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Yours, Mine, Ours: Some Best Practices for Authors Writing Collaboratively

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Yours, Mine, Ours: Some Best Practices for Authors Writing Collaboratively

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Peer-Reviewed Article

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Introduction

The authors of this article focus on the best practices we learned through our experiences in scholarly writing, with a specific focus on the collaborative writing process. For the sake of this paper, we define collaborative writing as a collective process of creating a scholarly work for distribution, either through formal (e.g., peer-review) or informal (e.g., white paper) venues. This article is, in part, in response to our lack of formal training and addresses a situation in which we felt other researchers might find themselves. We hope to provide starting points for others interested in writing collaboratively and help empower those wishing to have a broader conversation about writing. Our scope here is limited to collaborative writing, and as such, we exclude other components of collaborative scholarly work, such as generating an idea, pursuing a grant, or analyzing data. Nevertheless, we do endeavor to provide resources and advice broadly applicable and relevant to all disciplines.

After a brief literature review, included to provide a broader context, the authors give some background information on their own experiences with co-authorship prior to this article. However, the authors dedicate most of this article to presenting reflections, advice, and a curated list of open-access resources related to some of the critical aspects and challenges of collaborative writing.

Literature Review

The sciences saw sole-author papers as the status quo from the 1600s to the 1920s. Sole-authorship as a standard made it straightforward to assign credit to the incremental discoveries in the sciences (Greene, 2014). However, Greene notes that sole-author practices declined from the 1920s to the 1950s, and we see this practice lessening further after the 1980s. Today, co-authorship is the norm in most scientific disciplines, and we observe this norm in the humanities and social sciences to varying degrees. In some fields, like physics, authorship credit is so significant that the collaborators must list names in the appendix. “Hyperauthorship” sees over 1,000 authors on a single paper (King, 2012).

There are many benefits to working collaboratively. For example, in one examination of academic librarians’ collaborative writing and publishing practices, the researcher found evidence that collaboration can lead to higher caliber publications (Hart, 2000). Another study showed that co-authorship practices in music therapy demonstrate many advantages, including the benefit of incorporating more specialized skills to provide greater insight into the research problems (Layman and Elliott, 2019). Evidence also suggests that in addition to being practical and productive, collaboration offers enhanced access to expertise, resources, and funding (Beaver, 2001). Furthermore, Beaver points out that these kinds of efforts can be both fun and intellectually stimulating.

However, lack of writing experience and training can make navigating co-authorship all the more challenging. Authors may not feel empowered to discuss projects with collaborators due to a lack of foundational instruction in writing. In fact, scholars across all disciplines report that they receive little to no formal training in writing. For example, a survey by Sword of over 1,300 scholars from various disciplines found that only 15 percent received formal training as part of their disciplinary program (2017). The remainder received informal or semi-formal training, meaning they learned the peer review system's rigors by trial and error or found workshops or other avenues to further their writing education. And while trial-and-error is a formative and viable learning experience, introducing norms and expectations could mitigate false starts or dropped projects. Therefore, articles like this can provide valuable information about what to expect.

Author Backgrounds

The authors saw this article as an opportunity to share what we learned to help others prepare for future collaborations. The three authors come to this topic at different stages of their careers, with varying levels of collaborative writing or co-authoring experience and diverse academic backgrounds.

Paulina Borrego comes to academic writing as a nonnative English speaker. In her education, Borrego tended towards subjects that inhabited their own created language, such as chemistry and mathematics, which use their own symbols and formulas. Librarianship is her third career, and most of her writing has involved reporting on library projects and initiatives. While not a formal part of her library position, she feels it is essential to communicate through publishing to inspire others to explore projects divergent from their traditional roles. Her first collaborative writing experience came when she worked with fellow science librarians to tell the story of a librarian and staff outreach project at the Science & Engineering Library at the University of Massachusetts Amherst (http://works.bepress.com/paulina_borrego/49/). She has also written several solo articles that deal with creative library projects outside the realm of a traditional academic library such as the Mass Aggie Seed Library (https://works.bepress.com/paulina_borrego/41/) and her Quirky Patent Coloring Book projects (https://works.bepress.com/paulina_borrego/44/).

