GROUP WRITING

STEP 1: Familiarize yourself with the group

The first step in forming an effective group is familiarizing yourself with the group. During this step, it is essential to address both “housekeeping” issues and the working atmosphere you wish to create. Allot plenty of time to this stage of the process. Use the document entitled “Step 1: Becoming a Team” to help work through this stage of the process.

A. Share information.
   Ensure everyone in the group has everyone else’s details—name, preferred email address, Facebook page, cell phone number, and home phone.

   Agree on the method of communication. In general it is best if information is shared with the entire group rather than relayed through a single person. In addition, keep in mind that English as a second language students generally prefer written forms of communication.

   Address possible times for meetings to be held virtually or in person.

   Determine how you will keep minutes and who will be responsible for them (Will you have a single person handle this task or rotate the job?). Minutes are vital for group members who miss a meeting and for those who speak English as a second language and may feel more comfortable with written documents.

   Determine how you will share research information—online, hard copies? Consider using BLS, Facebook groups, or Google Docs as means of sharing information.

   Identify individual skills. Is there someone in the group particularly skilled in graphing, editing, formatting? Does anyone have contacts, experience or information that would add to the project? Students using English as a second language may offer different but equally valuable skills for the group. Ensure that each group member has the opportunity to contribute his/her particular skill set.

B. Create group goals.
   Create a group calendar of due dates, using due dates on the syllabus as your start and then incorporating dates for key points in the writing process. When will you have the first round of research completed? When will individual parts be
completed? When will you assimilate information? Proofread? Incorporate graphics? Complete the final draft?

In creating a group calendar, accommodate individual work schedules and holidays and allow plenty of time for unexpected delays (illness, problems with content or with computers).

Determine what mark you would like to earn on the project and discuss how you might achieve this goal.

C. **Establish and formalize a positive working atmosphere.**
Discuss how the group should respond if a member fails to meet a due date or misses a meeting. Does that person assume responsibility for an additional task? Buy the next round of coffee? Are there methods of dealing with this in the course, for example a group evaluation that figures into the final grade or the option of leaving a name off the report?

Effective writing collaborators encourage disagreement about content and style while maintaining a mutual respect. How will the group handle inappropriate responses? How will the group ensure that every member is heard?

Will the group work toward consensus or make decisions based on majority vote?

Formalize the answers to the previous questions by recording them in your meeting minutes or on the “Step 1: Becoming a Team” sheet.

In order to conduct group meetings effectively, you should agree on the time allotted for each meeting and on what you want to accomplish in each meeting. To do this effectively, you should have an agenda and keep minutes. The agenda serves to keep the group on task and provides structure. Keeping minutes is essential for two reasons. First, keeping minutes requires you to identify the key points in the discussion as well as action items and the person responsible. Second, minutes create a formal record of attendance and responsibilities. This record should be shared with the group, preferably in an online format. Should any problems with the group arise, you will have a record of activity and people involved. Templates for agendas and meeting minutes are available on the writing centre LibGuide.
In planning your meeting, be sure to allow time for informal conversations and check in. This time is not wasted; the more individuals identify with the group, the more commitment they will have to it. Create an atmosphere in which all members feel comfortable enough to speak up, not only about the content of the project but about the group process. Members should feel comfortable in expressing complaints as well as compliments. Developing a level of trust through casual interactions can facilitate this process.