

Summary of Panel Presentation
Working and Writing Together: Strategies for Effective Collaboration
November 13, 2007

Monica Bulger (PowerPoint Presentation):

Slides will be posted on the writing center website

1st Meeting as a Group

- Define assignment: make sure you know and understand what you are supposed to do.
- What are the expectations?
- What is the purpose of your project?

Establish Group Goals

- Look to the future and decide what you want your end result to be. Working backwards is helpful.
- Discover strengths of teammates and decide who will do what by when.
- It is necessary for someone to be the “buck stops here” person within the group. This position can rotate but it is essential for the group to take this role seriously.

Panel:

Bruce Kendall, Yolanda Crous, Darren Hardy, Marion Wittmann, Christopher Evelyn

Q: Please tell us about your thoughts on group writing and share some tips you may have for our students.

Bruce: You must write a document that everyone believes in. Most of the hard work is figuring out what to say and how to organize the document. You must decide what should be included and the order things should be in. Members in your group may have differing opinions about this, so it is effective to take a brainstorming approach.

Try not to start with an outline, because that may restrain your thinking. Develop key concepts and agree upon those. It may be helpful to work on a white board or to write topic sentences on index cards and rearrange them accordingly.

Usually when working with two people, there tends to be equal participation within the group. However, when working with three or more people, someone isn't going to work as much. You should play to one another's strengths. For example, figure out who has good grammar and let that person edit the paper. In order to contribute to the project, it does not necessarily mean that a group member has to write.

Disagreement is an opportunity: it often reflects a misunderstanding that needs to be discussed. Make sure that each person understands the underlying issue at hand. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

Yolanda: Successful group writing comes down to how you work with different personalities and how you approach a project. Everyone should contribute, but do not

feel like you have to have control over the whole project. This is too great of a task to take on, and you will end up drowning in the work.

It's amazing how long it takes to write the thing – give yourself plenty of time. Editing takes almost as long as writing, so the editor of a section should be different from the writer of this section. You should set deadlines, and have your group project advisors help you set these deadlines.

Also, use the Writing Center for your first few editing sessions, because you will be able to talk about the project in a neutral place with a neutral person. This atmosphere diffuses personalization and makes the editing process much less threatening.

Darren: In the beginning of the project, it is important to establish a clear division of labor, as well as internal deadlines. These two facets are fundamental to the success of your project.

Also, remember that you're not writing an e-mail, a memo, or a journal article: you're writing a report for your client. Your client will be concerned with the detail in which you explain your project. However, for sections such as the abstract or executive summary, more general explanations are more effective. A useful way to model your writing is to find examples of material that is written effectively and that accomplishes what it is you need to do.

The task of editing is much more manageable if you have an "editing buddy". Have one person read and edit your section of the paper before you show it to the whole group. This way there is individual attention given to your writing. Tools can sometimes cause stress, so know who is more skilled at using different programs. Recognize that there will be experts in your group, and do not be afraid to let them handle that particular software.

Marion: In your initial meeting, it is important to let your group members know what you want to get out of the project. This will help the group as a whole define the project and set a clear objective.

Every time you split up a section, have two people work on it; this will guarantee equal participation. Have someone outside of each partnership edit that portion of the project. Then bring the section to the group to make sure it makes sense in terms of relevance.

Christopher: You should go into each project believing in the good of people and respecting that each person is different. When we looked back, we realized everyone contributed to the project. It is important to remember that every person is putting in his or her effort in some way, even if he or she is not a good writer.

Establishing roles within the group and reminding each other of those roles will reinforce their willingness and ability to contribute. You may be asked to develop and learn a

brand new skill when working on a project. Identify this early on so you are not left learning a new software system a few days before your project is due.

Q: How can we use meeting time the most efficiently when we are working within our groups?

Darren: A lot of groups have a tendency to want to edit their project during a meeting, which ends up being frustrating and taking a long time. Make sure you define who will take on this role before-hand. If there are issues with the way something was edited, then you can discuss it together as a group.

Yolanda: You may want to discuss what you want to write during a meeting, but you have to remember that it will not necessarily turn out that way. People listen differently and may not completely understand the point you make during a meeting. That is why it is important to first agree upon a research question at the start of a project and have it summed up in one sentence that everyone believes in.

Darren: Appreciate and accept people's work styles. Understand that you won't be able to coerce people to work differently.

Monica: It is also helpful to send e-mails at the end of each meeting to establish what the group has agreed they will accomplish by the next deadline.

Q: What is the best way to deal with style?

Bruce: First you must decide which facets of style are important. Do not get caught up in whether to use a comma or a semi-colon, because that does not matter. You should focus your energy on places where style is getting in the way of content. If everyone understands what is written and agrees that it effectively answers the question, then leave it alone.

Darren: Another style element that tends to confuse people is when to use active or passive voice. Have the editor go through the paper and make sure the usage is acceptable and consistent.

Bruce: Also, in terms of formatting, it may be useful to take advantage of word templates. This way everyone is working with the same format, and it is easier to edit and compile parts of the whole.

Q: Have you used Google Documents, and do you think it is useful?

Darren: I have used it a little, but it is a fairly new program. Word has a similar feature called "track changes" that serves the same function. Google Documents may be useful for sections, but not the entire report. Either way, you must always make sure to back-up your work.

Monica: Google Documents does not change the colors of text like “track changes” does. However, it does allow two people to edit the same document at the same time. You do not always have to e-mail the group the latest version of a document, but you need to make sure that you do not save over another person’s work.

Yolanda: Do not underestimate how long it will take to compile drafts and edit the final project. It always takes longer than you think.

Q: How do you maintain energy and enthusiasm when working on a project?

Darren: Do not expect to maintain energy. It comes and goes in cycles.

Christopher: One way is to think about producing work that your teammates will like. This fear will keep you motivated. Also, get outside of Bren and visit your project location or your client to ground yourself and get a fresh perspective.

Marion: Make sure you like what you’re doing. It always helps to stay enthusiastic when you are working on something that you like. There are many parts to a project, so speak up if you want to take charge of a particular section. Also, deadlines help to keep energy up.

Bruce: When you’re in the throes of writing and editing, you can forget what the bigger picture is, so it’s a good idea to get together as a group and re-confirm your vision.

Q: How should we go about making decisions when we cannot reach a consensus?

Bruce: One way is to switch off letting people get their way. Toss a coin or use some scheme for rotating which idea you will adopt.

Darren: You have to get past politeness in your group. No one wants to be bold enough to make a decision, but you must be honest.

Monica: Remember that you are all good people working toward a common goal. Use feedback, not criticism.

Q: How can we structure our group time to make the most of it?

Christopher: You should come to each meeting with an agenda prepared. Rotate who will be the person to make the agenda.

Marion: Tangible goals and deadlines help make meetings productive. Each individual should have a task and come prepared to report on their task. For example, x needs to get done, so the next time we meet, which is _____, we should have this done.

Bruce: Try to make all big decisions within the group as early as possible. Do not leave them until the end because they will be difficult to make. Use the group meeting time to

hone your statement of what you're going to do and not going to do. Come up with focused goals as soon as possible so that everyone is on the same page.

***Q:** How do you deal with different perspectives on issues? (e.g., science vs. non-science writing perspective)*

Darren: We did not find this problematic because it is okay to have different sections written differently. After editing you will be able to make sure the sections flow with one another.

Yolanda: You can help different perspectives flow by adding information into the intro and conclusions that aligns with each section.