

Keys to Successful Collaboration

Qualities associated with responsible group membership are outlined below, along with suggestions for how to apply them to achieve a successful collaborative experience. Following this information is a template for your group to consult as you work out your written agreement, due Wednesday, March 23.

There are certainly other factors that contribute to successful collaboration in addition to those listed below, and groups are encouraged to identify and incorporate these into their group's written agreement, but *at minimum*, the topics articulated below must be addressed overtly in each group's agreement.

I. Communication

Communication is key to group success. Each group will need to set up a system for keeping all members in touch. *At minimum*, a directory containing the contact information (phone numbers and email addresses) of all group members must be created and distributed.

Each group will also need to reach consensus on its expectations for responding to emails or other messages, state its preferred mode(s) of communication and what it considers a timely response, and outline what will be expected of members who must miss a meeting. This information should be stated explicitly on the group's written agreement.

Suggestion: Student groups in previous classes discovered that creating a Facebook group for project group members is an easy and convenient way to keep in touch. Group members can touch base to post availability for out-of-class meeting times, attach drafts of work in progress for all members to review, link to useful articles and other sources, and share ideas and information. Many students found their Facebook group to be more advantageous than email because it opens communication easily to all group members at once, limiting confusion and keeping all written communications, attachments, and ideas in the same place rather than in a hodgepodge of emails. However, I still strongly recommend sharing phone numbers for getting in touch on the fly when necessary and expect that each group will outline its own specific expectations for communication within the group.

II. Participation in Discussion and Contribution of Ideas

The exchange of thoughts and ideas in group conversations should lead to a project that each member finds interesting and feels comfortable with. Therefore, it is important for each group member to engage actively in group discussions, contributing ideas as well as offering constructive feedback in response to others' ideas. Every person has a unique perspective, and all group members are expected to participate fully and contribute substantially to the success of the project as well as to be open to the contributions of other members of the group.

Each group will need to work out for itself what its expectations are for its members in terms of the exchange of ideas and to codify these expectations clearly in the group's written agreement.

III. Division of Labor

Ideally, collaborative work involves dividing the labor efficiently so that each member takes on a fair share of the work and contributes according to his or her strengths. For example, the group might decide to select a group member to be in charge of organizing scholarly source material and bibliographic information, another to head up the drafting of the paper (or development of the web site or production of the video), another to design and organize the class presentation, and another to lead the revision and editing of the final product. Often these roles will emerge as the project gets underway, but clearly stated expectations in each group's agreement document will help to ensure an equitable division of labor.

Please note, though, that division of labor does *not* mean that members will not contribute in multiple ways and work on multiple tasks in the process of completing the project. Regardless of how tasks are divided, appropriate revision and editing is required to ensure that the final product – whether paper, video, or website – responds to all assignment criteria and functions as a cohesive whole. These are project requirements for which all group members should consider themselves equally responsible.

IV. Setting and Meeting Deadlines

Research projects often have multiple stages, which may require groups to set its own interim deadlines for when particular tasks need to be completed. These deadlines should be discussed and established collaboratively. Members are then responsible for completing their assigned tasks by the agreed-upon dates. Each group should consider developing a work plan that includes a calendar of due dates for particular tasks (e.g. for completion of exploratory research, compilation of bibliographic information, drafting and revision due dates, etc).

Also, consider including in the group's written agreement procedures for emergency situations when a group member might have to miss a deadline. At the very minimum, contact with other group members needs to be maintained to the extent possible so that no one else is unduly burdened or has their ability to complete their own work held up.

V. Active Role in Reviewing Others' Work and Providing Feedback

Each member is responsible for keeping up with the work of others in the group to ensure that everyone remains on the same page and is up to date on the status and progress of each stage of the work, including with respect to any unexpected issues or problems that may arise. This means that regardless of each person's individual agreed-upon role, all members of the group are also equally responsible for reviewing the work of the other members and for providing appropriate feedback.

For example, everyone will need to make sure the project is appropriately grounded and contextualized in scholarly research, that the final product (whether scholarly paper, web resource, or video presentation) is cohesive and error-free to the extent possible, and that all group members are well prepared to participate fully in the group's final presentation. Groups should reach an understanding about how best to accomplish this review and feedback process and codify it in their written agreement.

Template for Composing Your Group's Collaborative Project Agreement

I. Communication

Outline the group's expectations for responding to emails, Facebook wall posts, or other messages; state its preferred modes of communication and what it considers a timely response; and consider articulating sanctions to which the group will have recourse should one or more group members fail to stay in communication.

II. Participation in Discussion and Contribution of Ideas

Each group will need to work out for itself what its expectations are for its members in terms of the contribution and exchange of ideas and to codify these expectations in the agreement.

III. Division of Labor

Groups should come to consensus on and include in their agreement specific information as to who will be in charge of each major aspect of the project, what each leadership role entails, and the supporting activities expected from the other members of the group. Ideally, each group member will lead at least one major activity.

IV. Setting and Meeting Deadlines

Include procedures for setting deadlines and for emergency situations when a deadline might have to be missed as well as specific consequences for missing deadlines in non-emergency situations. The group should consider including procedures to follow in cases when things don't go as planned, including what if any sanctions will be imposed as a result of missed deadlines.

V. Active Role in Reviewing Others' Work and Providing Feedback

Groups should reach an understanding about how best to accomplish an effective review and feedback process as work on the project progresses and should codify this understanding in the written agreement.

Please consider including a statement such as this one in your group's agreement:

Every member of this group is expected to fulfill a responsible, reliable, and respectful role as we work together on the collaborative project. In that spirit, I agree to communicate openly about my expectations. I also agree to contribute my ideas, time, and work in order to make our project a success and expect the same from the other members of the group. I will do my best to meet the standards set out by the instructor, as well as those set by my group in this agreement. I understand that I will be held individually accountable for a fair portion of the work, and if my team members agree that I have not contributed my fair share, I understand that I may be subject to sanctions as outlined herein as well as to possible grade penalties.

Signatures of group members:
