



Two coauthors review and discuss development of the article they are preparing for submission to a military-oriented publication. (AI image by Michael Lopez, *Military Review*)

Writing Is a Team Sport

How to Find and Write with a Coauthor

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Writing is rarely a solitary venture. While there are formal and informal means of building support networks to receive

feedback throughout the writing process, coauthoring is a great way to reduce unease and distribute the workload. Still, before you randomly ask your office mates

to embark on a writing journey or agree to contribute to someone else's project, read this how-to guide on coauthoring an article to avoid some of the common shortfalls. Cowriting has its fair share of challenges that authors must account for to succeed, from coordinating writing schedules to avoiding reader confusion from multiple voices or styles (more on that later).

This guide shares hard-earned lessons based on our personal experiences as coauthors on numerous articles, many of which were published and many that crashed and burned. Through anecdotes and a review of different tried-and-true methods for coauthoring, this piece aims to steer both aspiring and experienced authors through the writing process from start to finish. Read on to learn how to select the perfect partner, establish a writing plan, mentor through coauthoring, and navigate the inherent difficulties of composing an article with multiple contributors.

A Note on Coauthoring

Statistically speaking, you will likely find yourself coauthoring a piece. About one-quarter of military-authored articles (113/450) were coauthored across *Armor*, *Engineer*, *Fires/Field Artillery*, *Infantry*, *Military Review*, the Modern War Institute, *Parameters*, and War on the Rocks between November 2021 and April 2023.¹ Coauthorship was most common in branch magazines, with 64 coauthored pieces and 107 single authored pieces (37 percent) in that period.² *Military Review* and *Parameters* pieces were just behind with 23 percent, and 16 percent of online pieces by military writers in Modern War Institute and War on the Rocks were coauthored.³

So why did I just bombard you with a bunch of data? Because, when struck by a great idea, many military authors' first step is finding the perfect partner.

The Perfect Partnership

Finding a suitable coauthor is a challenge. Writing will test your relationship early and often as priorities shift and inevitable creative differences arise. So, how do you find a partner who will elevate the project and see it through to the end?

The best approach to developing an effective union is to frame it as a team effort early: you are not looking for someone's help with *your* project, but a teammate to develop your project *together*. While a late addition

to an already-drafted article isn't unheard of, the ideal time to find the perfect partner is in the brainstorming or outlining stage of the writing process. The earlier you find a potential writing partner, the better. Optimally, you and your coauthor develop the idea together.

I (BD) luckily experienced such a scenario while at the School of Advanced Military Studies. After class one day, a classmate and I discussed the failings of the Army's body composition program. We violently agreed on most points, and the decision to capture our argument in a short article together just made sense.⁴ Sometimes, the willingness to voice your thoughts and engage with others is enough to attract an interested coauthor. Other times, a more deliberate effort is required. So, don't be afraid to discuss your idea with those around you while you are in your brainstorming stage.

Rebecca Segal's article in this compilation, "A Writer's Guide to Giving and Receiving Feedback," outlines the value of discussion in solidifying an initial argument.⁵ These conversations serve as an excellent venue for soliciting coauthors, as in the case of my after-class-chat-turned-paper. There is ample room for exploration and discovery at this stage in the writing journey.

Simply discussing your idea with peers, bosses, and subject-matter experts helps you flesh out your own thoughts and affords you the opportunity to hear additional perspectives that add value to your argument. Still, before propositioning someone to write your article with you just because they are enthusiastic about the idea, ensure you understand the nature of the contributions you are looking for. At the end of the day, you already have the initial inspiration; the coauthor should either make the process easier or strengthen the final product. Sometimes,

they do both.

Ask yourself what you need in a

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coauthor. Do you need help writing? Do you need more expertise on the topic? Would rank or experience in a unique position add credibility to your argument? Does author diversity change the narrative of your argument or address potential bias? Identifying your gap allows you to find the right person to fill it. If a prospective writing partner brings value to your efforts, then ask for help. However, before diving into

screen might tax the relationship, software that allows all authors to access and edit the document simultaneously has made this a more feasible writing plan as authors can collaborate in real-time despite geographical dispersion. In fact, the authors of “Building and Running an Online Forum” leveraged this method.⁷

However, concurrent editing has drawbacks, particularly when authors are emotionally invested in their

“ If you plan to sit in a room together and write, you may be disappointed with how little gets accomplished as you work through each sentence. ”

the writing process, make sure all authors agree on a writing plan.

