



# 7 Things You Need To Know about Collaborative Writing Tools

at Penn State

## Case Studies

### Group Work

Bart and Ashley are working on a group project for an economics course. Bart has found an interesting article about the supply chain they are studying, so he goes to Zoho Writer and finds the outline that he and Ashley have started. He adds his summary of the article along with the citation and reference. While in the reference section, he sees that Ashley is also working on the document at the same time. Bart reviews a chart she has added and leaves an in-line comment suggesting that they compare Ashley's chart to data from another supply chain.

### No Strings Attached

Shelley starts working on her essay while at home visiting her parents over the Thanksgiving break. She uses her parents' home PC and creates the document in Google Docs. Back on campus after the break, she shares the rough draft with the course TA. The TA locates Shelley's shared document in his Google Docs account and adds a few suggestions regarding the introduction. On the day the paper is due, Shelley oversleeps and forgets her laptop back at her dorm room. She simply stops by a computer lab on campus and logs into Google Docs to review the TA's feedback and to put the finishing touches on the essay. When she is done, she saves her essay as a PDF and submits it to her course's ANGEL drop box – complete and on time.

## 1. What Is It?

Collaborative writing tools are Web services that essentially function as online word processors. Accordingly, they generally feature intuitive GUI interfaces, basic text and document formatting options, and the ability to save either to the host's server or the user's local directories. The crowning feature of these tools, though, is how well they facilitate working in multiple author environments. For example, the tools can notify authors when changes are made to a document, maintain a document revision history, allow multiple authors to work on the same document simultaneously, and allow authors to annotate the document with comments – all in a single, completely Web-based package. As an illustration, three such tools are profiled below:

### Zoho Writer

This service is a prototypical online word processor with a clean, familiar interface and the ability to share documents. It is also part of a larger suite of free and fee-based online productivity tools including project management, customer relationship management (CRM), and database tools.

### Google Docs

The 800-pound gorilla of the collaborative writing space is Google Docs (formerly known as Writely). As part of the larger suite of Google tools, this online word processor is integrated with Google's other online services including spreadsheets, Web pages, Internet search, e-mail, and more.

### NoteMesh

This unique implementation of collaboration tools allows students in the same class to develop class notes collaboratively. The notes are organized by institution, class, and section, allowing students to discover each other online.

## 2. Who's Doing It?

An informal follow-up with staff at several CIC universities indicates that applications of collaborative writing tools for teaching and learning are inconsistent. Ohio State and Purdue are not currently working on any university-level usage of the tools; however, Michigan State does have several faculty members who have begun to incorporate the services into their courses, either as the required or recommended option for completing group papers.

## 3. How Does It Work?

Fundamentally, the tools are extremely easy to get started with. Since they are all free, users need only create an account, log in, and start writing, editing, and sharing. Once the users complete those simple initial steps, how they choose to use the services will vary based on their needs.

## Implementing Collaborative Writing Tools

Zoho Writer

<http://writer.zoho.com>

Google Docs

<http://docs.google.com>

NoteMesh

<http://www.notemesh.com>

*Or contact us if you are interested in exploring this further.*

## Who to Contact at Penn State

Contact Education Technology Services (ETS) at:

Tel: 814-865-2030

E-mail: [tlt@psu.edu](mailto:tlt@psu.edu)

## 4. What are the Strengths?

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In looking at collaborative writing tools overall, several strengths stand out. While not all of these features apply to every service available, generally, collaborative writing tools offer benefits including:

- Extremely easy document sharing and collaboration
- Familiar, intuitive word processor interface
- Availability from any computer with an Internet connection (i.e., no need for local copies, CDs, flash drives, etc.)
- Versioning by saving a history of changes (who and when) that can be viewed and compared
- Ability to save local copies if desired
- Support for importing documents in various file formats (.doc, .csv, etc.)

## 5. What Are The Downsides?

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Again, looking generally at the range of services overall, users will want to consider their specific situation or need in light of several features including:

- Potential privacy or data security issues due to the fact that documents are stored on the host's server
- The fact that users must be connected to the Internet in order to edit documents
- Typical issues with a service that is hosted outside of the education institution (e.g., advertising, varying levels of technical support, separate accounts, lack of ANGEL integration, etc.)
- The need to manually invite collaborators
- File size limitations

## 6. What Are The Implications for Teaching and Learning?

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These services' most intriguing application for teaching and learning is their ability to facilitate collaborative writing and group project work. Essentially, these tools eliminate the technological barriers to collaborative writing, which in turn facilitates group work. Possible implementations could include developing a shared written assignment, creating a shared set of class notes, critiquing others' written work, and generally harnessing the power of the old adage that "two heads (or many) are better than one."

## 7. How Do I Get Started?

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The best way to get started is to try the tools out yourself. It will take you less than five minutes to set up a free account with one of the tools, and you will be able to start exploring them for your own work. As you do, think about their potential for developing a research proposal with multiple colleagues, co-authoring a journal submission, managing meeting minutes, etc. Once you are comfortable with how they work, you will likely start to see potential everywhere for how they could be applied for teaching and learning. (See the sidebar for two hypothetical case studies.)