Team Collaboration Using Google Docs, Sheets or Slides

(Written by Rob Anson, with input from Sources June 1, 2021)

Google Docs has some great collaboration features for group writing. But what we need is a plan for our team to use those features harmoniously. This reviews the collaboration features and lays out a plan for your group to use them productively.

I'll assume you know how to use Google Docs. But if you'd like to brush up take a look under Sources below--there are links to good 10-15 minute videos on Google Docs, Sheets and Slides.

All three tools include exactly the same collaboration features. I'll refer to Docs in this article, but the collaboration features and plan apply to all three. The collaboration features we'll discuss include: Shared Drive, Comments, Recommend Edits, and Version History. Summary of Collaboration Features in Google Docs And there are links to articles on each under Sources.

To make this easier to relate to, lets say your team was assigned a two week research project report working in person. Actually though you could easily tweak this plan for any group project even if it was 16 weeks in length, a presentation or a design document, or done remotely in a virtual team using Zoom (or some other video conference tool) with a pandemic raging around.

The group writing plan includes 6 steps. Longer projects may iterate steps 3-5 a few times, and projects with more non-writing work may need a more detailed task plan, but here is the basic idea.

1. Set Up: Share Documents & Files *[individual team member]*

2. Plan Content: Outline Report & Assign Tasks *[team meeting]*

3. Write Draft *[individual members]*

4. Review Draft *[individual members]*

5. Proofread and Check Document *[team meeting]*

6. Finalize Document *[1-2 team members]*

* Oops… Fixing Issues: Using Version History

1. Set Up: Share Documents & Files *[individual team member]*

You could share individual documents, but that is a lot of extra work and less effective. Instead, create a **Shared Drive** for all your team's files, and give your team members access. In the Shared Drive, create all your Google files, drag & drop other files (eg. PDFs, Word, JPG, etc.), and add folders as needed. The point is that all files are **automatically shared** with the group.

2. Plan Content: Outline Report & Assign Tasks *[team meeting]*

A little time planning will save a ton of time working. So meet together, and here is your agenda. I strongly recommend your team asks one member to facilitate the agenda and discussion, enabling everyone to have input. And one person will be the recorder, to capture the plan. Here is what you will do:

1. **Start with an Outline** — Everyone needs to read the assignment carefully first. Then start to identify section headings to outline the report. Be descriptive to people remember, and use all CAPS so the headings stand out, you can reword and clean it up later. The recorder captures it where everyone can see and participate.

2. **Brainstorm Ideas** — With an outline in place, give it a test run. In other words, brainstorm some starter "seed" ideas under important sections. Things like "Talk about this…", "Find data on that…", "Address factors in the chapter 4 checklist…", etc. If the team knows the direction already, then ask everyone to open the document in the *Shared Drive*, and–at the same time– insert ideas in appropriate headings for 15-20 minutes. In other situations, where you still need to work out a direction, research question, or topic, make it a team discussion supported by the facilitator and recorder.

3. **Assign Tasks** — Next is the task plan–assign who does what. You can put the tasks & names under the section headings or insert a table at the top of the document to enter tasks * names. There are probably both writing and operational work tasks to capture. Focus on tasks to have done before the team meets next.

4. **Set the Due Date** — Before you split up to work, set the next meeting date f possible. This is also a "hard" (required) date for the assigned tasks to be done.

3. Write Draft *[individual members]*

Most of the draft writing (and other work) will be done working separately. Just a few guidelines will keep this smooth and productive:

- **Section Authors** — A simple rule for this phase helps keep the peace: Only section authors enter content into the section. However, when you have suggestions for other sections, then Great!– attach a *Comment* to that section with your ideas to start the conversation. Then let that author respond or incorporate it. It will be appreciated.

- **Draft vs. Notes**— Remember, this draft will evolve into the final submission. Thus, only enter information into this document that is intended (at least for now) to go into the final report. Put all those other notes in a separate document–working ideas, reminders, connections, quotes from articles you might use, calculations, etc.

- **The Due Date** — Remember the due date for completing your sections! It is a good idea for someone to take responsibility to send a reminder email out.

