collaboration until much later in their career. This is partly because many graduate schools, especially in low- and middle-income countries, rarely offer guidance on how to form successful collaborative relationships. In the absence of relevant courses and guidance during their early-career phases, a lot of young researchers struggle to engage in collaborative projects.

What is collaborative writing?

There is no single way to define collaborative writing. Some describe it as a group writing process where authors combine and share their expertise, knowledge, and skills on a project (Lunsford & Ede, 2012). However, the dynamics between collaborators may vary widely, and workloads are often unequally distributed. Some members have more responsibilities than others, depending on their goals and expertise. Similarly, collaborators may be experts in differing fields. More often than not, collaborations require interdisciplinary input.

Why engage in collaborative writing?

The value of collaboration is pretty evident. When individuals from different fields work together, some of the most insightful research ideas are created (Byers-Heinlein et al., 2020). My first encounter with collaborative writing, for instance, was during my master's degree training in psychology. I collaborated with professors from the fields of anthropology and sociology to incorporate a sociological perspective into my thesis. This allowed me to view my psychology-oriented paper from a perspective beyond brain physiology and cognition, which I could not have achieved otherwise.

Benefits of collaborative writing

1. Professional growth

One of the primary advantages of collaborative writing is professional growth. If you are an early-stage researcher, collaborating with someone more established in the field can help with dissemination of your work. Associating your name with someone more well-known in the field will increase your visibility. Additionally, a collaborator could also serve as inspiration for future research endeavors or may be able to write letters of recommendation for you when you apply for jobs or awards.

2. Enhanced productivity and creativity

Collaborative writing offers manifold creativity and productivity benefits. When two or more like-minded experts brainstorm on the same idea, the quality of the product is likely to increase (Hollis, 2001; Paulus et al., 2018). One collaborator's strengths can compensate for another's weaknesses, allowing each member to benefit from the other's experiences and knowledge.

In my experience, time spent working on a paper is reduced if more professionals are working together. A few years back, I was struggling with finishing a research draft I had written during my undergraduate years. I felt the draft was worth publishing, but I struggled with staying productive enough to complete the manuscript. I eventually decided to reach out to my previous supervisor and her team. Their expertise and input genuinely helped in both reshaping my manuscript and moving the project toward completion. I am unsure if my work would have reached the level of academic soundness that it did had I continued working on the manuscript alone. This experience taught me that collaborations not only provide opportunities for the less experienced to learn but also help them finish the projects they start.

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Finding suitable collaborators

So how do you find a collaborator? The answer is fairly simple: Look for people with similar interests. You would be amazed to know how many researchers share your interest in topics and need help learning more about them. A quick email explaining why you are interested in a particular topic and what you will bring to the table is a good start. However, don't expect someone to accept your offer of collaboration right away. Be patient and hope for the best. If anything, this experience will be a lesson in networking, another important aspect of one's research career.

Responsibilities and authorship

Factors determining a successful collaborative writing process include a respectful relationship, a shared vision, transparent expectations, and mutual trust. Because authorship guidelines vary with disciplines, it is very important to devise guidelines within your group and set expectations about credits and responsibilities before you start working together. You might also devise an informal written agreement

that clearly describes the roles and responsibilities of all involved members. Even though the initial agreements could change as the research process goes on, a detailed writing plan with deadlines is also a good idea. Thinking about potential obstacles at the outset may help you avoid technical concerns that invariably arise as time progresses.

Other considerations

Despite its benefits, collaborative writing is certainly not a walk in the park. In fact, collaborative writing comes with its own potential pitfalls, such as unequal distribution of workload, disagreements, and loss of interest. Friction might arise from different notions about conducting research, writing style, or what should be included. But handling a disagreement is easier when collaboration has a basis of open communication, respect, and trust. Having a system of open communication inevitably reduces these challenges and increases insightfulness.

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Being a graduate student does not necessarily mean signing up to be a lone wolf. The learning and research impact associated with collaborative writing can make your research pursuits more socially and intellectually enjoyable. The more people you involve in your research, the better experience, productivity, and research satisfaction you will receive in the long run.

It's always the right time to begin writing together.

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