Thea Atwood has a background in psychology and cognitive neuroscience. Coming from the highly collaborative and competitive field of neuroscience, the majority of Atwood's writing is with co-authors. Her writing tends to focus on reporting out on initiatives and projects that are themselves collaborative. This has included a project with The New England Software Carpentry Library Consortium (<https://escholarship.umassmed.edu/jeslib/vol8/iss1/5/>) as well as participation in a cross-institutional study examining the support needs of faculty working with big data (https://scholarworks.umass.edu/libraries_working_papers/2/). Atwood received no formal training in writing, writing style, or collaboration, but has attended workshops on research productivity, including workshops provided by the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity. While she is not required to have a research agenda at her organization, scholarly contributions are necessary for Continuing Appointment (a tenure-like appointment) and promotion.

Rachel Knapp has a multi-discipline background that includes chemistry, forestry, engineering, and library science. Knapp's collaborative writing experience is limited to a few papers with her advisor while earning her Master's in Forestry (e.g. <https://doi-org.colorado.idm.oclc.org/10.1016/j.foreco.2010.08.014>) and a few pieces written with library colleagues, including one written with Borrego (<https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/jptrca/vol30/iss1/4/>), shortly before this article. Knapp received some formal writing instruction as an English major, but it was not specific to research based projects. When Knapp received her MLIS, the program did not offer a writing-intensive course or address the challenges of writing collaboratively. Knapp's organization provides research time and requires publishing for promotion and tenure.

Author Reflections and Curated Resources

At the start, the authors discussed past experiences with collaborative writing and used those experiences to select the topics for this section. The authors identified these key points, presented below, as the most relatable and relevant. As the authors worked together, they incorporated additional reflections into this article. Therefore, previous experiences and this current experience informed the thoughts and advice included here.

Knapp carefully selected the resources for this section from hundreds of possible options. The authors intend for the materials to complement their reflections. The three primary criteria for selection are:

- The resource must be open access. The authors felt it was important that all readers be able to refer to the resources listed. The authors acknowledge that this likely led to the exclusion of other helpful information. Note: Citations outside of this section of curated items are not necessarily open access.
- The resource must be broadly helpful. Accordingly, Knapp made every effort to ensure that the resources were suitable for readers regardless of discipline, professional status, or previous experience.
- The resource must come from a reputable source. Although not all resources are scholarly, Knapp did her best to vet authors and ensure the recommendations included little to no sales or advertising.

Finding Co-author(s)

The three authors came together somewhat by chance. Borrego and Knapp met as Patent and Trademark Resource Center (PTRC) Librarians. They both attended the 2019 Patent Information User Group (PIUG) Conference and decided to write a reflective essay to inform other PTRC Librarians of the value of the PIUG Conference. This collaborative writing experience was so positive and such a rich learning experience that they took the time to think about why that was. What makes an excellent collaborative writing team? What are some of the dos and don'ts for a collaborative writing project?

After more discussion, Borrego and Knapp decided to talk with two other librarians about their experiences in collaborative writing and see if they would want to work together on an article about the topic. Atwood joined the team, bringing a wealth of collaboration experience and a keen eye towards best practices from her data management background. Unfortunately, the other author was unable to commit to the project.

Before choosing a collaborator, it is wise to identify the specific purpose for the collaboration. For example, are you looking to find someone who is working on a similar project? Or do you want to broaden your perspective by working with someone outside your normal realm, possibly someone who could teach you something new? Maybe you are interested in making a connection or adding credibility, perspective, or expertise to an existing project? Also, you might choose a collaborator as a way to mentor someone in your profession. Being transparent and upfront on the purpose of the collaboration will make finding a well-matched co-author easier.

