

TEN TIPS for Managing Multi-Author Teams

Less stress.
More timely
publications.



TERRY ERLE CLAYTON

Acknowledgements

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I am deeply indebted to the many colleagues, clients and students who have taught me so much about the struggle of writing, and the truth of what Dr. Samuel Johnson said more than 300 years ago: *What is written without effort is read without pleasure*. It is my mission to help you get the most from your efforts.

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Terry Erle Clayton, MSc.

Professional Development Series # 1

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The author (left) with Dr David Molden, then Deputy Director at the International Water Management Institute in Sri Lanka in 2010 editing the CGIAR Water, Land and Ecosystems Program proposal.

Foreword

Multi-author publications are the norm in business and the professions. Most take far too long to complete, not because of the number of people involved, but because too often the team leading the project does not take the time to make the process explicit and get buy-in from everyone involved at the start. What multi-author projects need is traffic control. Without an agreed system of who does what and when and how, things tend to go back and forth and around and around for months. Many projects die in the process. Friendships and professional relationships die in the process.

There is no one right way to manage a multi-author project. The point is, if you and your team take time at the beginning to think about the best process for you and make it explicit, you will be rewarded with a relatively trouble-free process and a more timely publication.

Start with these basic guidelines and adapt them to suit your team.



FAO/USAID Avian Influenza meeting, Bangkok

The Ten Tips

Print this page for your team discussion.

1. Divide your project into stages and set a hard deadline for the completion of each stage.
2. Set up an editorial committee or working group and appoint one member as the Managing Editor.
3. Agree on the rules of authorship before anyone starts writing anything.
4. Get agreement on structure and content from senior levels of management.
5. Agree on your ground rules.
6. Police discussions at each stage of the process.
7. Demand specific comments.
8. Do not allow Track Changes in work to be shared for review.
9. Limit the circle of reviewers for the final edit.
10. Be hard on deadlines.

1. Divide your project into stages and set a hard deadline for the completion of each stage.



Joint IRD and Land Development Department Thailand proposal preparation.

A multi-author project is like a funnel. At the wide end of the funnel an individual or group makes a decision to produce a specific publication and there is an open discussion of ideas about content and structure and your audience. At some point, a small group comes together or is appointed to do more detailed planning, recruit contributors, assign tasks, and (most importantly) map out a timeline with deadlines. In the next stage, the funnel narrows and contributors work on their drafts, which are shared for review and comment. Nearing the stem of the funnel is the beginning of the general review when your editorial committee sends out a draft to everyone you think should see it, including those you deem worthy of a professional courtesy, and anyone you think might be offended if you didn't ask them. Announce a firm deadline for this stage. And then, into the stem of the funnel for the final editing stage.

2. Set up an editorial committee or working group and appoint one member as the Managing Editor.



UNDP Terms of Reference Writeshop, Hanoi.

Someone needs to be in charge. A managing editor negotiates agreement on the ground rules and then enforces them. Everyone agrees to abide by the managing editor's decisions. Part facilitator, part referee, part sheriff, the managing editor takes ultimate responsibility for making the final revisions and copy editing or seeing that they are made, and for keeping people to the agreed deadlines.

Both external and internal managing editors have their pros and cons. An external professional is often able to take a neutral approach to complex issues, navigate past organizational conflicts and deal with the personality quirks of internal participants with detachment. An internal managing editor, on the other hand, usually has the advantage of knowing the needs of the organization—although this can at times contribute to predictable, stale products.

A good balance is a hybrid approach, with an external managing editor and an official internal referee who can arbitrate differences of opinion.

3. Agree on the rules of authorship before anyone starts writing anything.



Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Programme project proposal preparation.

Arguments over authorship can kill a project and leave a landscape littered with hard feelings. Decide on or negotiate the rules for authorship before anyone invests any time in drafting material. Here are the main questions you will need to consider:

1. Is this a corporate publication? If 'yes', the organization is the author.
2. Is this publication a compilation of chapters or sections? If 'yes', the name of one or more editors will be on the cover and title page with individual chapters and sections having separate authors.
3. How will authors' names be listed? Alphabetically? In order of seniority? In order of 'significance of contribution'? Other?

4. Get agreement on structure and content from senior levels of management.



Dragon's Den session at Science Communications for Policy Impact side event of the Landscapes for People, Food and Nature in Africa Conference in Nairobi.

This is a case of managing expectations. If the final draft of your document is the first complete version a senior manager sees, don't be surprised if they ask for significant changes. Prepare a detailed annotated outline as early in the process as you can and circulate that to senior managers with a request for comments. Attach the final agreed outline to the first complete draft when you send it to senior management for review as a reminder of what they agreed to.

5. Agree on your ground rules.



IUCN Asia Water Workshop. Bangkok.

You don't need many ground rules. Here are some basics.

Style guidelines: Agree on what style guideline you will follow and make sure everyone has a copy. If you can get people to follow at least some of the guidelines it will greatly reduce the time and cost required for a final edit.

Standard file naming format: An individual author may know exactly what is in the file named Finalwednesdayafterlunchdraft.docx, but anyone else has to open it and then try to figure out what it is and where it fits in the sequence of versions. It is crucial for a smooth work flow to agree on a consistent file naming system. There are many ways to do this. As an example, here is a system that works well for me on multi-author projects:

Short title of the document edit [day month year] [your

initials].docx Example: Gender transformative approach edit 18

june 2015 TC.docx

The only data that changes will be the date and the initials. Do not eliminate the spaces, like this:

Gendertransformativeapproachedit18june2015TC.docx

or use underscore marks like this:

Gender_transformative_approach_edit_18june2015
TC.docx.

Neither is a requirement and if you do this your files will not line up by title and date, which is a highly desirable feature when the managing editor is sorting revised versions from a dozen or more authors. Whatever you do, be consistent.

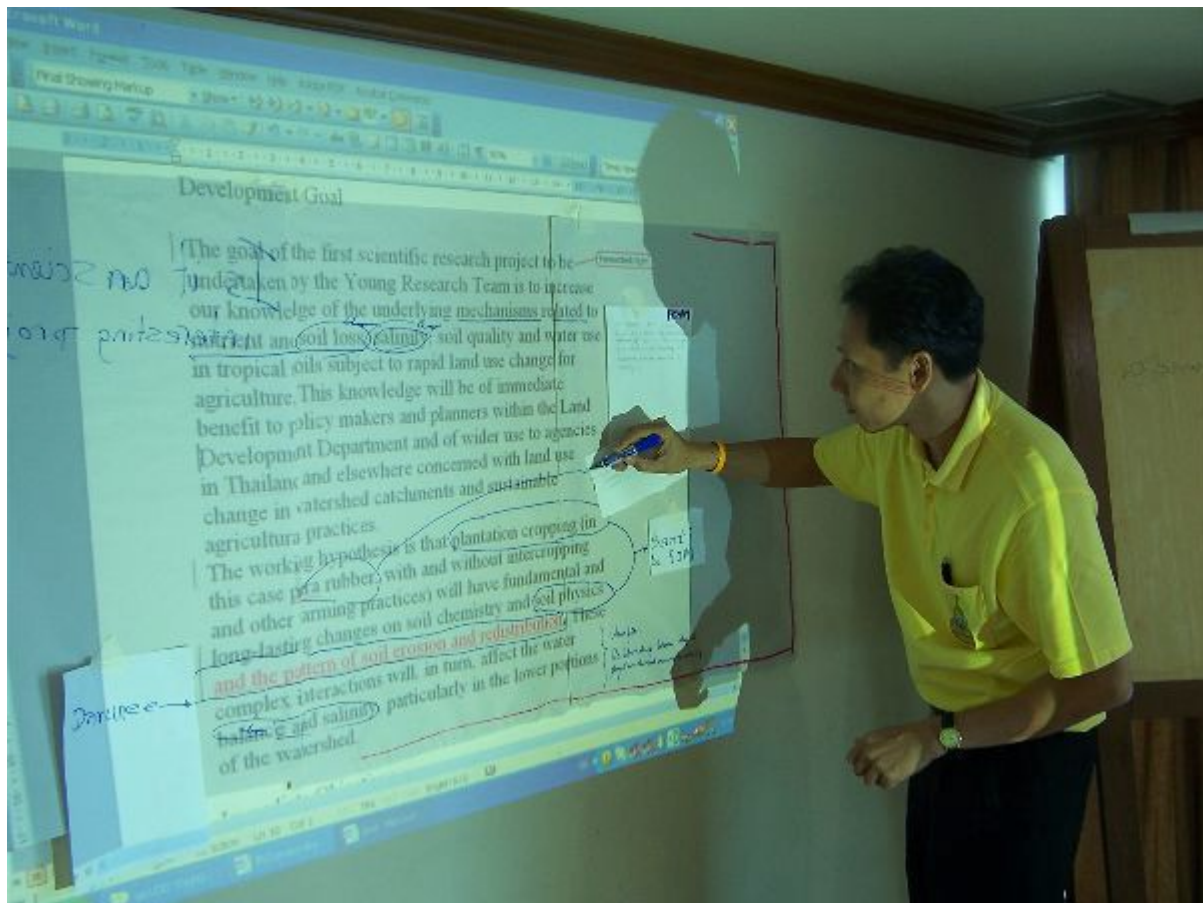
6. Police discussions at each stage of the process.



