Guest Editorial

A Formula for Collaborative Writing

I love to write, both as a solo author and as a member of a writing team. Although writing collaboratively can be enjoyable and highly productive, it can also be fraught with challenges. One way to minimize these challenges, increase productivity, and keep relationships buoyant and intact is to use a dynamic framework for writing in teams. Several years ago, I developed the Formula for Collaborative Writing—a step-by-step guide, plan, or recipe to achieve mutual and achievable writing goals and outcomes. The formula offers a practical approach to scholarly ventures by (a) clarifying relationships, beliefs, roles, and responsibilities, (b) providing clear direction, (c) improving efficiency and communication, and (d) ensuring goal achievement. I hope all writing partners will give it a try.

ASSEMBLE THE TEAM

Consider assembling a diverse writing team whose members represent differing perspectives, specialties, backgrounds, and disciplines. Diversity in a writing team generates a positive force and often produces a paper greater than the sum of its parts. Once the team is assembled, the first meeting can be one of the most enjoyable and is certainly one of the most important, as norms are established and affirmed and all members confirm their individual and collective responsibility to deliver the final product. Co-creating and committing to functional norms are essential practices to achieve team cohesion and goal attainment. An effective way to establish norms is to ask all authors to describe the outcomes they hope to achieve and have them express commitment to both individual and team contributions. Some common norms include resolving conflicts in a respectful and expedient manner, as disagreements will inevitably arise. Other norms include adopting the idea that the only skin we have in the game is to make our product excellent—in other words, every aspect of the writing venture is open to discussion and negotiation. To question a process or detail is never personal but is instead intended to improve the writing product. Furthermore, because life happens and relationships trump everything, if an author is unable to complete an assignment, the team is alerted and deadlines and assignments are renegotiated. For example, in one of our writing teams, a coauthor broke her collarbone while snowboarding, and while she was recovering, a second co-author sustained injuries in an automobile accident. Consequently, the timeline was delayed, but because of the norm that relationships trump everything, we adjusted our time lines, and in the end, it was worth it. That particular paper won the 2013 Christine A. Tanner Scholarly Writing Award for the Journal of Nursing Education (Clark, Olender, Kenski, & Cardoni, 2013)! Just one amazing example of how relationships really matter.

It is also fun to give your writing team a name; for example, our international research and writing team that focused on academic incivility in the People’s Republic of China was named Team China, reinforcing a sense of collegiality, teamwork, and an esprit de corps.

SEQUENCE OF AUTHORSHIP

Some of the most challenging and ethically laden discussions focus on the topic of authorship. Although writing with multiple authors provides fertile ground for collaboration, disagreements about authorship can interfere with the writing and dissemination process. Early and intentional conversations are needed to discuss who will be first author and the subsequent sequence of authorship. In some cases, the sequence of authorship is apparent. For example, the principal investigator may be the obvious choice for first author. However, in other situations, the choice may not be so obvious. For example, when one author acquires funding for the project but does not contribute significantly to the writing of the manuscript, the position of first author might be renegotiated. Generally, authorship is based on the journal’s authorship guidelines or on an author’s level of writing contribution to the manuscript. Other factors may include considering which author will submit the manuscript and assume the role of team leader (TL). In other words, the sequence of authorship frequently reflects the declining impact of each person’s contribution. If the contributions are of equal proportion, the authors may be listed in alphabetical order. Contributors who do not meet the criteria for authorship are frequently listed in the acknowledgments section.

PURPOSE STATEMENT, AUDIENCE, AND VENUE

A clearly written, unambiguous purpose statement based on the results of the project provides focus and direction and
helps determine the most appropriate audience and journal venue for submission (and hopefully publication). Early in the writing process, develop a working title, a clearly written purpose statement, and a detailed outline for the manuscript. In addition, identify the intended audience and venue and review the corresponding author guidelines. Now, the action plan and time line can be developed.

**ACTION PLAN AND TIME LINE**

Drawing from Stephen Covey, who so aptly stated, “Begin with the end in mind” (Covey, 1990), this is where the time line begins. First, determine when and where the final manuscript will be submitted and work backwards from there. In our writing teams, we literally draw a line on a piece of paper and begin developing a detailed outline of the manuscript and corresponding processes. The Figure provides an exemplar of a manuscript time line.

The time line provides a consistent framework for each author’s specific contributions and assignments, but it still remains fluid and negotiable. Our first meeting consists of getting acquainted (or reacquainted) by determining the sequence of authorship, refining our purpose statement, and making assignments. We divvy up the work, schedule subsequent team meetings, and confirm what needs to be accomplished between meetings. In addition to the selection of a TL, we also identify the keeper of the manuscript (KM), whose primary role is to maintain an accurate and current version of manuscript drafts, tables, figures, and references. The KM may also be responsible for the initial formatting of the manuscript, and if not, a formatter is assigned or a team member volunteers.

We convene several meetings, either meeting face-to-face or using conference calling or online meeting platforms, to discuss various aspects of the writing process. These processes generally include (a) confirming the accuracy of our analysis and results, (b) making sure we have completed a robust and comprehensive review of the literature, and (c) outlining the key elements of the discussion and application sections. Once we have completed these activities, authors are assigned to develop specific sections of the manuscript. A time line is set to complete the “very drafty first draft” (VDFD) of the manuscript, which is typically completed using e-mail or other forms of online communication, such as document management tools and software.

Once the VDFD is compiled, it is edited by all members of the writing team; then the TL composes it into a close-to-final draft and collaborates with the KM for manuscript accuracy and formatting. Meanwhile, the TL (or designee) contacts two to three reviewers whom the writing team has identified as excellent editors or content experts. In some cases, we have asked notable scholars to review our manuscript and have been delighted when they agree and deliver excellent and insightful reviews. Each reviewer is asked to edit the close-to-final draft within a predetermined time line and return their review comments to the TL. Then, the TL composes a final draft for one last review, which is conducted by all members of the writing team. Any additional edits are integrated, the formatting is finalized, and the manuscript is submitted for journal review. Now it’s time to celebrate a job well done (at least until it is time to revise)!

**REVISION AND RESPONSE TO THE EDITOR**

If the manuscript is not rejected, it will be provisionally accepted based on revisions and a careful response to editor and reviewer comments. We recommend using a table to gather reviewer comments and respond to the editor. A simple two-column table can be designed to list reviewers’ comments and the authors’ corresponding responses. Once the revisions are made and the manuscript is resubmitted, celebrate again and get ready for the big party when your paper is published.

Using this formula for collaborative writing may not always result in a publishable work, but it is an effective way to collaborate—and that in itself is a great accomplishment. Being a member of an energetic and dedicated crew often results in a well-thought-out, excellent—and publishable—paper.

**References**


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