

Remote Control: Coordinating Collaborative Writing in Online Courses

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Abstract

This Great Idea for Teaching (GIFT) activity presents a collaborative writing simulation designed for online communication courses, particularly those focused on technical or professional writing. Inspired by a real-world workplace miscommunication, the activity replicates the challenges of remote teamwork by assigning students to small groups tasked with revising flawed communication templates. Each student is responsible for one document—such as a press release, email, or radio pitch—requiring them to coordinate messaging, correct inconsistencies, and collaborate asynchronously. The assignment fosters essential communication skills, including document design, editing, brand consistency, and internal coordination. It also offers opportunities for debriefing and reflection on professional habits such as accountability and direction-following. Designed to mirror authentic workplace dynamics, this activity is flexible, scalable, and aligned with the guidelines set forth by Barton and Coombs (2023) for effective GIFT submissions. Ultimately, it prepares students to succeed in modern digital workplaces where clarity, collaboration, and communication are key.

Keywords: collaborative writing, online learning, remote teamwork, asynchronous instruction

Courses

- Online Technical Writing
- Professional Writing
- Organizational Communication
- Public Relations Writing
- Communication for the Workplace

- Demonstrate understanding of message coordination and brand consistency.
- Apply critical thinking and direction-following in high-stakes writing situations.

Learning Objectives

- By completing this activity, students will:
- Practice writing and revising professional documents with attention to clarity, tone, and consistency.
- Collaborate in a simulated remote team environment.
- Identify and resolve discrepancies across communication materials.

Remote Control: Coordinating Collaborative Writing in Online Courses

Team-based assignments are a staple of communication and writing pedagogy, yet they often pose unique challenges in online learning environments where real-time interaction and accountability are more difficult to manage. While face-to-face students can spontaneously collaborate and communicate, remote learners

are more likely to face communication gaps, disjointed messaging, and confusion over roles and responsibilities. These complications reflect the growing reality of modern professional environments, where remote and hybrid teams have become the norm. For instructors in technical or professional writing courses, this shift presents both a pedagogical challenge and an opportunity to simulate real-world collaborative dynamics.

This Great Idea for Teaching (GIFT) activity was developed in response to a real workplace scenario where a failure to align communication across a remote team led to the public release of conflicting and inaccurate materials. The consequences of that misalignment—sent to an audience of over 2,500—highlighted just how critical internal coordination is to successful external communication. The activity described in this article translates that experience into a structured, classroom-tested assignment that mirrors professional collaboration within an asynchronous or remote learning environment. Designed originally for an online technical writing course, this simulation challenges students to work in small teams to revise flawed communication materials, align their messaging, and produce a cohesive campaign despite working remotely and asynchronously.

The structure of this article follows the guidelines outlined by Barton and Coombs (2023) in their Concise Guide for Preparing GIFT Articles, which emphasizes a clear, replicable format to share effective classroom-tested teaching strategies. By aligning with their framework, this GIFT seeks to contribute meaningfully to the collective knowledge of communication educators, offering a practical and flexible activity that prepares students for the collaborative demands of today's professional writing environments.

Theoretical Rationale

This activity is grounded in Organizational Communication theory, especially systems theory and the concept of interdependence within team-based communication networks (Miller, 2015; Shimizu et al., 2022). In remote teams, the lack of physical proximity intensifies the challenge of achieving message coherence (Allen et al., 2015; Vasudevan et al., 2023). The simulation offers students a microcosm of professional scenarios where multiple stakeholders contribute to a campaign, often leading to misalignment in messaging. It also emphasizes technical writing principles such as usability, accuracy, and document design, crucial for creating a cohesive user experience across platforms. Peer editing has been found to enhance the learners' ability to evaluate

their own work (Henshaw, 2023). Online learning environments would seem to be ideally suited to providing students with a socially, culturally, and technologically complex learning environment. To fully capitalize on the potential of this environment for the development of layered literacies, however, students must learn effective teamwork skills (Staggers et al., 2008).

