

MOVING THE WORLD WITH Collaborative Writing

BY TOM MCTIGHE

“**D**o your own work” is one of the primary tenets we hear in school, but on the job we are often judged by how well we work on a team. In writing, many hands do indeed make light work—as long as they are not all trying to type on the same keyboard. Knowing how to collaborate is a valuable skill, one that professional writers should try to develop as early as possible.

There is a common perception that great writing is produced by individual authors. America celebrates the individ-

ual, and popular sentiments often favor the individual over the group. This country’s original political ideals, embodied in the Bill of Rights, articulate the rights of the individual within the collective state. The Bill of Rights, however, is itself a product of collaborative writing: James Madison based the work on the Virginia Declaration of Rights.

In “Facilitating Students’ Collaborative Writing,” Bruce Speck asserts that the notion of single authorship is “a fiction” and that all writing is collaborative. He justifies his position by showing that, as in the case of the Bill of Rights,

all “[t]exts depend upon other texts,” and that all writers are influenced by the writing, speech, and ideas of others. Since we’ve been collaborating all along, Speck seems to be saying, we might as well learn how to do it right.

Managing the Tasks

With information being generated at an ever-increasing rate, collaboration among writers is becoming more common. Many newsrooms, for example, are responding to the convergence of print, broadcast, and electronic media by embracing a team-based approach to



reporting—an approach antithetical to the traditional view of reporters as loners who research, write, and take full credit for their own stories.

Collaboration can accomplish things that would be impossible for a single author. Ambitious projects such as the Wikipedia encyclopedia (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page) have begun to explore the possibilities of large-scale collaboration. Built on the Wiki technology, which allows users to edit the site's Web pages, Wikipedia encourages anonymous contributors to add to its growing collection. Since going live in

2001, it has amassed more than 450,000 articles.

And, let's face it, even if you're not trying to write an encyclopedia, the process of writing can be daunting at times. The various steps—brainstorming, researching, outlining, drafting, and editing—demand not only different skills, but also different states of mind. It can take a lot of energy to continue to move toward the finish line. Collaboration allows you to share these tasks or to divide them into manageable subtasks. Instead of trying to do everything yourself, you can concentrate on one aspect of the project and let someone else worry about the rest.

But isn't collaboration complicated? How do you know who contributes what, and how much credit each contributor should receive? Who is ultimately responsible for the quality of the document? It can be unsettling to have your supervisor hand you a deadline and a list of names (your new "teammates"). Where do you begin?

Establishing Trust

The Linux story is an inspiring example of a successful collaboration. For over ten years, hundreds of programmers from around the world have worked together to create a revolutionary free operating system. In terms of collaborative synergy, this is the best-case scenario: The participants are involved in the project for the sheer love of it. The overwhelming majority of them don't even get paid.

Most of us aren't quite so lucky. Our collaborative situations tend to be somewhat less than ideal. Instead of a team of enthusiastic volunteers, we're likely to find ourselves grouped with an ambitious, self-appointed leader; a daydreamer; a hand-wringing worrier; and someone who never seems to be around. For these kinds of collaborations to work, it's necessary to focus on survival. And establishing trust is the first step.

The members of the Linux development team have a common goal that unites them. This shared vision helps hold the project together during tough times. On a team from which this ideological glue is absent, it is especially important that the participants know the

rules of the project and what role they are to play within it.

In *Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing*, Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford suggest that most successful collaborations start with some defining rules. These rules should clarify what is expected of each participant, how conflicts are to be handled, and how credit and responsibility will be assigned when the project is finished. Well-written rules will provide the disparate members of the group with a safe place—an equitable mental space where they can set up shop. Speck offers a beginning with his "Three Bs of Collaborative Writing" (quoted from "Facilitating Students' Collaborative Writing"):

Be responsible (as an individual)

- Meet deadlines.
- Schedule a sufficient amount of time to make quality a priority.
- Plan, plan, plan—including planning for problems.

Be organized (as a group)

- Prepare a schedule and monitor it as the project progresses.
- Complete assignments on time.
- Counsel group members who are late to meetings and who do not understand the meaning of the word *deadline*.

Be honest

- Tell group members what you can and cannot do.
- Express your reservations about the way the group is approaching the project.
- Counsel weak group members.

Getting Started

After discussing the guidelines of a project, you need to determine the role of each member and get going. There are three popular collaborative models for organizing a writing team: the newsroom model, the peer-to-peer model, and the top-down model.