While each discipline or cross-disciplinary research community will have its own networking outlets, they generally have many in common. Online venues to share information offer many options to help find collaborators. Participating in online conferences or meetings, joining and utilizing professional association websites and listservs, and taking advantage of social media platforms are all great ways of connecting. In-person options also include conferences, association meetings, workshops, and training. Another great way to find co-authors is to make connections through colleagues. A simple email or phone call to authors you have read and are interested in working with can result in exciting opportunities, often above and beyond your initial vision.

Additional Resources

Schrag and Kurdek. "A Graduate Student's Guide to Determining Authorship Credit and Authorship Order" (2006) – *This guide from the APA Science Student Council takes an in-depth look at what authorship is, how it is determined, how to negotiate with co-authors, and other general concerns around authorship.* <https://www.apa.org/science/leadership/students/authorship-paper.pdf>

Miller-Rushing and Primack. "Bad co-authors: How to avoid them and what to do when you have one" (2017) – *The authors provide advice related to preventing conflict and defining successful collaborations based on their collective 15 years of experience.* <https://dynamicecology.wordpress.com/2017/08/22/bad-coauthors-how-to-avoid-them-and-what-to-do-when-you-have-one/>

Shaikh. "A Brief Guide to Research Collaboration for the Young Scholar" (2019) – *This guide provides a detailed discussion of how to initiate and organize collaborative writing projects.* <https://www.elsevier.com/connect/a-brief-guide-to-research-collaboration-for-the-young-scholar>

Project Planning

Collaborative projects need to be respectful of the members' time and effort. A concise plan for all the collaborators to use if the project goes adrift, such as when the article's scope gets out of control or the end goal is lost, can be the key to the project's successful completion. The first project meeting aims to get all authors on the same page from the very beginning.

We found it essential to mindfully set time aside at the beginning of this project to discuss each author's goals and ideas. Ideally, in any project, each person comes to that first meeting with their vision of the article's main objective and ideas on where to publish. The desired publication outlet will often strongly drive decisions such as scope, writing style, and deadlines.

It is also necessary to decide what collaborative software tools are valuable and essential and anticipate any technology needs. For example, as this article's data and citation demands were minimal, we utilized Google Docs to collaboratively edit the article and Google Drive to save all related materials, such as PDFs of important papers. On the other hand, more complicated projects with more people, extensive literature reviews, or data-intensive demands would likely benefit from more sophisticated options. There are many project management tools to choose from, such as Trello and Asana, and citation management tools, such as Zotero and Mendeley, that can simplify the process.

The plan must be evaluated often and changed as needed. Therefore, at each meeting for this paper, we checked in and referenced our current project plan. We found this check-in process kept us on track, gave us confidence that we were on the same page, and allowed each author to have the space to bring up new ideas, criticisms, or objections.

Additional Resources

Chappell. "ClickUp: How to Make an Awesome Project Plan for Better Team Collaboration" – *This article provides concise, detailed descriptions of typical components of a project plan. For-fee service, but easy to replicate in a free app such as Trello.* (2019) <https://clickup.com/blog/how-to-make-a-project-plan/>

Kittler. "Template and Guide to Writing Academic Papers" (2020) – *This guide provides a template for writing manuscripts that authors can use to develop a project plan. There is a business and management focus but is broadly applicable to other fields. Note: Preprint.*

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339747462_A_Template_and_Guide_to_Writing_Academic_Papers

Perkel. "Synchronized editing: the future of collaborative writing" (2020) – *This Nature article discusses the software options available for teams of researchers to use to work collectively during the editing stage.* <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-00916-6>

Compromising on Project Goals

On any collaborative project, there is a balance between a personal vision and the collective vision. Each author typically comes to the project with a clear understanding of what they hope to contribute and what, if anything, would lead them to quit the project. Naturally, differences arise, and knowing when to compromise on your vision in favor of the group's collective goals is crucial. Knowing when to honor your point of view over a collaborative one is equally important. As a project develops, be mindful of your motivations and be prepared to either compromise or pursue your interests in another way. Ideally, thinking about this ahead of time is helpful, but sometimes you cannot know unless you try.

