The Journal of Extension

Volume 58 | Number 5 Article 9

10-1-2020

Collaboratively Writing Extension Publications for the Public

Adrienne M. Duke
Auburn University

Recommended Citation

Duke, A. M. (2020). Collaboratively Writing Extension Publications for the Public. *The Journal of Extension, 58*(5), Article 9. https://doi.org/10.34068/joe.58.05.09

Journal of Extension
www.joe.org

October 2020
Volume 58
Number 5
Article #v58-5tt6
Tools of the Trade

Collaboratively Writing Extension Publications for the Public

Abstract
This article describes how to collaboratively write Extension publications for the public. The seven-step process that is outlined provides structure and accountability for completing writing projects that involve multiple authors and facilitates the dissemination of electronic or print materials in a timely manner.

Keywords: collaborative writing, Extension scholarship, writing process

Adrienne M. Duke
Associate
Professor/Extension
Specialist
Auburn University

Introduction

Extension professionals are constantly attempting to manage demands of different strands of their work and supply written content for various audiences (Adams et al., 2005; Llewellyn, 2013). Producing written material, such as fact sheets, technical pieces, and online content, is fundamental for many Extension professionals as an accompaniment or alternative to providing direct programming. To ease the workload, it is helpful to write in teams (Teuteberg et al., 2016). While writing with others can pose challenges, having a structured process with assigned roles, responsibilities, and deadlines can mitigate some common issues. I have written several fact sheets, publications, and online pieces with Extension colleagues and students. This article outlines a seven-step process I use to make writing collaboratively more enjoyable and to ensure accountability across all authors.

Seven-Step Collaborative Writing Process

Step 1: Select a Topic, Define Roles, and Create an Outline

A group interested in collaborating on a writing project should meet face-to-face or through videoconferencing to launch the project. The three most important subjects to discuss are topic of the publication, target audience, and method for distributing the document once it is complete. Identifying the distribution method at the onset is important because doing so determines whether the group is writing a document that will be posted online, picked up at an event (e.g., a health fair), or made available immediately following a program. The discussion also should include identification of a lead author who will manage the writing process, make edits, assign sections to other authors, and keep the writing project moving forward. After these decisions are made, the lead author facilitates creation of an outline that will inform the requisite literature search. Each person is assigned a section of the outline for which they will be responsible throughout the process. Beginning with the outline, it is important to use a collaborative document tool (e.g., Google Docs, Dropbox) for the project. Collaborative document tools are ideal because they allow multiple people to view, edit, and work on the same document simultaneously without needing to send multiple email attachments.

Step 2: Gather Information

Each person on the writing team should search for the most recent research reports, information on practices, and/or laws or policy statements related to their section using Google Scholar or university library resources. Resources to search include research articles from recent peer-reviewed journals, websites of government entities (e.g., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Food and Drug Administration), and content from field-specific national organizations. Currency is key during this step. Although finding the date on research articles is easy, finding a date of publication for website content can be trickier. In general, the currency of a website page is reflected in the "last updated date" typically shown at the bottom of the page. Each person should copy all the information from a relevant article/website and paste it in their assigned section in the shared document. An important task at this stage is to link the copied/pasted information to the original article/website. The link, not just the citation, should be added as a comment beside the text. Applying this approach allows group members to return to the site during subsequent steps to ensure that no plagiarism exists. Overall, the goal of Step 2 is for each author to ensure that all relevant information is included under their assigned subheading in the outline. Information saturation is more important than length; decisions about what will be deleted occur during Steps 3 and 4.

Step 3: Organize/Sort/Conduct First-Round Editing

During a team meeting, the team should discuss what has been written, which sections should stay, and which sections should be deleted. Sections may need to be deleted because of a lack of information from the literature, redundancy, or other issues. It is important that the actions for this step occur in the shared document so that everyone can see what is being removed. At this meeting, team members are assigned to summarize, synthesize, and edit their respective sections of the shared document, and the lead author establishes a deadline for completion of this work to keep the writing process moving forward.

Step 4: Edit

After team members have edited their respective sections, the lead author completes a second round of edits across the entire document. Depending on the publication medium, transitioning some of the text to bullet points may be needed. The lead author also should check for plagiarism and adjust the reading level as applicable. Software such as Readable (https://readable.com/) or Grammarly (https://www.grammarly.com/) can be used to ensure that the text will be easily understood by the target audience. The lead author should complete this task in accordance with an established deadline.

Step 5: Select Images

While the lead author is editing, the other authors should look for images that correspond to their previously assigned sections. Each author should choose at least two images so that an adequate selection exists during the final review meeting. Images should illustrate concepts, represent diversity, and be representative of the population the document will target. Often an institution has a subscription that can be used to purchase photos (e.g., Istock). If that is not the case, team members can use Creative Commons (https://creativecommons.org/) to find free images that do not violate copyright laws. Again, the lead author should establish a deadline for this step to keep the writing process moving forward.

Step 6: Conduct a Final Review

The group should meet again to decide which images to include in the publication and to make final review assignments. Each person should review the final draft of the publication and make any edits needed before final submission. The lead author should establish a deadline for this step as well.

Step 7: Submit

After the final edits have been made to the draft, the document is complete and should be submitted by the lead author.

Conclusion

Writing is a professional development experience that is important for Extension professionals. It deepens and expands content knowledge about a topic and thus can enhance teaching and program implementation. Although writing projects can feel daunting, a structured collaborative approach to writing can foster a supportive process that helps organize thoughts and ideas and brings projects to completion.

Author Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Adrienne M. Duke. Email: amd0046@auburn.edu

References

Adams, R. G., Harrell, R. M., Maddy, D. J., & Weigel, D. (2005). A diversified portfolio of scholarship: The making of a successful Extension educator. *Journal of Extension*, *43*(4), Article 4COM2. http://www.joe.org/joe/2005august/comm2.php

Llewellyn, D. A. (2013). Finding first-year success in Extension: Navigating stakeholder needs and institutional expectations. *Journal of Human Sciences and Extension*, *1*(1), 115–124.

Teuteberg, D., Martinez, A. D., Crawford, J., Hrncirik, L., Overath, R., & Betz, D. L. (2016). Collaborative writing as a scholarship activity: A framework for Extension faculty. *Journal of Extension*, *54*(6), Article v54-6iw3. https://www.joe.org/joe/2016december/iw3.php