

## Assigning and Managing Group Writing Projects

*Sixth in a Series on Assigning and Responding to Student Writing*

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*Photo Credit: Chris Thaiss*

*Caption: Group presentation in Writing in Science*



*Photo credit: Chris Thaiss*

*Caption: Project team in Writing in Science*

Collaborative research and writing are at the heart of most disciplines in the university—and are the norm in most professional workplaces for which our students are preparing. This doesn't mean that writing isn't also an individual endeavor, as the solitary work of the researcher/writer is usually an essential element of the team process and of the co-authored proposal, article, report, or book that results. Indeed, a "group project" may be best thought of as progress between group decision-making, individual contributions, review among team members, more individual work, and so on, until a final draft is completed. Group work is both social and individual.

Many UC Davis faculty across disciplines already assign and manage group writing projects. I have been using them for many years, in courses such as Writing in Science and Writing in Business. Often, as in many of our First-Year Seminars, these

projects result in team reports and presentations. An earlier entry in this blog series describes sample team projects that occur in large-enrollment classes.

Group writing projects can bring students and teachers many benefits: among them,

- Experience in teamwork essential for success in labs, fieldwork, community projects, and most professional work environments
- Opportunities to require (and students to engage in) more complex research assignments than a quarter (or semester) allows individuals
- Students learning from the expertise and problem-solving techniques of peers
- Students learning to negotiate with others in decision-making situations

### **A few FAQs in designing and managing group writing projects**

*How can I assign teams and help them choose topics?*

Depending on the goals and projected student outcomes from the course, you can create a list of acceptable topics and have students sign up by interest. Alternatively, if the parameters of your course will allow, students can brainstorm topics and recruit other class members to become a team. Many designs are possible.

*What is the best size for a team?*

Because of the time crunch in a quarter (or semester), smaller teams (3-4) allow for quicker decision-making while also allowing for enough distribution of workload for a fairly complex inquiry. But some projects can involve an entire class working in smaller sub-teams on parts of a project, such as producing a class publication.

*How should I monitor the progress of projects to ensure time on task and quality of product?*

Because students will likely have had little prior experience in this format, monitoring regular stages is important. Typical stages to monitor include each team's writing a proposal, submitting a list of materials (e.g., library sources, site observations), progress reports, first full draft, revision, and final presentation. Each team member should take leadership at some point in presenting progress reports, and one or two very brief conferences with teams during the term are important for you to gauge progress and to troubleshoot.

*Do group projects increase my workload?*

There are tradeoffs. While group projects require regular monitoring, you will be dealing with many fewer than if each student were working individually. Moreover,

the team structure, when it works well, gives support to each member and removes some of the responsibility from you.

*How do I ensure that each student is contributing equally, since ultimately I must grade each student's performance?*

Progress reports can require each member to describe his/her contribution, and requiring each member to take the lead for part of the project can ensure equal contributions—and give you sufficient material on which to measure each student's performance. But many teachers see as one goal of the group structure that each person on the team gets the grade that the team earns.

### **More reading...**

A plethora of guides exist for managing group projects in academia and other workplaces. Two starters:

How to Manage Group Projects

<http://libguides.usc.edu/content.php?pid=83009&sid=1486574>

7 Tools Students Can Use to Manage Group Projects

<http://www.freetech4teachers.com/2012/02/7-tools-students-can-use-to-manage.html#.VPhZWM0xEpo>