Our first task for this project was to think about what we wanted for this co-authoring article. We each wrote an outline of our ideas, thinking broadly about all topics that might apply. The individual members' outlines were excellent for shaping the conversation, staying true to personal goals, and seeing who was interested in what issues. Brainstorming ideas alone helped create an unbiased outline that included all voices and perspectives. It is easy, and sometimes dangerous, to enter any collaboration before thinking about what you want without others' outside influence.

After preparing our outlines privately, we shared them to familiarize ourselves with all the ideas before the first meeting. Then, in the initial meeting for this article, the authors used a color-coding scheme to gather common points to determine which topics to include (See Figure 1). At this point, if we each had divergent visions, we might have tried to persuade one another, let go of some of our individual goals, or maybe even left the project altogether. Luckily, we all agreed on the primary topics and continued by grouping broader common themes and assigning responsibilities.

Additional Resources

Albert and Wager. “How to handle authorship disputes: a guide for new researchers.” (2003) – *The authors focus on good authorship practices, give advice on dealing with authorship problems, provide a glossary of authorship concepts, and a list of websites for additional references.*

https://publicationethics.org/files/2003pdf12_0.pdf

Eilerman. “Agree to Disagree – The Use of Compromise in Conflict Management” (2006) – *This article discusses the “agree to disagree” approach and comments on when compromise is appropriate.*

<https://www.mediate.com/articles/eilermanD7.cfm>

Overton and Lowry. “Conflict Management: Difficult Conversations with Difficult People” (2013) – *This article from the health care profession discusses strategies for avoiding and addressing conflict during group work.*

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3835442/>

Establishing Roles

After the idea starts to take shape, discuss who is responsible for what, whether it makes sense to assign roles, and if there is a need for a primary co-author or lead author. The lead author’s responsibilities will vary from project to project. Therefore, it is essential to clarify and understand those expectations collectively before moving forward.

Although the authors felt that, in this instance, having one person in charge of the article was better, it is not always the case. A more distributed style of managing a collaboration might be necessary or preferred. It can be manageable to split the tasks up and have team members volunteer for specific roles. Several factors determine whether it makes sense to have a group leader with expansive responsibilities or a distributed set of responsibilities gently overseen by a group leader. The decision can depend on the number of people involved, the length and breadth of the project, and the authors' availability, just to name a few. It is also essential to understand that "lead author" means different things to different people and varies across disciplines. Also, the person running the collaboration may not necessarily be the lead author. It is essential that the collaborators remain flexible, understand the unexpected demands that invariably occur, and be comfortable adjusting role assignments or responsibilities.

There was consensus for this article that we would like to have a lead author who also took on a project management role. We defined "lead author" as the person who would be our go-to person, run meetings, be the timekeeper for project deadlines, the eyes managing the article's scope, the reviewer of article tone and voice, and the correspondent with the journal editors. We also established the lead author's power over the article's overall content, style, and progress. Finally, roles and assignments always considered the strengths and preferences of the group members.

Additional Resources

Allen et al. "Credit where credit is due" (2014) – *This Nature article describes various types of roles co-authors might assume and how those roles are defined.* <https://www.nature.com/articles/508312a>

Tarkang et al. "Publication practices and responsible authorship: a review article" (2017) – The authors discuss the concept of authorship and make an argument for universal publication guidelines. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5510206/>

International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. "Defining the role of authors and contributors" (2018) – *The ICMJE give recommendations on how to ensure that all contributors agree upon the amount of contribution and credit.* <http://www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/roles-and-responsibilities/defining-the-role-of-authors-and-contributors.html>

Setting a Schedule

Given the many competing tasks during the workday, writing seems to get pushed to the end. Creating a timeline at the beginning of the project and assign a timekeeper manager can help avoid unnecessary distractions and maintain progress. At the very onset, we created a timeline of how long we wanted the project to take and created milestones each month.

The timeline will be different depending on the project's intentions, the number of collaborators involved, and the demands of other tasks and responsibilities. External deadlines from publishers may also come into play. For example, responding to a Call For Proposals (CFP), such as book chapters, may require some forecasting of your future schedule. We felt the schedule in Figure 2 would work best for us, and in the end, we needed to extend our deadlines out many months. The lead author (Knapp) extended the editing stage into December and completed the final revisions in March 2021. Unfortunately, due primarily to unexpected professional responsibilities, Knapp grossly underestimated the length of the editing stage. Once the authors received responses from the journal, they met to discuss changes. In the end, the authors extended the initial writing state by 30% and the editing stage by 500%.

For us, meeting only virtually and with academic schedules to consider, we knew we needed to create a writing timeline that was thoughtful of the fluctuating demands on our time. For example, we heard stories of co-authoring articles that could drag on for years and knew we wanted to have the majority of the work completed before the Fall 2020 semester commenced. The authors met the initial writing deadline, but editing extended for months because of competing demands for time.

Additional Resources

The University of Southampton Library. “Time Management” (n.d.)– *This interactive course features tips, videos, downloadable items, and more. The focus is on dissertation writing but provides broadly applicable resources.* <https://generic.wordpress.soton.ac.uk/researchmethods/project-management/time-management/>

Wrike.com. “What is Time Management in Project Management (n.d.) – *This section of Wrike’s Project Management Guide outlines seven (7) primary processes in project time management.* <https://www.wrike.com/project-management-guide/faq/what-is-time-management-in-project-management/>

Young. “22 Tips for Effective Deadlines” (2021) – *This brief article offers advice on what to consider before setting project deadlines.* <https://www.lifehack.org/articles/featured/22-tips-for-effective-deadlines.html>

Accountability and Progress

At the beginning of any collaborative writing project, creating a timeline that allows for work style variability and anticipates potential delays or hurdles can be the key to smooth progress. Sometimes, even with the best intentions to collaborate on a project, things can go wrong. For example, other work assignments take priority, a time-immediate opportunity appears, or a family situation arises, diverting attention from the collaboration. Maintain accountability but be willing to assess if you will be able to get back on track, if you need to let the project go, or if the group needs to re-evaluate goals or revise the project timeline.

In our case, the first time we met to brainstorm for this article, we began by describing our experience with co-authoring and what problems might arise. Then, an honest discussion ensued, where we each shared our hopes, concerns, and limitations. We discussed a type of co-authoring preup, such as those Schlueter outlines in “The Co-Author Prenup” (2012). This discussion was the main reason we decided our group wanted one person to manage the entire project. Ultimately, we each agreed to the collective vision that the lead author would adjust goals and timelines as required to maintain progress.

To avoid resentment and create a positive co-authoring experience, each person needs to hear, value, and allow individuals the freedom to make original contributions. However, a balance between flexibility, accountability, and progress always needs to be maintained.

Additional Resources

APA Science Student Council. “Activities Associated with Research Manuscript/Posters: Points and Method of Assignment” (n.d.) – *Writing teams can use this PDF worksheet to evaluate collaborator types and amount of contribution.* <https://www.apa.org/science/leadership/students/authorship-determination.pdf>

McCullough. “5 C’s of Team Accountability in Leadership” (2021) – *This blog post describes methods for building a team and establishing a culture of accountability.* <https://www.rhythmsystems.com/blog/the-five-cs-of-team-accountability>

National Institutes of Health. “Sample Partnership Agreement Template’ (2011) – *This list of questions intends to guide collaborators through the assignment of roles and responsibilities.* <https://ombudsman.nih.gov/partnerAgree>

Different Writing Styles

As the project moves from the planning stage to the writing stage, it is worthwhile to be mindful of the different writing styles amongst the co-authors. For example, some authors want to use writing as a vehicle for the thinking process, while others may prefer to gather information and write once the thought process is near complete. These differences will become evident as the writing begins. Given this variability in approaches to writing, it can be very beneficial to take some time to discuss each person’s style of research and writing and how it will impact the work.

In our co-authoring experience, we discussed our writing styles early on and incorporated this into our deadlines and expectations of each other. For example, Borrego was a firm “writing to think” person, while Atwood and Knapp preferred to gather information and mentally process it before writing. We learned to embrace each style and use the skills of that individual to their fullest potential. We avoided frustration and confusion by discussing this early on, so we set appropriate expectations. We also found, in the end, that our different writing styles were an asset to our overall experiences. For example, Borrego would often provide a foundation ahead of Atwood and Knapp to scaffold their ideas.