IWMI Ghana.

Your discussions should become more focused and involve fewer people at each stage of the process. Some organizations have what you might call a ‘culture of conversation’. Every draft is passed around to everyone for comment. If you ask people to comment, they will, and then you feel obliged to incorporate their comments. This practice can delay a publication for months. Sometimes forever. The fact is, most authors are happy to see their draft once more just before publication and some not even then. If you have made the ground rules clear, that should be all they expect. If they don’t respond to requests for comments, see tip number ten.

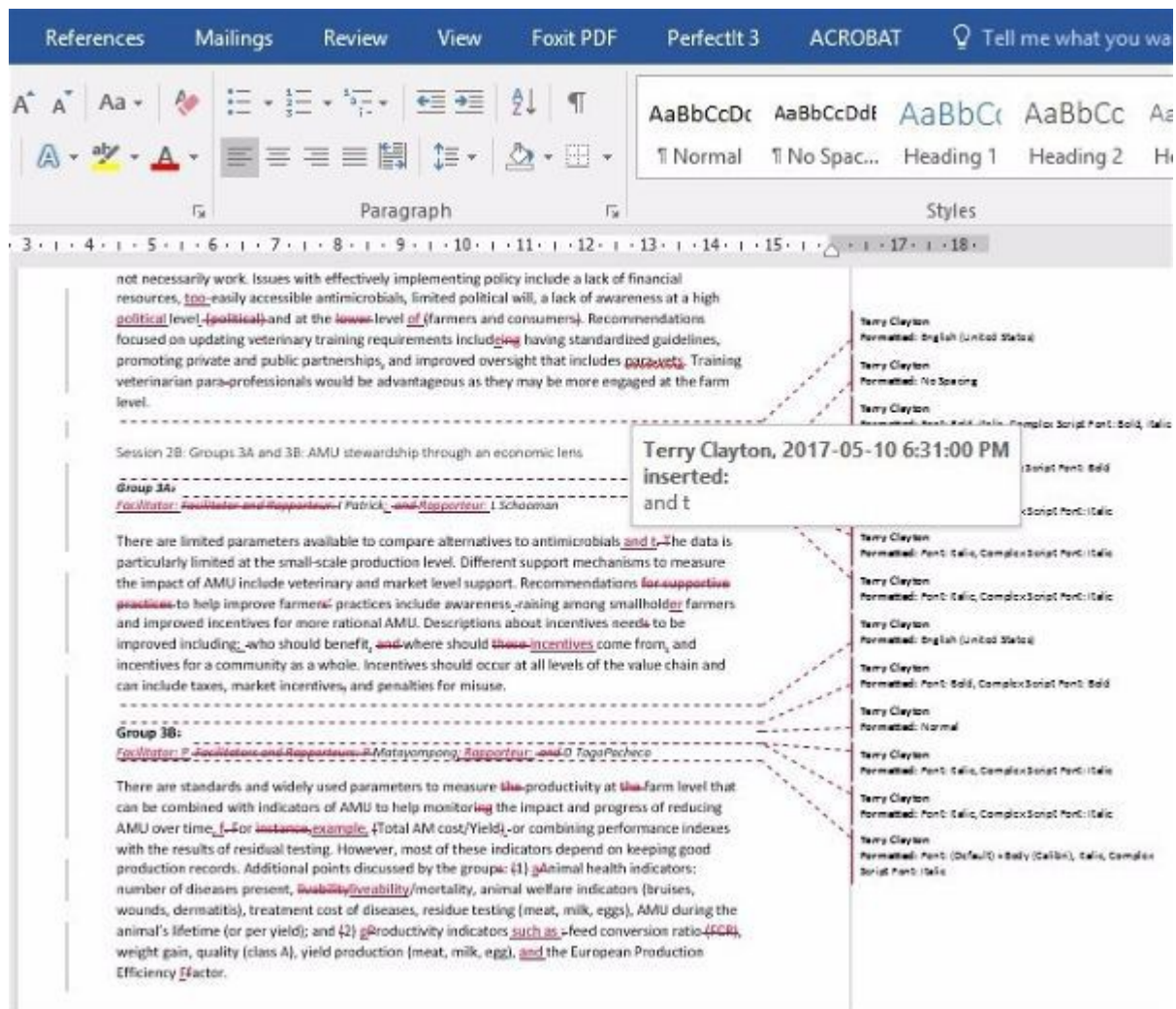
7. Insist on specific comments.



