

Acceptable collaboration **Kristine Haugen**

In humanities research, we have a convention for single-authoring virtually all of our publications. In reality, though, we discuss our arguments and materials with colleagues all the time. This means that our single-author convention is just about as misleading as the mass-author approach of some scientific publications: a scientific paper with more than 100 “authors” is a paper that dilutes the very concept of authorship (at the same time as it leaves ultimate responsibility for the paper very hard to locate).

In your writing assignments for this class, you’re presenting yourself as the single author. So, if we apply the standards of humanities fields, we’ll be taking it for granted that in each case you likely have some uncredited collaborators. But how much similarity to others’ work is too much?

Most students intuitively follow the guidelines that also seem right to me. If a typical homework is about one page long double-spaced, this is a decent schematic showing what it probably contains.

Contents of a typical homework, in order:

- Basic argument or point of view, stated briefly

- Example #A
 - Your explanation of Example #A

- Example #B
 - Your explanation of Example #B

The most that it’s reasonable to share very closely with someone else’s assignment is **two elements out of these five**.

So, you might choose **two examples** that several other people also chose. (Often, a number of students will write papers that use identical examples, which makes it obvious that these people had conversations about the assignment. This is fine, but then the individuals need to present arguments and explanations that are clearly their own.)

You might choose **one example plus its explanation** that at least one other person also chose as a set. Again, it’s pretty obvious when this happens, and as long as the rest of the two assignments are independent, it’s not a problem.

Or you might use words and ideas in your **main argument** that are closely similar to someone else’s, and in that case, you should use **at most one other element** shared with someone else. Maybe both of you think one particular example is great; maybe each of you draws a very similar explanation out of examples that are unique to you.

Two concrete **examples** of acceptable similarity are on the other side of this page.

Paper #1:

- Marvell’s “Horatian Ode” grudgingly admires Cromwell.
- “How good he is, how just” (line 79)
- Even Cromwell’s defeated victims openly admit this
- “’Tis madness to resist or blame / The force of angry heaven’s flame” (lines 25-26)
- Not only is it suggested Cromwell’s success was really owed to heaven, these lines may also be mocking his Puritanism.

Paper #2:

- The “Horatian Ode” admires Cromwell with reservations.
- “Where greater spirits come” (line 44)
- Cromwell indubitably deserved to win and is simply better than others
- “How good he is, how just” (line 79)
- This sarcasm – for it’s inconceivable the defeated Irish really think this – suggests that some praise of Cromwell is coerced or fake.

Paper #3:

- The “Horatian Ode” strenuously denies Cromwell credit for his successes.
- “’Tis madness to resist or blame / The force of angry heaven’s flame” (lines 25-26)
- Here, Cromwell’s success comes solely from God; he lacks the moral standing even to deserve “blame”
- “When the falcon high / Falls heavy from the sky” (lines 91-92)
- Cromwell is turned into an animal whose actions are virtually automatic, and it’s no coincidence that he’s being imagined here in free fall.

Both Paper #2 and Paper #3 are acceptably close to Paper #1, but it’s good that they’re not closer. In each case, you can pretty easily figure out which two elements are shared.

Gray areas where you really shouldn’t go:

- It appears that you may have taken two elements from one collaborator *and* one or two from somebody else. This is too much.
- It appears that you didn’t do the class reading, you looked at someone else’s assignment, you rewrote the first sentence or two of their assignment, and then, with the aim of avoiding plagiarism, you deliberately launched off onto a tangent so that the rest of your assignment is not the same as the other person’s. The reason this doesn’t fly is that your actual borrowing from this person is not in the neighborhood of 20% or 30%. If we count only the things you said that made any sense, the other person supplied 100%.

Basic advice:

If you’ve seriously underprepared in one particular week, your best strategy is to spend some small amount of time with the reading, write a short homework that is really your own, and mention in the course of the homework that “I could only spend a short time reading, but my first impressions are...” Just suck it up and pass the assignment with a mediocre grade. The reason: if you have a poor grasp of the material itself, looking at other people’s assignments will lead you almost inevitably to borrow too much.

(cont.)

If someone asks you for a lot of help, it's your call how much to give. But don't worry seriously that you will get busted instead of them. When two assignments are closely similar, it's typically very, very clear who first thought the material up. What the other person should do, if you tell them in detail what you wrote, is to recognize that you've staked your claim and they simply can't use all of the same stuff.

Don't attempt to footnote or cite people you spoke with. It's virtually impossible. In humanities publication, we give a cite for a particular point only in the case of a very famous person or a person we don't know well – in short, someone we don't generally collaborate with at all. Instead, at the beginning of a book or an article, we simply list the people we habitually talked with. You don't need to do this, because I know who your classmates are.

The take-home point:

Voluntary collaboration is great. At Caltech, you're especially lucky in that you have smart classmates it's worthwhile talking to. In written assignments, when you've learned from others, make sure the reader can see that you only got a jump start, not a life preserver.