

# Nurse Author & Editor

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## Collaborative Writing

### **Collaborative Writing: Strategies To Promote Successful Shared Authorship**

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For some authors writing can be an isolating, challenging, and emotionally draining activity. Authors who struggle to achieve writing success or want to avoid the solitary work may want to consider writing with others. Collaborative writing involves two or more authors working together to produce a shared document. Before deciding if this approach is right for you consider your work style, your writing needs, and the topic you would like to write about. Asking a few simple questions will help you determine if this approach will work for you. For example, what are you feelings about

writing? Do you feel excitement and passionate about writing or do you feel dread and dismay? Perhaps you need a boost in confidence, some positive feedback about your work, or encouragement to continue writing and succeed. What is your experience with writing? Maybe you are a novice writer and need assistance with the technical aspects of publishing and seek guidance to understand the steps and process of publication. Even if you are an experienced author you may enjoy the stimulation from working with others on writing activities. Time management may also be a concern and collaborative writing can help you set goals and achieve deadlines. How familiar are you with the topic? Do you need the knowledge and expertise of an individual who is more familiar with the content? Or, perhaps you may be looking for persons with shared interests who can push you to higher levels and encourage you to think about topics differently. All of these needs can be met through collaborative writing initiatives. However, authors interested in collaborative writing must think about the right approach to writing collaboratively to promote success.

## **CONSIDER COLLABORATORS**

When looking for possible collaborative writers consider colleagues both in and outside of your department or discipline. Also consider professionals you have met at networking events. Colleagues who have similar interests or an aligned passion for a topic might make likely collaborators. Sometimes you may also want to consider colleagues with complimentary interests who can help fill in gaps that you may have in a content area and add new insight when writing. When identifying potential partners consider personality fit and workstyles (Steeffel, 2013) to ensure work approaches are complimentary. Think about how possible collaborators see a project (big

picture person versus a detail person) and how that will work with your personality.

Identify early in the development stage how many collaborators you would like to work. Larger groups can present some challenges given different background, knowledge, experience, personalities, and writing skills. As group size increases it may become more difficult to reach consensus as some collaborators may have strong emotions and beliefs about the work. Lastly, don't forget to consider possible power struggles that may emerge as writers may include supervisors or students.

## **COLLABORATIVE WRITING APPROACHES**

Once the group members are selected you should then consider how the work of writing will occur. Keep in mind the number and make-up of the writing group may influence the approach used. There are three traditional approaches to collaborative writing that should be considered. The first is the hand-off method. After some general agreement about the topic and development of major headings of the work, one member of the writing group begins constructing a designated portion of the document, usually the introduction or background section. When this designated preliminary section is complete it is passed off to the next collaborative author who reviews what has been written, does some review and editing of the written work, and proceeds to write the next section. This hand-off of the writing continues in round robin fashion until the document is satisfactorily completed by all authors. Passing along the writing to the next author allows for ongoing review. The editing and critique of the previously written work as it develops permits authors to see the flow of the document, be

consistent in the style and format of the writing, and allows for editing and input as the document develops. This approach is helpful when the topic can clearly be envisioned as sequential and works best when authors can easily accept editing of their work and can write in sequential sections. However, disagreements may arise and cause potential conflict as members of the writing group may disagree on the focus of content or style of writing as the document develops.

Another type of writing approach involves parallel writing of the work. In this approach writing tasks are divided among the writers and each person individually crafts his/her component. An advantage of parallel writing is that all writers can be individually engaged in writing activity at the same time. However, it can be challenging to combine each writer's section into one document while ensuring adequate content coverage, avoiding duplications, and maintaining a tone and writing style that is consistent throughout. Such challenges are especially difficult when there are multiple writers. Therefore, it is important to identify a member of the writing group who can edit the work to make it consistent and flow as one cohesive document. This parallel writing approach can be appropriate when writers have distinct areas of interest or specialization. For example, when writing a research article a statistician can probably easily write the data analysis section of a document alone while other authors are writing the components that focus on their areas of expertise.

The last approach involves side-by-side writing in which authors are physically present and simultaneously construct a document together. Authors may experience synergy and may brainstorm creative ideas when they have an opportunity to co-create work together. However, if writers get

caught up in editing activities, or have differing opinions and writing styles they may face slow progress. Some authors enjoy this stimulating dialogue but for those who can easily get sidetracked they may need to use one of the previously discussed approaches that may help keep their activities focused on the writing task.

## PREVENTING PROBLEMS

Regardless of which approach is selected there are still some concerns that emerge with collaborative writing. These issues should be carefully addressed to promote successful shared authorship. One concern involves power differentials among the writing group. Faculty perceived to have higher power or rank may influence control over or even intimidate other colleagues or students who are part of the writing group. Nishikawa, Codier, Mack and Shannon (2014) discuss student faculty authorship challenges and offer solutions in the December issue of *Nurse Author & Editor*. Many novice writers may not feel confident to express concerns or opinions when working with experienced writers who are perceived as experts. In these cases, it is especially important to have an open dialogue before beginning any writing activity that allows all contributors to negotiate their roles and responsibilities and not feel minimized or dismissed. Refer to the Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals (International committee of Medical Journal Editors [ICJME, 2014]) to determine what constitutes authorship. All authors should contribute to writing and review of the work and not just be included as an author as a courtesy. Determine at the onset of activities who will complete tasks such as editing, formatting, corresponding with publishers, proofreading, or other writing activities. Also have a plan for how to handle disagreements should

they arise. Construct a formal written agreement outlining the order of authors, writing expectations for each author, approach for writing, and norms that will be followed for the group. It is also important to include in this document a timeline with suggested deadlines and incremental achievement milestones as part of this agreement so that all authors have similar understanding of how the work will proceed. Keep in mind the writing experience of collaborative group members when developing the agreement. Novice writers may struggle with conceptualizing the focus of the project, require more time to develop their ideas, and need guidance in conveying the appropriate tone. The lack of experience may spur the need for impromptu mentoring. Working one-on-one with the novice writer and role modeling appropriate writing behaviors may prove beneficial to the productivity of the group. Even with prior planning, problems may arise so it is important to communicate with the group members and be open and clear about issues. Handle conflict openly and honestly.

A final consideration for collaborative writing is how the work will be edited and stored. Technology growth has assisted writing groups and made collaborative writing easier than in the past. Using mark-up features in Word documents allows authors to insert comments and track changes. The annotations enable each individual author to see the revisions made as the work develops. When working on a collaborative document the writing group also has to establish a format for naming documents so that when using electronic files authors are reviewing the most recent version of the file. Consider using the date and author initials as part of the file names and update with each revision. Lastly, technology has enabled the sharing of documents in an updated electronic format. Storage of files in remote secure

storage locations such as Dropbox, Google Docs, Live Minutes or Wikis allows all users to have convenient access to the most recent document across devices and prohibits the need for other electronic transferring of files (Zhou, Simpson, & Domizi, 2012).

Writing in a collaborative manner can lead to productive and successful results. Before embarking on a collaborative writing project consider the best approach for the group as well as implementing strategies that may prevent writing problems. Openly communicating about these issues may lead to a pleasant writing experience and hopefully successful publication.

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