Joint IRD and Land Development Department Thailand proposal preparation.

Contributing authors will often use the Review/New Comment feature to pose questions, share their thoughts, and make suggestions. It is difficult for the managing editor to know what to do with these comments. Train authors to make specific comments. If, for example, an author or reviewer writes, "Perhaps a reference would be useful here," reply with, "Please provide a suggested reference." If someone writes, "I think this could be expanded on", reply with, "Please provide your suggestion for additional text." If you get no reply, ignore the comment.

8. Do not allow Track Changes in work to be shared for review.



Individuals can keep a version with tracked changes on their own drive if they so desire, but showing tracked changes to the group only encourages people to argue with the change. Let people question the revised text if they see a need to. If someone asks to see the changes you made, then send them the Track Changes version.

9. Limit the circle of reviewers for the final edit.



UNDP Terms of Reference Writeshop, Hanoi.

The deadline for the end of the general review stage marks the beginning of the final edit. No one will see the manuscript again until it is presented as a final draft ready for the publication process (layout, design, prepress). The final edit is all about smoothing out the text and making everything conform to the agreed style guideline, correcting errors, perhaps some minor changes to word form, syntax and grammar, and formatting. This is copy editing and proofing. Discussion is mainly confined to the editorial committee or working group.

10. Be hard on deadlines.



SEA Water Forum, Chiang Mai, Thailand.

Make it clear from the start that if people commit to the project, they commit to meeting deadlines. *I am really busy, I am in the field, I have a workshop, I am on leave, my brother and his family are visiting...* are not acceptable excuses. If you don't have what you need by the deadline, continue without it. If what you need is essential, either find a way to work around it or consider cancelling the project. You must be ruthless on deadlines otherwise a single individual can hold the project to ransom with, "I just need another week." Your reply, "Sorry. Time's up."

About the author



Terry Erle Clayton is a cognitive psychologist, author and educator based in Udon Thani, Thailand. Terry has over twenty years' experience working with international development agencies and NGOs, government organizations, universities and the private sector, mainly in South and Southeast Asia, but as far afield as Ethiopia, Ghana and Zambia. Terry has worked with hundreds of researchers in over 80 organizations on three continents on *"every kind of publication you can imagine."*

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clayton@redplough.com

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