Additional Resources

Argumentative Penguin. “The 8 styles of thinking: Unlock awesome writing by rewiring your brain” (2018) – *This Writing Cooperative blog article describes how thinking styles and writing styles are connected.* <https://writingcooperative.com/the-8-styles-of-thinking-unlock-awesome-writing-by-rewiring-your-brain-a0800d9eb9a1>

Cayley. "Writing as Thinking" (2014) – *The 'Explorations of Style: A Blog about Academic Writing'* discusses the benefits of the practice of exploratory writing.
<https://explorationsofstyle.com/2014/04/23/writing-as-thinking/>

Peer Review

The peer-review process and requirements vary among publications. Each publication typically describes its expectations on the publication's webpage or as part of the response. Once the peer reviewer comments are received, it is essential to discuss the article's tone once again. It will also be necessary to examine which comments to act on, what other edits are required, and who will be responsible for what. Essentially most of the steps taken to get to the submission of the first draft are repeated. The authors need to re-evaluate the project's needs, determine how to meet them, and assign tasks to each contributor as is appropriate.

As shown in Figure 3, we received the comments in April but could not meet until May to discuss. Each author took on a portion of the revisions and established a workflow. Reviewer comments were gathered and consolidated into the document sidebar for ease of reference and resolved after being addressed. We received comments from two reviewers; one provided feedback as comments within the document while the other provided input in a separate document.

The revision process took roughly six months to complete, including substantial time off during the summer. Once Atwood and Borrego performed their changes, Knapp reviewed the entire article and made any remaining necessary revisions. Although not typical, Atwood and Borrego gave Knapp complete control over the final edits.

Additional Resources

Khanam, Dr. Shazia. "Do's and don'ts for responding to peer reviewers' comments" (2013) – *This short article gives a concise list of things to keep in mind when replying to reviewers.*

<https://www.editage.com/insights/dos-and-donts-for-responding-to-peer-reviewers-comments>

Noble, William Stafford. "Ten simple rules for writing responses to reviewers" (2017) – *This comprehensive list of rules helps address the need to balance the emotional aspect of responding to reviewers with the practical need to edit and refine.* <https://journals.plos.org/ploscompbiol/article?id=10.1371/journal.pcbi.1005730>

Voight, Michael L. and Barbara J. Hoogenboom. "Publishing your work in a journal: Understanding the peer review process" (2012) – *This article provides an overview of the process and also includes a detailed example of review guidelines.* <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3474310/>

In Closing

There is no one way to work collaboratively with others on research and writing projects. Each person needs to take their personality and goals into consideration when seeking work partners. It is important to remember that group project management, much like information research, involves an iterative process of continually evaluating deadlines, responsibilities, and outcomes. Hopefully, this article and the resources included can help inspire and guide others.

Additional General Resources

Aguilar. “How to collaborate more effectively: 5 tips for researchers” (2020) – *This Nature Index blog post discusses owning failures, exploring non-traditional outlets, and more.*

<https://www.natureindex.com/news-blog/how-to-collaborate-more-effectively-five-tips-for-researchers-science>

Frassl et al. “Ten simple rules for collaboratively writing a multi-authored paper” (2018) – *The authors present rules and recommendations for both the planning and writing of an article.*

<https://journals.plos.org/ploscompbiol/article?id=10.1371/journal.pcbi.1006508>

Oliver et al. “Strategies for effective collaborative manuscript development in interdisciplinary science teams” (2018) – *Although science-focused, this in-depth article discusses the six guiding principles the authors developed based on their own co-authoring experiences.*

<https://esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/ecs2.2206>

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Schlueter, David A. “The co-author prenup.” *Mary’s LJ*, vol. 44, 2012, pp.451-486. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2905392>

Sword, Helen. *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write*. Harvard University Press, 2017.

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