Activity Description

In this activity, students are placed into small groups consisting of up to five members. Each group simulates a remote workplace team tasked with coordinating a unified communication campaign. To mirror real-world professional writing environments, each student is assigned responsibility for one specific deliverable. Examples include:

- Webpage content
- Press release
- Advertising flyer
- Radio pitch (script + audio)
- Email announcement

The instructor provides each student with a flawed template containing a range of issues, including spelling and grammatical errors, poor formatting, conflicting event details such as date, time, and location, and inconsistent branding. These intentionally flawed templates serve as the foundation for each student's revision work and provide a realistic challenge requiring careful editing, collaborative decision-making, and message alignment across all documents.

Instructor Preparation

- Create flawed templates for each deliverable (Word or PowerPoint format).
- Draft an announcement post in the LMS discussion board with brand colors, event name, date/time/location, and cause or organization supported.
- Create a Canvas discussion board titled Collaborative Workplace Team Discussion.
- Create a Canvas assignment titled Collaborative Workplace Team Assignment
- Rubric Development

Collaborative Workplace Team Assignment Rubric					
Criteria	Ratings				Pts.
Structure & Organization	10 pts Excellent Organization is logical; structure enhances clarity and delivery of main ideas	7 pts Good Structure is logical; main points are supported by organization	3 pts Needs Improvement Somewhat disorganized, but structure does not detract from understanding of main points	0 pts Unacceptable Disorganized and illogical structure hinders understanding	10 pts
Cohesiveness	10 pts Excellent It is clear the group worked together to create documents that represent the same event.	7 pts Good Most instances of incongruent information were located and fixed within the document	3 pts Needs Improvement Some group collaboration occurred, but the document contains many instances of incongruent information.	0 pts Unacceptable Author or group did not collaborate on event details and assignment feels disjointed from others submitted within the group.	10 pts
Mechanics	10 pts Excellent No or very few instances of incorrect spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and usage of standard English grammar	7 pts Good Few instances of incorrect spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and usage of standard English grammar	3 pts Needs Improvement Several instances of incorrect spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and usage of standard English grammar	0 pts Unacceptable Incorrect spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and use of standard English grammar hinders understanding	10 pts
Total Points: 30					

Collaborative Workplace Team Discussion Rubric					
Criteria	Ratings				Pts.
Timeliness	10 pts Excellent Logged into Canvas early in the week to begin role distribution	7 pts Good Participated in the discussion by midweek.	3 pts Needs Improvement Logged in right before the final deadline and gave minimal participation	0 pts Unacceptable Did not contribute prior to the deadline.	10 pts
Professional Communication	10 pts Excellent Communication was clear, direct, professional, and kind.	7 pts Good Communication was often clear, direct, professional, and kind.	3 pts Needs Improvement Communication was occasionally clear, direct, professional, and kind.	0 pts Unacceptable Communication was nonexistent, or inappropriate	10 pts
Teamwork	10 pts Excellent Consistently demonstrated flexibility, leading, following and adaptability	7 pts Good Frequently demonstrated flexibility, leading, following and adaptability	3 pts Needs Improvement Occasionally demonstrated flexibility, leading, following and adaptability	0 pts Unacceptable Did not engage with team or did so in an individualistic manner	10 pts
Total Points: 30					

Student Instructions

Students begin by using the discussion board to assign roles and discuss a strategy for producing consistent documents. The instructor monitors discussion participation as part of the grade. Each student is responsible for revising only their assigned document, collaborating with peers to align key information, proofreading peer work, and submitting their final version individually. Students are also encouraged to meet via Zoom to share documents before the due date.

Materials Needed

- LMS discussion board
- Document templates (.docx/.pptx)
- Assignment submission area in LMS
- Audio recording tool (for radio pitch)

Debriefing

Following the completion of the assignment, instructors are encouraged to facilitate a class debrief or assign a written reflection focused on the importance of internal communication. This reflective component allows students to process their experiences and draw connections between their classroom collaboration and real-world professional practices. Prompting questions might include:

- What challenges did you face coordinating details?
- How did it feel to rely on others for document consistency?
- What tools or habits would improve future remote collaboration?

