# Build a Story
An Exercise in Group Collaboration

In order to prepare students for collaborative work, use this "Build a Story" activity (an adaptation of the "jigsaw" technique) to discuss and plan for the challenges and opportunities in collaboration. In it students, synthesize multiple pieces of information to achieve a common goal, apply collaboration concepts discussed in class by practicing group work, and reflect on the successes and challenges of group collaboration in order to prepare for higher-stakes assignments.
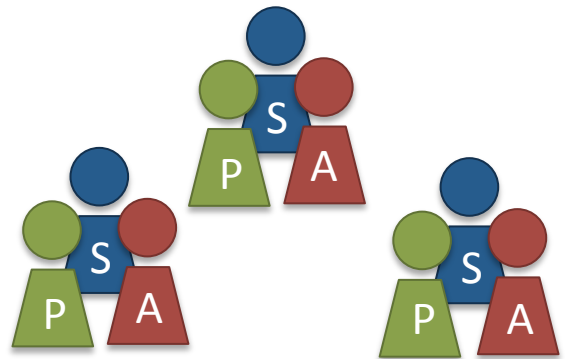
Part 1: Individual Task

Each individual in a group creates a story element: **protagonist**, **setting**, and **antagonist**.
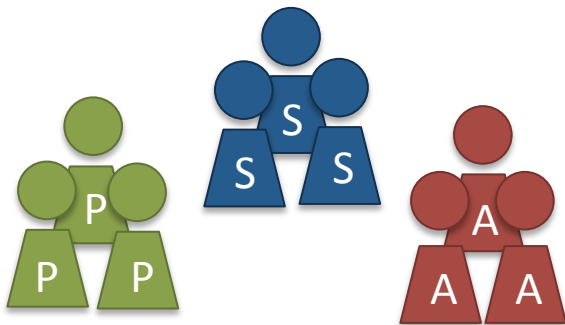
Part 2: Story Building

Reform groups, each made up of one student from each original group. Combine individual story elements to great a cohesive story.

Part 3: Reflect on Collaboration

Challenges
Changes
Strategies

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Build a Short Story: An Exercise in Group Collaboration

Most instructors would agree that the mention of "group project" makes students cringe and moan. We cannot blame them for this response, as individualism is a Western ideology and practice, and, perhaps, we instructors have experienced aversion to group projects along our educational journeys. With this in mind, I wanted to introduce a group writing project to my Writing 150 class in a way that might de-stigmatize the practice while building student collaboration skills. First, I had my students read "Writing 'Eyeball to Eyeball': Building a Successful Collaboration" by Rebecca Ingalls (2011), which provides real-world examples of collaboration, addresses issues involved in collaboration, and provides solutions to these issues. After discussing Ingalls, I had the class put the article into practice by participating in an exercise I entitled "Build a Short Story." The outcomes for this exercise are as follows:

1. Students synthesize multiple pieces of information to achieve a common goal
2. Students apply collaboration concepts discussed in class by practicing group work
3. Students reflect on the successes and challenges of group collaboration in order to prepare for higher-stakes assignments

This exercise was divided into three parts:

Part One:
- I asked students to evenly divide themselves into groups of "ones," "twos," and "threes."* Each group was given the following tasks:

    "Ones" – each of you will create a protagonist or main character. Include information like gender, personality, physical traits, and occupation.

    "Twos" – each of you will create a setting. Include information like whether or not this place is fictional, what the weather is like there, is it a poverty-stricken place or a rich area, and is it located in the past, present, or future?

    "Threes" – each of you will create an antagonist. See "Ones" for tips on how to create this character.

- Groups were given five minutes to write down individual creations.

Part Two:
- I then told the students to create new groups consisting of a "One," "Two," and a "Three."
- Once they formed new groups, I instructed them to combine the information they created and collectively build a story by adding a plot.
- They were given 10 minutes to do this and were asked to write 2-4 paragraphs only.
- When they were done, I asked a few students to share their stories.

Part Three:

We, then, reflected on this exercise by having a class discussion. Specifically, I asked them…

- "What were some of the challenges you faced when taking three pieces of separate information and putting them together into one story?
- "What changes did your group need to make to your original creations in order to achieve your group's goal?"
- "Did any of you utilize group-work strategies Ingalls discussed in her article? If so, which ones?"
- "What did this exercise teach you about group collaboration? What do you think are the most essential tools needed to work together?"

The exercise yielded an interesting discussion of what Dr. Yong Mei Fung (2010) calls "collaborative writing features" of "mutual interaction," "negotiation," "cognitive conflict," and "shared expertise" occurring during face-to-face collaboration. Groups reflected on the importance of clear communication, prioritization, overcoming obstacles, and utilizing individual strengths to achieve their goals. I would encourage any instructor to try this exercise when attempting to build collaboration skills among students.

*This can be done in a variety of ways, but I started at one side of the room and had the students count to three and repeat the process until we got to the last student in the class.

References

Fung, Y. M. (2010). Collaborative writing features. *RELC Journal, 41* (1), 18-30. doi: 10.1177/0033688210362610

Ingalls, R. (2011). Writing "eyeball to eyeball": Building a successful collaboration. In C. Lowe and P. Zemliansky (Eds.), *Writing Spaces*: *Readings on Writing, 2*. Retrieved from http://writingspaces.org/ingalls--writing-eyeball-to-eyeball

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