

## **Group Project Writing**

Workplace teams have been lauded for improving the quality of decision making in an organization, for fostering innovation and creativity, and for improving productivity. Recognizing that organizational structures are getting flatter, it is not surprising that employers are increasingly seeking college graduates who are well prepared in teamwork. As a School of Business student you will be assigned one or more group projects. These projects will typically involve some type of research that will need to be written up as a paper, and you may also be required to give a presentation about your findings to the class. In this section of the Guide to Writing we will give you some general advice on how to approach and successfully complete this type of assignment. As always, you should follow your professor's instructions completely and ask your professor about anything about which you are unclear. In fact, the most important point we can stress here is to follow the professor's specific guidelines.

Professors have differing expectations for how to approach a group project. Some professors expect each group member to focus on his or her particular strength and divide the work accordingly (e.g., a finance major may take the lead in the financial aspects of a group project). Other professors expect that each student is equally involved in each phase of the project. Whenever you are part of a group, it is important that no matter what type of assignment all group members understand thoroughly the work that is handed in. The professor expects you to learn about the whole topic, not just the particular area that you prefer.

When writing up a group report some professors will expect the entire group to work on writing the whole paper, while other professors may require that each group member write up an individual section. Where the latter approach is used the professor will still expect the paper to read as a consistent, coherent "whole" which means the paper must be edited to insure that the paper reads smoothly without jarring transitions from one section to the next. While it might make sense to let the strongest writer in the group act as the overall paper editor, this does not mean that the rest of the group members can simply "dump" a rough draft on the group editor and expect the designated editor to polish or rewrite that section. A clear, coherent and well-written report is EVERYONE'S responsibility in the group.

As you probably have noted in other sections of the Guide to Writing, accuracy of details, precision in language, clarity of organization, and attention to audience contribute to the overall effectiveness of a course paper since it greatly enhances the persuasiveness and acceptance of your analysis and proposals. The two most critical ingredients to making good decisions for all writing tasks is to always keep in mind the purpose and the audience for your project report. Is the purpose of your paper to describe a situation in detail or to bring the spotlight to some aspect that needs urgent fixing? Is the purpose of the group project to recommend a change of policy or to discuss alternatives and be creative?

In terms of audience, two particular cases are worth remembering. Your professor is the most obvious audience for your paper. This is especially true in research papers when the group has to convince the professor of the quality of the analysis and the strength of the arguments. When writing a case analysis, an auditing report, a financial market analysis, or a marketing plan, your professor will often indicate that the audience for your paper is either a manager, the

Board of Directors, an auditing committee, or a group of shareholders. What this usually means is that your paper has to address the specific concerns of that particular audience, be written in a particular professional way, and still convince the professor.

### ***Three Special Demands of Group Writing***

Group writing projects impose special demands on writers in addition to those of single-authorship. These demands include

1. Coherence throughout entire text from the executive summary, to the introduction, through the analysis and through the conclusion.
2. Consistency of tone and voice from one section to the next.
3. Uniformity in formatting.

The following section explains reasons these qualities are important for the success of group writing and offers suggestions to achieve an effective final result.

#### 1. Coherence of information, arguments, findings, and conclusions

While your report title page or memo will have indicated to your readers that the text was written by a group, their reading should focus on the logic of your arguments or explanations and the data that ground your text, not on errors and contradictions that occur when the pieces of multiple writers are simply cut and pasted together. These errors and contradictions include, but are not limited to, the following:

- a) Repeated references to the same organization, business, product, statute, or regulating body each time as though there is no previous mention of this entity.
- b) A first reference using an abbreviation or acronym when the full name has not been previously stated.
- c) Repetition of the same factual information in detail when such information was previously explained fully. This often occurs when one group member takes on more than he or she was assigned to do, as another team member is working on the same subject.
- d) Discussion of key points or supporting information as though the section writer has not read previous or subsequent sections of the report/proposal.
- e) Conflicting information.
- f) Missing information. Missing information often occurs when the team is not willing to revise the division of work done at the outset of the project and the members refuse to accept additional tasks. Since not every task is foreseeable from the start of the project, critical parts are missing or receive only cursory attention. Missing information can also result from last minute editing, especially when one person is responsible for bringing the page count down and does not understand the importance of a key piece of information.

2. Consistency of tone and voice from one section to the next

Textual indicators that reveal different group members wrote different sections distract the readers' attention from understanding your argument, explanations, supporting data, and conclusions. Such textual indicators include, but are not limited to the following:

- a) Awkward phrasing used to identify separate contributors ("I, John Jones, interviewed.....").
- b) Shifts in pronoun person and number ("you" vs. "one's"; "he" vs. "he or she", "him" vs. "they").
- c) Unnecessary shifts in verb tense (present tense in one section, and past tense or a mix of past and present tense in another).
- d) Shifts in formality of word choice (employees vs. folks).
- e) Unevenness in sentence and paragraph length.

3. Uniformity in formatting

Typographic uniformity in formatting assists the readers to understand quickly the categories or sections of the text. In turn, this rapid comprehension helps readers to mentally organize and assess information, logic, and connections (both within the text and to the contextual information external to the text). Readers must assimilate information following the writer's logic, so if they are distracted by shifts in font, irregularities in spacing, differences in the patterns used to itemized key points (i.e. by numbers, letters, or symbols), and section numbering, those readers may lose the thread of the writers' argument or explanation. Worse, readers may become annoyed at such distractions and reject the proposal, disregard the report or memo, or give your group a low grade. Discontinuities in formatting fall into the category of easily avoidable irritants; they are a clear indicator to the reader (and to the professor) that the group did not put enough attention and effort into the report.

### ***Strategies for Coherence in Group Work***

The following strategies will significantly improve the coherence in presentation of your group's information and argument, the consistency in voice and tone of the writing, and uniformity of formatting:

#### **DON'TS**

- Do NOT simply divide up tasks and expect to cut and paste the parts together a few days before the project deadline.

- Do NOT assume that once the sections have been drafted that your work is finished.
- Do NOT assume someone else is going to revise the writing.
- Do NOT appoint one person to “fix” the writing.

#### DOs

- DO begin discussions of the project requirements early and have those discussions frequently.
- DO leave ample time for each group member to read the draft for writing effectiveness. Every group member needs to read the entire document at least twice to check for
  - accuracy of content
  - coherence in presentation
  - consistency of voice and tone
  - uniformity of formatting
- DO ask one or more “outside” readers to read your text closely and give the group feedback. An outside reader might be a friend who is a careful reader and strong writer, a Writer’s Place peer tutor, a classmate, or your professor if he or she is willing to look over a draft.
- After each reading, group members should suggest revisions to the draft. Discussions of all writing concerns should involve all group members and can be done in person or through online chat and group-authoring options on SOCS.
- DO have a final revision of the full paper at least two days prior to the submission deadline. Revising multiple times is vital to making your ideas clear, your organization coherent, your facts correct and relevant, your argument logical and convincing, your voice and tone consistent, and your format uniform and accessible to follow.