Using Wikis for Online Collaboration

The Power of the Read-Write Web

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Probably the most common and traditional group writing project is the group research paper or presentation. Collaborative research papers are typically completed by a small group of two to four students, and emphasize research, writing, and collaborative outcomes. In a wiki, students can complete all the phases of research and writing process in a shared workspace. They are able to build off of one another’s strengths and create a single, unified writing project.

**Purpose**
Select this type of project when you want students to research and explore a course-related topic in more depth. Collaborative writing projects can be adapted to almost any discipline and help students develop information literacy and group collaboration skills. Projects can be simple, narrowly focused “white papers” (short discourses designed to educate or inform, which can be completed in a short time frame), or they can be more comprehensive, thorough treatments of an assigned topic.

**Frame**
It is highly recommended that you provide each collaborative research group with its own, private wiki, which can usually be set up easily with a free service such as pbWiki or Wikispaces. Within each group’s wiki, provide pages that support group planning, research, and writing.
**Group Planning Page**  Establish a page that includes a listing of group members and an area in which students can begin the planning process. Scaffold this page to include early steps in the planning process, with such headings as:

- Research Topic
- Group Member Roles
- Goals
- Outline

**Research Page**  Provide a page that students can use to track research and highlight key resources. During early research and writing, this page will become a work table, through which students can extract quotes, identify page references, link to relevant Web sites, and share research discoveries. In the final stages of the project, this page will become the list of references used in the paper.

**Paper**  At the center of the project is the paper itself. The framework for this page will evolve as the paper is developed. Encourage students to engage in stages of writing, including outlining, drafting, editing, and refinement. Have students start by converting the high-level outline from the planning stage into headings and subheadings in the paper. Provide adequate time for students to move the paper through the writing process, so that they do not rely on a divide-and-conquer strategy in the wiki.

**Management Tips**

If your formatting requirements are high, consider a wiki service that includes advanced formatting features, such as Google Docs.

It is usually more efficient to assign research topics or provide a selected list of topics from which groups can choose, rather than to leave this choice open-ended. With asynchronous work, it can be inefficient to have groups select a topic, as this discussion can take days or weeks to resolve.

Discussion forums can play an important role in a collaborative research and writing project. Ensure that students have access to a discussion forum in the
wiki or in your learning management system to support group questions, comments and negotiations.

The project can be easily adapted to virtual group presentations. Instead of paragraph narratives, encourage students to set up a wiki page for each “slide” in the presentation. Google Presentations, part of Google Docs, also supports collaborative slide-show development.

**Additional Resources**

Collaborative Writing and Research in Higher Education. Available at [www.stanford.edu/group/collaborate/](http://www.stanford.edu/group/collaborate/).


Reference