Chapter 1
Principles for Exploring Virtual Collaborative Writing

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ABSTRACT
This chapter defines collaboration in some of its many variations and settings, and then it locates collaboration in the virtual world of contemporary writers connected through digital technology. In this way, it offers a snapshot of the kinds of collaboration about which this book’s writers write in Sections 2 – 7, while it also uses that collaboration in its own development. In other words, the understandings reflected in this chapter are the product of intense collaboration among this book’s writers, who have brought to it their own expertise in this subject matter. This chapter addresses (1) the literature of collaboration and collaborative writing in general, (2) the move from traditional collaborative writing efforts into that of virtual collaborative writing, and (3) six principles inherent to virtual collaborative writing. Taken together, they help us to develop the definitions on which we have based this book’s approaches to virtual collaborative writing.

INTRODUCTION
Collaboration is a slippery concept. Ask ten people what it is, and ten different definitions will emerge. Ask ten people to collaborate on a writing project, and the result often will be like herding cats or lassoing fish. People tend to have strong feelings about their writing, and while they may claim to want to collaborate, they can hold onto their own words with a tight fist, fighting valiantly to save them from a subject matter expert’s (SME) correction, an editor’s cut, or a colleague’s revision. Yet collaborate they must. The world of workplace writing—whether corporate, academic, government, public, or private—increasingly calls for collaboration among writers to develop and produce complex documents and to do so efficiently and
effectively. Information products have changed as single sourcing and metadata (labels assigned to content) lead to content reuse in multiple—often unforeseen—ways. That is, writers may use metadata to search for content in a database and locate material that they can reuse, even though it was never written to be included in a particular information product. But it can be included because the content relates to a subject or product discussed elsewhere. The paradigm of the single owner of a document necessarily is giving way to writing content chunks or information that will be reused in various documents and distributed in multiple settings.

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COLLABORATION AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

Why Review the Literature Anyway?

Consider the expression “Why do I need road signs? I know where I’m going.” Familiarity with anything at the local level—whether it is navigating a map, making a phone call, or planting a garden—is relatively unambiguous. However, venture out into a new place or area of knowledge, and what made sense before can seem foreign or more difficult to contextualize. The same is true when thinking about collaborative writing in terms of the ways it can be defined and the many terms that are associated with it. Within the context of a writing team, collaboration may mean one thing; in another context, it can take on a very different meaning. For example, one of the writers conducted an informal poll of some technical writers, which revealed diverse approaches to collaboration, with some focused on interactions related to the planning and review phases of writing, others focused on interactions relative to the roles writers perform, and still others focused on when to interact and when to work independently to ensure productivity. In the context of this book project, academics and industry professionals had difficulty reaching agreement on the nature of collaboration, cooperation, communication, teams, content, information, and virtual tools. At times, the difficulty defining terms seemed to be a dividing line between theory and practice. That is, how we understand a term relates to a set of values, whether it be valuing a theoretical construct—“art for art’s sake”—or valuing the meaning of a term because of its applicability to ensure productivity and quality in a particular work setting.

Given the wide variability in the way different groups approach terminology, it is important to arrive at least at a provisional understanding of the concepts invoked throughout this text to achieve some degree of consensus on the terminology. How, then, can the key concepts be understood as if everyone were all viewing them at the local level? This chapter attempts to achieve a common view of the many dimensions of virtual collaborative writing by reviewing literature that establishes definitions and explanations of key terms. Lowry, Curtis, and Lowry (2004) highlighted the importance of arriving at a standard language:

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