Approaching Group Writing Projects

Group writing can seem daunting since it requires that different people synthesize their different writing styles. One of the most important elements of group writing is organization – your group will need to agree on a common argument and outline, divide responsibility, develop and schedule, and edit each other. This requires patience, diligence, and openness to alternative writing styles. The end product does not have to completely eliminate individual differences in writing, but it should look like a collaboration rather than separate parts.

Step One – Agree on a common argument/outline

This generally will require the group meeting in person. Discussions over email can stretch out over longer periods of time, and opportunities for compromise or agreement might be lost. Try to find some period of time for all group members to meet and discuss how to approach the assignment. Once you all agree, stick to the outline and own it – it's very frustrating for one member to decide to reorganize the paper on their own without consulting others, even if you do think it makes more sense. Also, if you really have a problem with the direction the group is going, speak up …but be willing to compromise. Don't use unspoken disagreement as an excuse when the final grade comes along.

Step Two – Divide responsibility

Even in a relatively short paper, the outline sections should be integrated into the larger argument but able to stand on their own. Make sure everyone gets an opportunity to contribute a part of the paper. If someone isn't pulling their weight in the group, make sure to address this sooner than later. You want to be polite, but it is your grade on the line. Your group may decide to designate one person as the compiler/editor of the final draft, but that should not mean that the whole job of editing falls on one person.

Step Three – Develop a schedule and stick to it!

To have adequate time to peer edit the sections, weave them together, and then examine the final product, you'll need a pretty strict timeline. As a group, discuss what is reasonable out front, leaving some flexibility, but not too much. We all know that things come up, but the quality of the collaboration will suffer if you leave putting all the pieces together until the last minute.

Step Four – Be a good peer editor

People tend to be relatively sensitive about their writing, so don't just point out the deficiencies of your group members. Offer constructive feedback about what members have done well and what you think would make the argument more persuasive. Start at the macro level – is the argument clear? Does the evidence support the argument? Then think smaller, are the paragraphs well defined? Are the sentences direct and easy to understand? Then, finally, go to the micro level – Are all the punctuation marks in the right places? Is the citation complete?

Remember, group members will be editing your work as well, and some clashes in style may become apparent. Before disagreeing with a particular critique, listen fully to your group members and try to see the situation from an objective perspective. If you still disagree, that is fine, but don't rush to disagree before you've thought through the critique and tried to see your group members' points of view.