The Writing Plan: Methods to Avoid the Madness

So, you found a partner or two and are excited to start writing. Wait to start. The next step is the most crucial part of coauthoring. While all the other aspects of writing an article still apply (see Theo Lipsky’s article for a detailed how-to guide), you must first figure out how to distribute the work among the authors.⁶ This guide offers four approaches based on our experience, most of which were leveraged to write the coauthored pieces in this compilation (see the table). These methods are not the only approaches, nor are they mutually exclusive of each other (especially as hurdles arise). Oftentimes, the best approach to a writing plan is a conglomeration of two or more of these methods.

Joint adventure. Equal partners writing the article together; this is the likely going-in assumption for first-time coauthors. How else could it be? Yet, this plan is the most difficult to accomplish. Sitting down and writing the article *together* is more challenging than it sounds. Drafting can be a long process. If you plan to sit in a room together and write, you may be disappointed with how little gets accomplished as you work through each sentence.

Still, it can be done, especially with modern technology. While sitting in a cubicle taking turns on a single

writing. Losing work because someone typed over or deleted your contribution can be frustrating, especially among equals. A joint adventure, though possible, is often easier in theory than in reality. If you do select this as your primary writing plan, be cautious that the process does not create more conflict than cohesion between you and your coauthor.

Back and forth. Authors often defer to this method upon abandoning the joint adventure. Instead of working simultaneously, the back-and-forth method works sequentially with a single author owning the draft for a short period, then sending the draft to their partner. The partner picks up the draft, reviews and edits what was written so far, and adds new content to extend the piece in length. This gradual chunking method allows each author to step back from the project, then forces them to reengage on the topic by reading an updated version and diving back in.

The back-and-forth method works best when each author can dedicate time to the piece in short bursts but can’t prioritize it for a long period. Like the first method, it also relies on some trust in the relationship, as each person is free to edit the other’s work. This requires ample coordination as each author strives to build on the other’s work while maintaining a shared vision. This is how the “PME to Publication” guide was written: the authors agreed upon an overall intent, specific outline, and frequently communicated via phone calls during the transitions.⁸

Table. Tried-and-True Writing Methods for Coauthoring

Tried-and-True Writing Methods for Coauthoring	
Joint Adventure	Written together as equal partners; simultaneous efforts on the same product
Back and Forth	Written together as equal partners; sequential efforts and shared drafts
Divide and Conquer	Each author assigned respective sections of an article that are combined when complete
Lead Author	Individual author owns the draft and manages the roles of other authors

(Table by authors)

However, do not fear potential lost work, as earlier drafts provide backups, and the authors can utilize the “track changes” tool during drafting and editing. Still, these first two methods will test the coauthor relationship and may unnecessarily complicate the draft if the writing styles don’t blend well together.

Divide and conquer. The most straightforward writing method is to select who writes each section and then consolidate at the end. From personal experience, this is the most common approach to coauthoring, especially with more than two authors. In this method, the workload is divided up front and the expectations are clear. We crafted the piece you are reading now this way. It is quick and easy to coordinate. This simple approach affords authors a lot of independence within their assigned sections and is seemingly easier than the previous two methods, but it is not without faults.

Because each section is written separately, the collective product might lack cohesion or a common voice. This creates additional work at the end of the process to ensure that each portion of the article is written in a similar style and that the sections build on each other with logical transitions. When the reader can clearly identify the shift from one author to another within the piece, the effectiveness of the overall argument may be diminished.

Accomplishing these final touch-ups to develop a cohesive paper often requires a single author to take the lead. If this is your preferred writing method, there are two ways that you might choose to mitigate this challenge. First, you can designate your lead editor up front and establish that they will be responsible for final polishing. Second, you can incorporate the back-and-forth method in the editing process. This allows you to weave each author’s voice throughout the piece and reduce sudden shifts in writing style.

Lead author. Sometimes, the writing relationship is not equal. This can be the result of varied experience, writing capabilities, knowledge of the subject, or simply time available to commit. When this is the case, having a lead author manage the project is a viable writing plan. The lead author will have a heavier workload, but the piece will more easily be converted to a singular voice and timeline hold-up frustrations are reduced. The other authors will contribute to specific sections, serve as an editor, or provide the topic expertise.

But at the end of the day, the lead author controls the draft, and depending on the relationship imbalance, may drive other aspects like deciding the venue, conducting the security review, and working with the editor. Of note, the lead does not necessarily have to be the highest ranking in the group. Usually, it is who is most capable of seeing the piece to completion. The lead author method works well as a mentorship tool for developing subordinates and is a common practice for helping someone with their first publication.

Coauthoring as Mentorship

While most of this compilation focuses on aspiring writers, the vital role of experienced writers in developing the next batch of authors must be addressed. Seasoned authors can provide the requisite mentorship to enable new authors to successfully enter the writing space or grant more opportunities to those with limited experience. The mentor can offer expertise in content development and drafting, assist in navigating the submission and editing processes, and open additional venue options by virtue of their established credibility.

Shortly after completing my (LF) undergraduate education, one of my professors approached me about a writing project. Rather than allow my academic

interests to dissipate as I began my military career (or have them relegated to conversation alone), he encouraged me to coauthor with him. His mentorship and guidance allowed me to channel my passions, leverage my research, and develop my writing skills to pursue a tangible goal. He taught me how to write for publication (as opposed to a grade) and select an appropriate venue for submission.

The work was published in a peer-reviewed journal nearly a year after our initial discussions.⁹ My coauthor's mentorship served as my gateway to the world of professional writing. Transitioning from the school project to professional article mindset can be challenging; a mentor's tutelage can help you successfully take the leap.

Experienced writers should seek opportunities to take someone under their wing. Coauthoring through mentorship is an occasion to teach, develop professional relationships, and catalyze a mentee's publication experience. The more ideas are shared, the better our institution will become.

Writing plan development should be deliberate, and coauthors should select the methods that best suit their circumstances. However, as the common Army adage goes, "No plan survives first contact." Sometimes, even the best intentions and well-devised approaches fail or generate frustration. Not all partnerships will be success stories.

A Cautionary Tale

Coauthorship can be great, but the process is not always smooth sailing. In fact, sometimes it's downright difficult. As in any collaborative effort, disagreements are sure to arise. Though you might have agreed upon a position at the outset, perhaps new information based on research creates a difference of opinion. Though a good coauthor might play "devil's advocate" occasionally to strengthen your collective ideas, fundamental disagreement over principle is one potential barrier in the coauthorship process. If this issue arises, it might be best to part ways and take your respective ideas to new projects or hold onto them for a later opportunity. Publication is a new level of commitment to an idea: once the work is out there with your name on it, it will always be attributed to you. Thus, publishing an idea you do not 100 percent support is daunting and, frankly, unadvisable.

A second challenge to coauthorship is the classic group project frustration (think back to grade school). Particularly when it comes to writing as a hobby—rather than a profession—the workload might not always be evenly distributed. As an Army officer or professional in any field, life tends to get in the way. A solo author can shift their timeline without disturbing a partner, but a coauthor is not afforded such luxury.

To mitigate this challenge, coauthors should transparently discuss their conflicting obligations and other time commitments upfront and break down the workload respectively. This is also an opportune moment to identify strengths, weaknesses, and relevant experiences. The split is not always (often not) fifty-fifty, but it is better to manage that expectation up front and approach the project realistically. These conversations are paramount to selecting the best writing plan.

Of note, writing always requires discipline, commitment, and sacrifice. It is not easy to sit down to research, write, or edit after returning from a long workday or a field exercise. Though a beer with friends is often an admittedly tempting prospect, sometimes a constrained timeline requires an author to devote the time to their paper instead. This is particularly true of coauthorship; when another person depends on your contributions, the required sacrifices may feel more apparent.

A third challenge is voice. While it was already discussed briefly above, it is worth reiterating. Creating a singular voice is necessary yet challenging, particularly if the authors have drastically different writing abilities. No matter how logical your argument is, if the writing feels disjointed or distracts the reader, your article will not garner the attention it deserves.

