

Special Challenge: Team Publication

In the module on How We Learn to Write, I mentioned the value of writing as part of a team to gain comfort and learn from others more experienced in writing, editing, and submitting a manuscript. I also indicated that there were some considerations to be addressed later.

Almost all my writing has been done solo. I have written as part of a team on a few occasions. Once, I also coached a writing team through the process. I learned a lot through these projects. While there is limited literature on this topic, I am providing one recent article (non-nursing) which does a thorough job at mainly identifying the legal and ethical issues beyond the selection of topic, outline, etc.

The difficulties associated with team writing can be avoided by addressing areas for potential confusion and the expected responsibilities up-front. In identifying and agreeing on primary topic of the manuscript, the content outline, who will qualify as an author (see the monograph on ethics), who will write which content, who will coordinate the group, and much more must be nailed down prior to formal writing. In short there are MANY ISSUES TO NAIL DOWN!

A group of two or more brings breadth and wealth of knowledge, experience, writing skills, and creativity to the writing table. But the added talent comes with the need for careful coordination and communication. All team members must come to some basic consensus on several points up front. They will need process for communicating and sharing (synchronous and asynchronous), a system to distribute manuscript drafts and track the edits or inputs from each member, a system to track progress, and a plan to track all contributions as well as to identify anyone who “goes missing” or needs assistance along the way. This is easier with a team of two to three. While I participated in one very large team, the sponsor provided most of the logistical resources and support. That level of assistance is rare.

Beyond the logistical arrangements, the first task of the team should be agreement on the main topic, along with an overall goal or purpose statement. Next, they need consensus on an outline of major sections and at least a sentence or two about the broad content for each section before any writing takes place.

Writing teams critically need outlines—and they must refer to them regularly. Otherwise, mission creep is possible as content stretches beyond the plan. The team needs consensus on the distribution of tasks such as writing sections, gathering references, proof-reading, and tracking progress. A spreadsheet is ideal, particularly for more than two authors. It can also track the established timeline for due dates, frequency of check-ins, and completion of specific goals.

Individual responsibilities vary from team to team. I will address small writing groups of two-three authors. This is a typical and manageable size that new authors are likely to experience.

In one style, every member provides extensive input for the content of each section, providing references as relevant, and then a primary author takes their input and drafts the document in “one voice”. Input can be asynchronous or synchronous. The draft undergoes multiple iteration with ongoing group comments and suggested edits being incorporated by the primary author. My experience is that this works with a small or large group that includes one highly experienced writer. Member may draft portions, recognizing the primary author may edit to maintain the “one voice”.

At the other end of the spectrum, all team members collaboratively identify the topic, purpose, and rough outline of major sections and some subheadings. While they can do this asynchronously, the ability to meet initially by phone, zoom, or in person expedites the process. Each takes responsibility for their section of the outline, to include pulling reference. They schedule deadlines task completion and share their detailed content plan with each other to avoid duplication or missing content. Taking team members’ comments, questions, and suggestions, they draft section. The full group ultimately reviews, tweaks, and finalizes the whole. The periodic input from team members minimizes few last-minute edits needed. This is the process I’ve participated in with groups of two or three and it has worked well

The actual process may fall somewhere in between. All must agree on the outline and overall manuscript plan and have input as the manuscript develops. But some pull references and provide an interpretation of literature, others write first drafts of section, others serve primarily reviewers and editors. In this case, each person is expected to meet the definition of authorship but using their strengths effectively.

The teams I have worked on carefully started with an outline to cover the topic. In two instances, each of the two authors then fleshed out their outline sections for approval, then were responsible for pulling their literature and writing that section. We worked asynchronously via shared files and references, tracking all comments and edits emailing back and forth. In another team of three, after a detailed outline was created by the team, one author pulled relevant literature based. Once the team updated and confirmed both the outline and literature, the primary author drafted the bulk of the manuscript, with frequent input from the co-authors. All three teams successfully completed a publishable manuscript. Each experience was positive, with success benefiting from the extensive due diligence up front.

While I've described successful writing teams, the outcome is not always as good. Some team members drop out due to external responsibilities or lack of interest. Some may drop out over the long time it may take to create a good manuscript. Generally, the teams with which I'm familiar developed a good sense of teamwork and remained flexible to achieve the goal.

Beyond necessary organized, focused and timely participation, some writing teams encounter problems regarding defined or sequenced authorship. The precise order needs to be decided early and only altered if the expected distribution of contributions change. There is another monograph in this series on publication ethics, including authorship. It covers the responsibilities and level of contribution that must be met by anyone acknowledged as an author. It is important to share and discuss those expectations early in the team process to avoid later conflicts.

Despite the potential areas of confusion identified, I highly recommend team writing as a positive experience. It is a productive, collaborative opportunity from which all members typically learn and can establish long-lasting relationships.

Hosseini, M., Holcombe, A. O., Kovacs, M., Zwart, H., Katz, D. S., & Holmes, K. (2025). Group authorship, an excellent opportunity laced with ethical, legal and technical challenges. *Accountability in Research*, 32(5), 762–784.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08989621.2024.2322557>