



## Planning Engaging Collaborative Writing Tasks

by [Monica Farling](#) and [Nigel A. Caplan](#)

Outside the classroom, writing is rarely a solitary task. We wrote this article by talking through our ideas, writing an outline together, drafting sections individually, editing each other's writing, and discussing improvements. Though there are sentences here that Monica wrote and others that Nigel composed, we are coauthors of the article. As with all truly collaborative writing, this is a text that neither of us could have written individually (Schrage, 1994).

Though individual writing is important, collaborative writing is a highly beneficial learning activity for English as a second language classes at all ages and levels (Storch, 2013). In particular, we have found that whole-class collaborative writing, or joint construction (Rose & Martin, 2012), allows us to demystify the writing process by producing a text in the target genre together, "live," with our students so they experience the journey from blank page to finished product.

To demonstrate the potential of joint construction, here is a lesson plan for intermediate-level learners who are writing multiparagraph papers while studying relative clauses for the first time.

### The Task

Students often arrive in our Intensive English Program classes complaining: about their apartments, about public transportation, about school policies they dislike. When prompted, "What do you think you could do about that?", they may shrug apathetically or respond with overly strong language: "I'll tell him it is stupid!" Working together as a class to write a tactful complaint letter offers students the opportunity to meet curricular writing objectives while also learning culturally appropriate language for addressing conflict.

### Modeling

Before students write, they should read multiple examples of the genre they will be asked to produce. Because complaint letters are generally private correspondence and authentic examples may be hard to find, you will need to write two to three sample complaint letters on different topics. As a class, read one model and discuss the staging (structure) and use of language. How does the email begin? At what point does the writer say, "I have a problem"? What kinds of descriptive language are used to help the reader understand the problem clearly? How does the

writer soften strong statements? What types of phrases does the writer use to request solutions? Where are these requests located in the letter?

Now read another model, and compare it to the first. Which aspects are similar? Are there patterns of organization that both letter-writers follow? This will open up a discussion of which features of the genre are fixed and which are somewhat flexible.

### **Collaborative Brainstorming**

A key aspect of collaborative writing is shared experience (Rose & Martin, 2012). Students must all be somewhat familiar with the topic to contribute to the discussion. Choose a problem that is common to the class, such as the state of the classroom or inefficient public transportation. Brainstorm aspects of the problem, encouraging specificity. “We don’t like our classroom” doesn’t tell what is wrong. “Our classroom is so small that we can’t move around easily” gives a clearer picture.

Then, focus on organization. A question like, “Which of these ideas do you think go together?” helps students think about paragraphing. Talk through your mental process of categorizing the ideas from the brainstorming: “Well, *noise* and *seeing people having fun* are both *distractions*.” This renders your thinking visible and shows that good writing does not appear by magic.

### **Joint Construction**

Now it’s time to write the letter! This can be done with a projector or interactive white board, but poster paper also works well. Explain that students are going to suggest sentences and you are going to write them up. You may need to help with the conventions of starting a letter or email, but then remind students about the stages that they analyzed in the sample letters.

As you write the letter collaboratively, keep asking students to suggest the next sentence or phrase. Focusing on language the class has studied, press for more detail when it is needed. “Okay, we said the room is noisy, but we want to communicate clearly just how much it affects us. Could you use a relative clause? The noise *that the class next door makes*...Someone finish the sentence for me.” If students are unable to think of the next sentence, refer them back to the brainstorming and ask what should come next. It is appropriate to gradually increase the scaffolding until students can participate. For example, if no one can volunteer a complete sentence, try starting it for them; if that is still too difficult, prompt them for words and phrases that you can form into a sentence. Eventually, you will want to reduce the scaffolding so that students are performing independently.

When the text is complete, go back to the beginning and read it aloud. Point out that good writers reread their work. (Struggling writers rarely do!) Correcting errors together demonstrates that even proficient writers have to edit. Give each student a copy of the finished text so they can share in the success of this coauthored text.

Joint construction is front-loaded and can seem time consuming in the beginning, but it pays off when it comes time for students to write independently. Your students are now ready to compose

a new text in the same genre but on a different topic, such as an email to their landlord complaining about their apartment, or an email to the school administration to ask for a different class schedule.

## Other Collaborative Writing Tasks

Joint construction was first developed in middle schools and has been used successfully in both first- and second-language writing classes from elementary to graduate school (de Oliveira & Lan, 2014; Dreyfus, Macnaught, & Humphrey, 2008; Rothery, 1996). For example, with prematriculation graduate students, Nigel teaches summary, synthesis, and data commentary using the same basic lesson plan of modeling, joint construction, and individual writing. In Monica's intermediate-level classes, her students collaboratively write product listings for online auction sites and reviews of local restaurants. For younger and lower level learners, we recommend writing narratives and descriptions from pictures together.

Collaborative writing can also be conducted in pairs and small groups. The same principles apply, starting with interactive modeling of the genre. Groups need to write about a shared experience, they need to plan so they share a vision for the text, and they should produce one single text, either on computer or paper. The teacher is then free to coach groups; help them overcome obstacles; and prompt them to refer to the models, reread their writing, and stretch their language use.

## Conclusion

Collaborative writing works because it reinforces the stages of the genre and opens a space to talk about language choices. Joint construction is especially effective because the teacher is modeling writing strategies and helping shape students' suggestions into clear, coherent prose. Students learn from their own ideas, their peers' contributions, and the teacher's prompts and recasts. We regularly see even students who struggle with writing transfer concepts, grammar, and vocabulary from the joint construction into their subsequent independent writing (Caplan & Farling, 2017). And our strongest writers gain in fluency and range through exploring the choices that are made in the composition of any text.

When we finish a joint construction, we enthusiastically say to our students: "You wrote this!" The collaborative text is one that no individual student—nor the teacher—could have written individually. Instead, it is one that they can all be proud of and turn to as a model for their future writing.

## References

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