



THE WRITING CENTER

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Writing Groups: Course-Based Writing Groups

You may choose to or be required to form a writing group for a University course. You may decide to form a group that will read and offer commentary on each member's writing in response to course assignments or you may be required to write a collaborative group paper. Both kinds of course-based groups share some positive characteristics:

- ✓ You will have the same assignments, making it easy to work together to figure out the task, break the assignment down into manageable parts, and develop strategies for completing the papers.
- ✓ You will all have a similar knowledge base. Having read the same books and attended the same lectures, your group can rely on one another to figure out complex materials and answer each other's questions.
- ✓ You can discuss the instructor's expectations and strategies for meeting them.
- ✓ Your instructor may be willing to serve as a mentor for your writing group, meeting with you periodically to discuss your progress on course projects.
- ✓ Since you will see one another in class, it can be convenient to meet regularly either before or after the course's meeting time, or to use the five minutes before or after class to get out your calendars and schedule meetings.

All of these factors that you share can help your course-based writing group get started a bit more easily. For the most part, class-based writing groups work just like any other writing group--members make decisions about how the group will operate, set up a regular time and place to meet, and support one another's writing with a feedback and writing activities during and in between meetings. The tips below will help your group meet the demands of being in a group with your classmates.

Course-Based Writing Groups for Individual Work

While any writing group can help you get feedback on your writing, a group that includes other people writing papers for the same class will provide you with a collection of readers who know about the subjects you are writing about, are addressing the same questions

and assignments, and are writing to impress the same audience/professor. That insider knowledge can make a course-based group even more helpful to its members.

- ✓ In courses that require lengthy research or analysis papers, a writing group that meets regularly outside of class can help you stick to a regular writing schedule, brainstorm ideas for further research, get feedback on your writing more regularly than you can from the professor alone, and learn other students' ideas as you develop your own long-term project.
- ✓ In courses that require several short papers, the group could meet during the weeks before papers are due to figure out the assignment, brainstorm strategies, figure out which readings will be most helpful, and read one another's drafts.
- ✓ Groups can also meet after members receive graded papers from the professor to talk about grades, discuss feedback, and figure out strategies to improve the next paper.
- ✓ Most faculty members encourage students to work together in this way. After all, talking about course materials and challenges outside of class is one more way in which students can think and learn about the subject matter. But some faculty members may wish to restrict certain kinds of writing group interactions to avoid plagiarism. If you have any questions about developing a course-based writing group, please discuss them with your professor before your group starts to meet.

Collaborative Group Assignments

Frequently, professors will ask students to form groups that will compose a paper jointly. The tips below will help your group develop a good plan for working together and create a strong paper.

- ✓ Group projects can serve a variety of educational purposes. They may teach you skills for collaboration in fields where jointly conducted research and co-authored publications are common. They can allow students to gain experience conducting research on a much larger scale than individual work allows. By including a number of researchers and writers, these projects can ensure that students gain exposure to a variety of perspectives on controversial topics, moving beyond their own personal views. They can also allow students to develop skills in group dynamics, interpersonal communication, and collaboration. Sometimes it is helpful to ask why the professor chose to assign the project as a group effort. Their objectives for the activity may guide your group's efforts.
- ✓ When thinking about group projects, students often worry most about fairness. Everyone wants to be sure that work is distributed evenly and that the group is not punished collectively for the failure of one or more group members to do their jobs. These concerns can be addressed most effectively early on. Use the Writing Groups Starter Kit handouts to establish your personal goals for working within this group and to set

ground rules for participation. What are each person's responsibilities? When should each of these responsibilities be met? How will the group support each person's work? What should group members do if they have problems fulfilling their responsibilities? And how will you keep track of the project, both as individuals and as a group? Will someone serve as the facilitator or leader, or will you all share that responsibility? By honestly addressing these questions and any anxieties over fairness early in your work together, you can avoid miscommunication and problems later on.

- ✓ As you discuss the ground rules for your group, keep in mind that you may have different levels of commitment to the project and the class. Someone taking the class Pass/Fail, for example, may not be as committed as the person trying desperately to get an A to bring up his GPA. Someone taking just nine hours of classes may have considerably more time to devote to the project than someone taking twice as many classes or working almost full-time outside of class. Of course, everyone participating in a group project owes it to the rest of the group to put in their best effort, but sometimes the circumstances of member's lives will mean that what constitutes a "best effort" will vary widely. Addressing these different levels of commitment and availability early on may enable your group to develop equitable ways of meeting everyone's needs.
- ✓ Each member of your group will bring different skills to bear on the group's task. Some of you may be outstanding researchers, able to ferret out the most elusive details from obscure sources, while others might be terrific editors who can catch grammatical errors and restructure awkwardly organized paragraphs. Assess your strengths as individuals and figure out how those strengths can be profitably combined in the group. What weaker areas might you all have to work hard to address?
- ✓ Your professor may dictate a division of labor for your group (for example, "Each member will write a summary of a different article and then the group will write a collaborative paper about the common themes among all of the articles). If he or she does not, you will have to figure out a division of labor for yourselves. Do you want to each do essentially the same task, such as finding out about one part of the project, writing it up, and editing it independently, then putting together these isolated pieces to make a whole at the end of your work together? Would you rather divide up the work based on tasks, having some people conduct research, others write, others develop audiovisual aids, and still others type/edit/proofread? Will you actually compose as a group, sitting together as you write collaboratively?
- ✓ Just because your group is not ready to write the paper yet does not mean that you shouldn't be meeting and working together. You could gather to discuss the data you are finding or to brainstorm ideas for additional research. You could meet to provide each other with summaries of the readings you are each doing and to talk about the questions that secondary literature poses for you. You could also meet to hone your

writing skills using the various handouts in the writing groups packet.

- ✓ When you write a collaborative paper, whether you compose as a group or write individual pieces separately and then cobble them together, you will want to be sure to edit the piece to smooth out the "voice" of the author. Even though your reader (the professor) will know that the piece has been written by a group, the arguments in your paper will be most effective if the prose flows seamlessly as if it were the work of one author, not many. You might try reading early drafts and the finished paper out loud to the group, pausing after each section or paragraph to gather group input and eliminate repetitions between sections written by different group members. If you reach a sentence that seems unwieldy or awkward, it may be helpful to ask each group member to rewrite it in their own words, each reading his/her own version out loud so that the group can pool its ideas and then figure out the best way to say what it means.

- ✓ Finally, your group will have to decide what to do if a group member fails to live up to the group's expectations. You might build consequences for failing to meet the group's guidelines into the ground rules. Your instructor might build evaluation forms for each group member into the assignment or, if asked, might have other suggestions for how to manage a group in which some members are working much harder than others.