The Newsroom Model

When a small group is formed to complete some writing task, the newsroom model is often the best approach. One member is chosen to manage the project and to make the final editing decisions. This editor often facilitates an initial brainstorming session, puts together a

working outline, and then assigns each of the other members a section to write.

Once the group decides on an editor, it is on its way. But the group has to live with its choice, and the designated editor needs to embrace the job and lead. Leading a group is a complex subject in itself, but good books such as Roger Schwarz's *The Skilled Facilitator: A Comprehensive Resource for Consultants, Facilitators, Managers, Trainers, and Coaches* can help. The success of this kind of collaboration depends on two things: how well each member performs in his or her role, and how well the editor can incorporate everyone's contribution into a cohesive final document.

The Peer-to-Peer Model

Working with just one other person is relatively easy. You have to manage only one set of quirks. This relationship can be like that between an editor and a writer, such as Maxwell Perkins's work with F. Scott Fitzgerald, Thomas Wolfe, and Ernest Hemingway. Alternatively, the two partners can take turns working on different tasks.

Like a marriage, over time this kind of partnership can lead to a very productive and rewarding relationship, but, as with all collaborations, establishing clear boundaries is important. When rules are not explicit, misunderstandings are more likely.

This type of arrangement might be difficult when the writers are strangers, when egos are fragile, or when one or both writers are overly attached to the material. If the stakes are high, as when two writers are trying to write an important grant or a business proposal, it is crucial to establish trust—and parameters—before the writing begins.

The Top-down Model

In his classic 1991 book, *How to Write Usable User Documentation*, Edmond H. Weiss laid out a revolutionary treatise on how to write technical manuals. Years later, it remains a testament to creativity in technical writing. Weiss's top-down approach to large writing projects is one of the conceptual highlights of the book.

Imagine for a moment that you are the lone technical writer at a small engi-

Looking for Collaboration Software?

With access to a Web server, you can set up your own Wiki site (visit twiki.org/ to see an example), which aids collaboration by creating an electronic record of an entire project. This site can come in handy when you want to revisit an earlier draft, or when it's time for your review and you want to show your manager exactly how much you have contributed to a project. The history of each page can also be examined to determine what worked over the course of the project, with an eye to improving future collaborations.

If you don't have a Web server handy, several affordable options are available, such as Basecamp (www.basecamp.com/). This site allows you to manage your files, send messages to your teammates or your clients, and more. Managing a single project is free, and all you need to use it is a Web browser.

E-mail still provides an efficient, easy-to-use way to collaborate. Editing Word documents with Track Changes and sending them back and forth as attachments may be somewhat tedious, but, unless someone takes the time to learn a better way and explain it to the rest of the group, this method may be as good as it gets.

neering R&D company. Your boss has asked you to document the company's best practices. Weiss's approach is to move as much of the work as possible to the front of the development cycle. So, instead of spending most of your time revising your drafts, you spend it planning the document and creating as detailed an outline as possible.

Your goal is to have such a level of detail that eventually the manual just "falls out" of the outline. At this point you'll create a collection of one-page modules, like a set of forms that need filling in. After all the stakeholders sign off on the outline, you assign each module to the appropriate subject matter expert, and, as the sections come back, you edit them for grammar and style.

Writing with a Full Schedule

The article you are reading took me more than a month to finish. What happened? I was excited about the topic. I knew what I wanted to say. I had a good outline. But between other articles, work, school, and my responsibilities at home, I just didn't have the time or mental energy to get the thing written. With one or two trusted collaborators, I estimate it would have taken only a few days—OK, maybe a couple of weeks—to turn my initial outline into a final draft.

Who can say how different that final draft would have been from this one? Or what ideas those other collaborators would have brought to this piece? I imagine I might have been challenged, possibly inspired, occasionally surprised. With regular feedback from other writers, my creative process—an introspective,

self-referential loop—might have been redefined, opened up, and pushed to new heights. In any case, my schedule is just as full this month as it was last month, and I'm starting to think that, if I want to keep writing, collaboration is my only hope. If any of you feel the same way, drop me a line. ☎

SUGGESTED READINGS

Lunsford, Andrea, and Lisa Ede. *Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990.

Schwarz, Roger. *The Skilled Facilitator: A Comprehensive Resource for Consultants, Facilitators, Managers, Trainers, and Coaches*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002.

Speck, Bruce. "Facilitating Students' Collaborative Writing: Issues and Recommendations." *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 28, No. 6 (February 2002).

Weiss, Edmond H. *How to Write Usable User Documentation*. 2nd ed. Phoenix, Ariz.: Oryx Press, 1991.

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