Writing Collaboratively

Collaborative writing doesn’t always mean the same thing to all people. Our experiences on this type of “group work” may make us think it can only be done one way or that we will only prefer one role. This can often lead to frustration. Here are some suggestions - not mandates! - to help you with your collaboration.

Consider Resources & Logistics:
What resources are available to your group inside of CoursePlus? Did faculty set up a Discussion Forum or Wiki for your group? A Discussion Forum category can be set up to allow conversations that are private to group members (plus course faculty and TAs). Group wikis may also be set up this way. Additionally, there are a myriad of tools external to CoursePlus; here are just a few:

- Brainstorming and Concept (Mind) Mapping can happen in your group's Discussion Forum or wiki, or using a free tool like Coggle, Padlet or Bubble.us.
- Google Drive (Google Docs) or Microsoft OneDrive (Word Online) are just two options for collaborative editing, including document storage.
  - You can access your OneDrive account by logging into the myJohnsHopkins portal and selecting the OneDrive quick link under Cloud Apps.
- Zoom, Skype, and Google Hangouts are all options for web conferencing (video and/or audio plus sharing screens).

Consider Individuals:
Get to know the individuals on your team. If your group wants to meet synchronously - in person or online, scheduling dates and times up front may benefit everyone. (Consider time zones, work and family responsibilities, etc.) Finding a convenient time can be as simple as a few emails or communicating inside your Discussion Forum category or using a scheduling tool like Doodle or whenisgood.net.

Perhaps volunteer to state your strengths and weaknesses. While everyone should have equal responsibilities, allow for individual talents and skills to serve as resources. For instance, if someone is well-versed in a required style (MLA, APA, etc.), they may want to serve to edit or proof the citations. If someone is weak in their writing, but strong in their analysis or research, they may want to request to do more of the up-front work.

Consider Goals:
Your goal isn’t just about a good paper; it is about the process of successfully collaborating, including contributing to and listening to your group's conversations and sharing the work, which will lead to an excellent final product. The final product itself should demonstrate the application of the concepts you've learned as applied to your selected topic. Working on a collaborative assignment will be more enjoyable if you "work smarter, not harder".
Consider Tasks and Develop a Timeline:
When considering the tasks, go back and **re-read any instructions carefully**. Some tasks may be required and non-negotiable; others optional or simply logical.

Everyone in a group brings a unique perspective as to how best to approach a writing assignment. As a group, you must first agree upon and document which tasks are non-negotiable. Then decide together what other tasks or milestones will help you produce the final product. Using this lists of tasks/milestones, agree upon who will do what and a reasonable timeline to which everyone should adhere. (Make sure the timeline is easily accessible or that everyone gets a final copy of it for reference!)

Here are some tasks that might be considered for any writing assignment: Topic Selection; Draft argument, thesis, and/or summary; Outline; Research; Draft Paper; Review of Paper (for flow/content); Review of Paper (for grammar and other semantics); and Final Paper for submission.

Consider How the Paper will be Written:
No matter how the paper is written, it is a good idea to have the central ideas agreed upon before composing the assignment’s main text. Your group should all “be on the same page” in terms of knowing what it is that you want to accomplish. The central ideas may be represented in an expanded outline, a mind map, or other collaborative workspace.

The group may have different styles of writing (that will be blended in the editing phase) but you should try and keep the same point of view. Who is your audience? What should the paper look (or "read") like -- will it be closer to a journal article or newspaper article? How will you include and document citations and other references?

In drafting the paper, worry about the ideas and concepts and the logical flow of the document when you are first bringing everything together. Is the focus or argument clear? Are there transitions in place between the supporting evidence? Is there a logical conclusion?

BEFORE YOU GET STARTED WRITING, decide how you will collaborate on developing the actual paper. Note that you can combine several different techniques in your approach.

**Divide and Conquer?** Will separate parts (consider the outline, if you have one, or topics) be researched and written by separate individuals and then brought together and "polished" with peer review into the final paper? If using this approach, make sure that the central ideas are already agreed upon.

**Synthesis Writing?** Will two or more team members combine their efforts to compose a single section or topic in the paper? Or perhaps the text of the whole paper will be composed collaboratively by the entire team into a single document? Google Docs and Word Online (available through your JHU OneDrive account) lend themselves to this co-authoring method. This “whole paper” collaborative approach lends itself to a singular voice but can be more time consuming.
Combine Approaches? Perhaps you will consider a combination of writing methods -- for instance, an individual may write the introduction, while a subgroup synthesizes a particular aspect of the analysis, and then all parts are brought together to develop the final paper.

Consider Reviews:
In collaborative writing, everyone is a reviewer and everyone should be open to "your own" contributions being critiqued by your peers. Take the time to read the final paper as an outsider. (This is easier when/if you are reviewing a section where you are not the original author!) Ask questions when there are points of confusion or superfluous text. Point out anything that may counter the argument, thesis or summary of the paper that is not carefully balanced. Also note when there are strong, salient points that may be worth mentioning in the introduction or revisiting in the conclusion of the paper.

When reviewing, look for subtle biases that may have been incorporated. This could include opinions, prejudices, or myths. Label these points and consider including a respectful note as to its inappropriateness and/or falsehood.

Be certain to label anything that probably deserves a citation but is initially without one.

Again, remember to look at the paper as a whole. Is the focus or argument clear? Are there transitions in place between the supporting evidence? Is there a logical conclusion?

Consider Editing and Revisions:
In revising and editing the draft of the paper, decide if everyone will share in the revisions -- i.e., are you welcome to comment and directly edit each other's writing or only offer suggestions as comments, leaving the actual editing to the original author? Will there be a designated "final editor" to make the final pass at reviewing and editing?

DO NOT FORGET TO PROOFREAD.
Punctuation, grammar, spelling and required components (including citations and word count) matter.