

## An example of a successful submission

(thanks to Peter Levrai and Averil Bolster for their permission to use this paper)

### Undergraduate collaborative essays: constructive, not a cop-out

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We were tasked with developing an EAP course at the University of Macau, an English-medium university. The course adopted a process approach to writing where students considered outlining, drafting and redrafting. They worked on one main essay over the semester, and it was decided that essays should be developed in groups rather than individually.

While there was an initial logistical motivation for this due to large class sizes (24 students per class) and a teacher having multiple classes (typically five), the decision to proceed with group essays was based on the benefits of collaborative writing. Shin (2015) outlines the added benefits of collaboration (e.g. teamwork and critical thinking) which can in turn increase students' employability (Wigglesworth and Storch 2009). Collaborative writing can also result in better quality essays (Wigglesworth and Storch 2009), which exhibit better task fulfilment, higher grammatical accuracy and increased complexity (Storch 2005).

In the pilot year, the course followed an approach which would be suitable for an individual essay (Figure 1), with students doing some individual work with sources and paragraphs before drafting the essay together as a group.

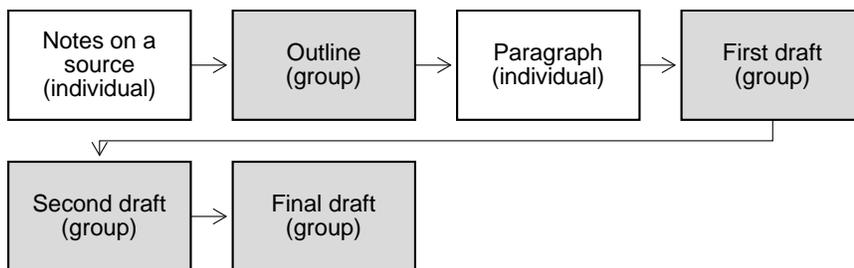


Figure 1: Pilot year approach

This approach led to some difficulties as the individual writing elements had a negative impact on the first and second drafts. Rather than a coherent whole, drafts tended to be an amalgamation of disparate parts. While this was something that could be dealt with during the drafting process, it was an issue that needed to be addressed for subsequent cohorts. Other concerns arising from the pilot year were that

**Comment [TP1]:** See the Guidelines for details of fonts, margins, etc.

**Comment [TP2]:** Name and affiliation. No job title needed. If self-employed, use 'Freelance'.

**Comment [TP3]:** You may want to divide your paper into sections with subheadings. Here, the diagrams break up the text.

**Comment [TP4]:** It is entirely acceptable in CS to use the first person. You don't need to use an overly scholarly style. It's better to write in a clear and accessible style than to aim for an overly formal register.

**Comment [TP5]:** The context is clearly stated in the first sentence – EAP, Macau, writing class. Make your context clear, but don't use up too many of your 750 words by giving detailed background information – save your words for your results and discussion section (if a research paper) or for details of your teaching technique (if a methodology paper).

**Comment [TP6]:** This introduces some theoretical background. Only three references are permitted; the writers have used them all here to set the scene. Don't fill your paper with too much theory – deal with it quickly, then move on to what you did in your context.

**Comment [TP7]:** Figures and tables, etc. are a good way to condense your information and make it easy to follow. No more than two, please. Space is limited, so the fewer tables and figures, the better. Don't worry if your diagrams don't look as good as these do – our designer can make them look nice! If you do use figures, keep in mind that CS is printed in ...

**Comment [TP8]:** Now we get to the really interesting part – why this approach outlined above was not entirely successful. It can be very interesting to read about a problem that arose and how it was solved. ...

**Comment [TP9]:** In a presentation, this kind of list could be displayed using bullet points on a PowerPoint slide. It's important to take your slides and convert them into text. Peter and Averil have done this successfully.

there wasn't enough support or scaffolding to help students through the group writing process, that students had difficulty arranging times to meet and that the balance of work was not always equal within groups.

To mitigate these issues, a more robust system was introduced the following year (Figure 2). The group aspect of the assignment was made explicit as students were asked to produce ground rules at the start of the project, review how their group was working mid-way through and reflect on how the group had worked at the end. More individual writing elements were introduced to give students more writing practice but, crucially, these were introduced around the essay writing process rather than as part of the essay itself. Prior to writing students discussed input texts on a Moodle forum and the sources they planned to use in their essay via Stormboard, a free online whiteboard/brainstorming tool. This allowed the teacher to see early on who was engaged in the process and who may be not contributing as much as they should.

**Comment [TP10]:** Every teacher who has assigned group work has probably come across some or all of these concerns. The reader is inspired to continue reading to find out how the challenges were addressed.