Achieving a singular voice includes obvious efforts to create a similar tone throughout the piece: adjusting word choice, reworking sentence structure, and focusing on transition sentences or paragraphs between author sections.

There are also less evident hiccups that you might not expect when creating a singular voice. In our (recent) experience, sharing anecdotes in the first person became a potentially confusing endeavor with more than one author. This article has three different personal stories. Without the individual author's initials at the onset of each vignette, would you be able to identify which anecdote belonged to which author?

When we initially approached the multiple authors/storytelling dilemma, we decided to emphasize readability by letting the author tell the story in the first person with corresponding endnotes to refer the reader to the respective author and article. We thought it worked well; our first reviewer didn't. To add clarity, we reduced the number of anecdotes altogether and included the author's initials where appropriate. Even with experience (and this handy how-to guide), there will inevitably be obstacles for you and your coauthors to tackle as a team.

The final challenge of coauthorship deals with circumstances beyond the control of either party. Sometimes, things just don't work out.

I (LF ... see what we're doing here?) recently coauthored a piece with a friend who was required to remove his name from our byline due to organizational constraints. I worked well with my coauthor throughout the writing process and did not experience any of the challenges described above: we agreed upon and strongly believed in our ideas, managed the workload equally in accordance with our initial writing plan, and integrated our contributions well into a singular voice.

Yet, his chain of command advised him against publication in the final weeks. Shocked, I offered to scrap the project entirely and walk away with the fulfillment of simply expressing our ideas on paper, writing to learn. In the spirit of professional discourse and sharing our thoughts, he encouraged me to publish individually,

removing himself from the byline. Our work was successful in reaching a widespread audience and initiating discussion, and we were able to retroactively add his name back to the byline after publication. I am grateful to have selected a supportive, humble coauthor committed to sharing his ideas even if he did not believe he would receive credit.¹⁰

Conclusion

Though both internal and external factors can affect successful coauthorship, do not shy away from seeking a writing partner. If you are just starting out, look for a partner and share the burden. Understand what you're missing and find the perfect partner that brings value to your project or the writing process. Discuss writing plans and deal with potential friction points like expectations and timelines upfront. If all parties are inexperienced as coauthors, your best bet is to divide and conquer, taking care of individual sections first and working on blending at the end. This way, everyone knows their responsibilities.

If you are an experienced author, step up as a mentor and help introduce new voices to the conversation. Serve as a lead author to introduce others to the conversation. Ultimately, writing is a team sport: several collaborative minds are often far more capable than individual brainpower. The challenges can be overcome, but the advantages cannot be understated. We all benefit from an increased focus on professional discourse. ■

Notes

1. The data above was collected and shared by Zachary Griffiths, "Bring Back Branch Magazines," Modern War Institute, 27 April 2023, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/bring-back-branch-magazines/>.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Brennan Deveraux and Katie Haapala, "Who Cares If Soldiers Look Fat? Reimagining the Army's Body Composition Program," From the Green Notebook, 16 March 2022, <https://fromthegreennotebook.com/2022/03/16/who-cares-if-soldiers-look-fat-reimagining-the-armys-body-composition-program/>.

5. Rebecca Segal, "A Writer's Guide to Giving and Receiving Feedback," *Military Review* 104, no. SE-02 (2024): 94–99.

6. Theo Lipsky, "How to Write an Article," *Military Review* 104, no. SE-02 (2024): 27–34.

7. Erik Davis and Nick Frazier, "Building and Running an Online Forum," *Military Review* 104, no. SE-02 (2024): 65–69.

8. Brennan Deveraux and Gordan Richmond, "From PME to Publication," *Military Review* 104, no. SE-02 (2024): 43–50.

9. Max Margulies and Leah Foodman, "Suboptimal Selective Service: An Analysis of the Obstacles to Selective Service Reform in American Political Institutions," *Journal of Strategic Security* 14, no. 2 (2021): 74–88, <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.14.2.1903>.

10. Leah Foodman and Kevin Shinnick, "Be All We Can Be: Reclaiming the Army Identity," War Room, 21 March 2024, <https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/articles/all-we-can-be/>.