- **Communicate** — Don't go silent on your team. Keep up some communications so everyone stays engaged. Also, when you add a Comment to someone's section, that will also generate an email to members.

4. Review Draft [individual members]

Reviewing is the most critical step, especially writing in groups. Writing separately can get a lot done quickly, but it also introduces a lot of rework issues for content and form. The purpose of reviewing is to create a final report with quality **content** (accurately communicate your ideas/research, logically

develop arguments, address the assignment requirements) and quality **form** (correct grammar, spelling and punctuation, good flow and word choice).

Review needs to go on throughout the writing process, but the type of review changes. At this stage, early-mid process, you should focus 90% on reviewing content; don't waste time perfecting the form until ideas are well setup. That said, writing styles and skills often vary widely such that some (10%?) attention to form will inevitable.

This review requires giving team members time to concentrate. Each will individually read and mark-up the document, placing attention on content suggestions. Two Google Docs features are used for mark-up, *Comments* and **Recommended Edits**.

- **Comments –> Content** — Use *Comments* to address content. Highlight all or part of a passage, then insert the *Comment*. By typing your thoughts into the comment bubble, the draft remains readable so others can consider and assess the suggestions. And because you can *Reply to* Comments, conversations (via email) can efficiently take place to resolve the passage.

- **Recommend Edits –> Form** — *Suggesting* works like Track Changes in MS Word. To start, click the pencil in the top right, and choose *Suggesting*. In this mode, you can edit the text as you normally would, but it captures your edits as suggestions. That is, it marks the text as changed AND your edit shows up as a *Comment*. Another person can simply accept or drop each change.

5. Decide Revisions [team meeting]

When there are a number of content suggestions–*Comments*–it is time for a team meeting. Discussion is needed to decide on the content suggestions, and how to address them in the text. To aid the discussion, everyone can open the document, but one person should share their screen and record revisions from the conversation. It is a good idea to ask one member to facilitate the discussion, helping all members express their ideas while encouraging the team to make decisions they can live with, then move on.

6. Proofread and Check Document [2 team members]

Proofreading and checking the final copy should be done by two strong writers. Finalizing the document includes a few things done by one or two strong writers.

1. Carefully proofread and edit the writing–spelling, grammar, punctuation, transitions.

2. Set up/check report elements, including titles, team information, page headings/footers, page breaks, etc.

3. Ensure the references include all sources found in the report, and that source citations are entered correctly.

4. If there are appendices, ensure these are organized and presented appropriately.

When the document form is clean, you are ready to submit. Pay attention to the instructor's submission instructions. You can use *FILE > Download* to create a final file in the correct format for the instructor (e.g. PDF, Word, PowerPoint, etc.)

* Oops… Fixing Issues: Using Version History

What should you do if a team member accidentally deletes or changes important passages of the document? Don't panic! Use Version History.

Open the *FILE* menu and select *Version History > See Version History.*   This will list all changes and who made them, by time of the change. Scroll down to select the version just before the deletion/change, then do one of three things.

- Click *Restore This Version* to replace the entire document with that earlier version.

- Click *Make a Copy* to make a separate copy of the entire earlier version. You can then go back through it to see what you need.

- Click on the earlier version then highlight the section you want to retrieve. Use *EDIT > Copy* to place it in your clipboard. Return to click on the latest version and *Paste* that in at the appropriate place.

Sources/For More Information:

- **Group Writing**, by The Writing Center at University of North Carolina, 2020
- **Collaborative Features Instructions**
  - **Get Started with Shared Drives**, by Google, 2020
  - **How to Collaborate in Google Docs**, by Justin Pot, March 24, 2019
  - **What Is Version History and How to Use It in Google Docs?**, By Justin Pot, March 21, 2019
- **Beginner Tool Tutorials** (if you need to review the basics)
  - **Quick Tutorial of Google Docs**, by DavidLeeEdTech (Video, 9 minutes)
  - **Google Sheets Tutorial for Beginners**, by Railsware Academy (Video, 14 minutes)
  - **Quick Tutorial for New Google Slides Presentation**, by DavidLeeEdTech (Video, 13 minutes)