**Comment [TP11]:** Now we move into the solution. The writers have left enough space to describe the new approach. The balance of the paper is very good.

**Comment [TP12]:** Explain anything you think your readers may not be familiar with. Here, Peter and Averil recognize that not everyone knows Stormboard.

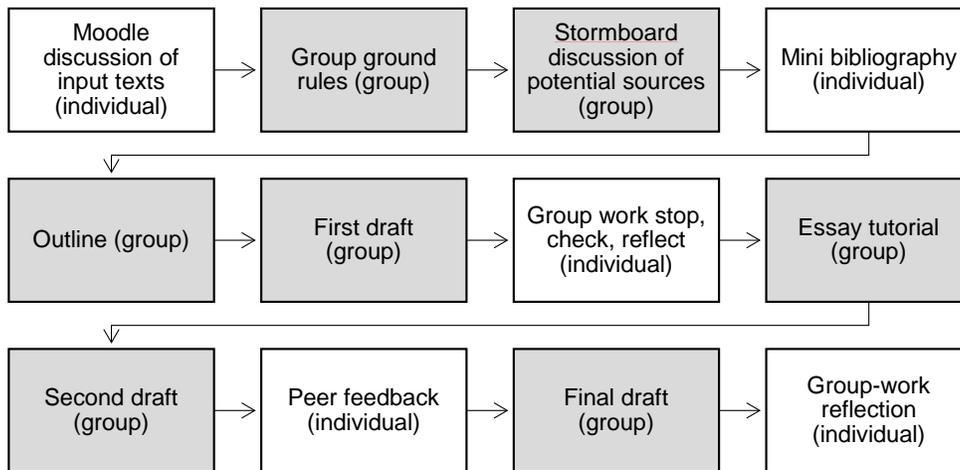


Figure 2: Year Two approach

**Comment [TP13]:** This figure reflects the style of the figure above; readers can clearly see what has changed.

This revised approach helped make the collaborative aspects of the assignment explicit, allowed for greater insight into how groups were working and provided scope for awarding a mix of individual and group marks, which addressed the concern about students getting fair reward for their work.

At the end of the course the students were surveyed to determine their perceptions of collaborative essays. The response during both years was very positive. Students felt that they understood what made a good essay and had improved at essay writing. Their perceptions were

**Comment [TP14]:** Now we get to the results of this new approach. What advantages did it have? What was learned from the changes?

supported by the qualitative change in their writing from the start of the semester, where they moved from very basic writing to a more sophisticated style better suited for university.

Students were asked if they would recommend group essays, and in both years around 85 per cent responded that they would. The most common reason why a minority would not was that they felt group essays led to too many ideas that were hard to organise. Concerns about working in a group with members who do not contribute enough was also raised by a small number of students. For the students who would recommend group essays, the main reason was that there were more ideas in a group and it was felt that collaboration led to better-quality ideas and better essays. The teamwork and communication aspect of collaborative writing was also valued, as was the support and help available when working in a group.

In conclusion, collaborative writing tasks are successful if supported by the teacher. Rather than using a similar approach as with individual essays, there has to be explicit scaffolding of the group writing process. Students have a positive perception of collaborative writing and there is the potential for wider learning gains. As well as an understanding of essay development, students also have the opportunity to develop their communication, teamwork and critical thinking skills.

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## References

- Shin, M. 2015. 'Collaborative learning'. *English Teaching Professional* 97: 11–13.
- Storch, N. 2005. 'Collaborative writing: product, process, and students' reflections'. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 14/3: 153–173.
- Wigglesworth, G. and N. Storch. 2009. 'Pair versus individual writing: effects on fluency, complexity and accuracy'. *Language Testing* 26/3: 445–466.

**Comment [TP15]:** Don't be afraid to raise less positive results. This makes your paper very realistic and perhaps more interesting. Few things are perfect!

**Comment [TP16]:** Every paper needs a conclusion, even if it's quite short.

**Comment [TP17]:** You don't need to add the word count, but make sure you are below 750. A few extra words can usually be edited out, but papers significantly over the limit will be rejected out of fairness to everyone. Your paper should also be above 700; papers below 700 words are likely to lack important information.

**Comment [TP18]:** Give your email address so that readers can contact you for more information. If you do not wish your email address to be published, please make this clear when you submit your paper; otherwise, it will appear in the book.

**Comment [TP19]:** References show your readers where they can find more information. Please limit your references to three. Make sure the works cited in the text of your paper match your reference list. Check the Guidelines for details on how to reference works in CS style.