Student reflections often reveal several recurring insights. Many express surprise at the frequency of conflicting details between group members' drafts, even after the group had agreed on basic event information. Others acknowledge the realization that strong individual work is not enough to ensure project success without clear communication and alignment among the team. Some students share feelings of frustration stemming from late participation or a lack of proofreading by their peers, especially when it compromises the cohesion of the final deliverables.

These debriefs frequently lead to meaningful discussions about professional expectations, shared accountability, and the critical role of clear and timely communication in collaborative environments. The activity thus serves not only as a writing exercise but also as a practical lesson in workplace dynamics and remote team functionality.

Appraisal

This activity offers several notable strengths. It provides a realistic simulation of modern remote work environments, giving students a valuable opportunity to experience challenges commonly faced in professional, distributed teams. The assignment effectively integrates writing, editing, and collaboration, allowing students to develop essential communication competencies. Additionally, its flexible structure makes it suitable for various delivery methods, including online, hybrid, and face-to-face formats.

Despite its strengths, the activity also presents some limitations. It relies heavily on consistent student participation throughout the week, which can be difficult to ensure in asynchronous or fully online courses. Some students may exceed the scope of the assignment by attempting to complete multiple documents rather than focusing on their assigned task, which can undermine the learning objective of following instructions precisely. Conversely, others may wait until the last minute to participate, claiming work already completed by peers and failing to contribute to collaborative editing or decision-making. These behaviors can negatively affect the group dynamic and overall cohesion, but can also provide effective teaching moments for individual students.

To mitigate these challenges, instructors should emphasize that part of the assignment's purpose is to practice direction-following and equitable participation. Students who overwork or under-collaborate should receive appropriate feedback, and grading rubrics should evaluate both the quality of the final product and the student's demonstrated collaboration. Encouraging the use of tools such as Google Docs or shared cloud-based folders can help students visualize inconsistencies, share progress, and work toward document consistency in real time.

This assignment is also adaptable in several ways. Instructors can easily modify it for in-person instruction by printing flawed documents and organizing live group collaboration. The core concept can be applied to a variety of scenarios, such as a company launch, crisis communication response, or nonprofit gala. Furthermore, instructors may tailor the assignment to reflect industry-specific audiences, providing students with practice relevant to their intended career paths. For courses based in design, it could also be replicated on a larger scale as an end of semester project where the students do not begin with templates. It could serve as a pre-assessment and post-assessment to the course to analyze student growth in both collaborative writing/editing as well as teamwork skills.

Conclusion

This learning activity equips students with the practical skills and professional mindset needed to navigate collaborative writing in remote environments. By simulating a high-stakes workplace scenario with flawed templates and distributed team roles, the activity challenges students to move beyond individual excellence toward collective coherence. It reinforces not only core writing and editing competencies but also fosters habits of communication, accountability, and adaptability that are essential in today's digital workforce. When implemented with clear expectations and reflective follow-up, this assignment offers a replicable, flexible model for teaching collaborative writing that mirrors the demands of real-world communication contexts.

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Collaborative Workplace Rubric

Criteria	Ratings				Pts
Structure & Organization	7 pts Excellent Organization is logical; structure enhances clarity and delivery of main ideas	4.67 pts Good Structure is logical; main points are supported by organization	2.33 pts Needs Improvement Somewhat disorganized, but structure does not detract from understanding of main points	0 pts Unacceptable Disorganized and illogical structure hinders understanding	7 pts
Cohesiveness	7 pts Excellent It is clear the group worked together to create documents that represent the same event.	5.25 pts Good Most instances of incongruent information were located and fixed within the document.	3.5 pts Needs Improvement Some group collaboration occurred, but document contains many instances of incongruent information.	0 pts Unacceptable Author or group did not collaborate on event details and assignment feels disjointed from others submitted within the group.	7 pts
Mechanics	6 pts Excellent No or very few instances of incorrect spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and usage of standard English grammar	4.5 pts Good Few instances of incorrect spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and usage of standard English grammar	3 pts Needs Improvement Several instances of incorrect spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and usage of standard English grammar	0 pts Unacceptable Incorrect spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and use of standard English grammar hinders understanding	6 pts
					Total Points: 20