

# Using Google Docs as a Collaboration Tool

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Most people know Google because of its search engine tool; however, it offers an equally impressive set of tools that allow the user to “create, share, and edit” documents. Google Docs offers a suite of web-based applications that allow for the creation of documents, spreadsheets, forms, drawings, and presentations. In this column I will address how Google Docs can be used as a collaborative tool for teaching, learning, and productivity.

## The Problem

A faculty member develops a term project in which he requires the students to work collaboratively over an eight-week period. He requires each student to provide evidence of on-going contributions to the project. He relies on an honor system in which each student signs his/her name on the title page of the project. In recent teaching evaluations, he received feedback that the honor system is ineffective and unfair to the students who did the majority of the work on the term project. The faculty member seeks a solution to effectively monitor each student's level of participation on the term project.

## Getting Started with Google Docs

In order to use the collaborative features of Google Docs, each user must have a Google Account. While I highly recommend creating a Google Mail (Gmail) account to use for your Google Account login, you do not have to have a Gmail account to use Google Docs. To create an account and author your first Google Doc, follow this step-by-step process:

- ▶ Direct your browser to [www.google.com/docs](http://www.google.com/docs). You will be prompted to enter your Google Account login information or create a Google account. If you already have a Gmail account and want to use it for Google Docs, enter your Gmail email

address and password in the Sign-in field. If you do not have a Gmail account or want to use a different email address for your Google Account, click on the “Create an account” link.

When determining whether or not you want to use your main email address for your Google Account, keep the following in mind: 1) Google will send you an email each time a document is shared with you; 2) emails from collaborators on the Google Doc will be sent to the email address associated with your Google Account; 3) there is a chance your main email address, especially if it is associated with a K-12 or University, may tag emails originating out of Google Docs as spam.

- ▶ **Create New document.** Google Docs allows you to create a document, presentation, spreadsheet, form or drawing. After you choose your new document type, name the document by clicking inside of the box that reads “Untitled document” (See Figure 1)
- ▶ **Add content.** Enter content into the Google Doc in the same manner as if you were using any other word processing program. Use the Google Doc tool bars to format your content. Many of the more popular formatting tools (e.g. Bold, Align, Header, Tables) are easily accessible via the toolbar.
- ▶ **Share your document.** After you create your Google Doc, click on the “Share” button in the top right hand corner. Click on “Invite people.” You are allowed to enter any email address. If the purpose of sharing the document is for collaboration, be sure to select “To edit” below the box where you enter the email addresses. Each person who collaborates with you on the document must have a Google Account. (See Figure 2)

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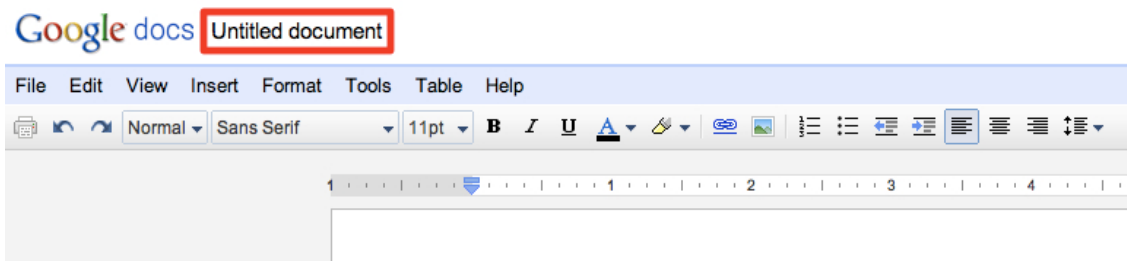


Figure 1. Naming your Google Doc

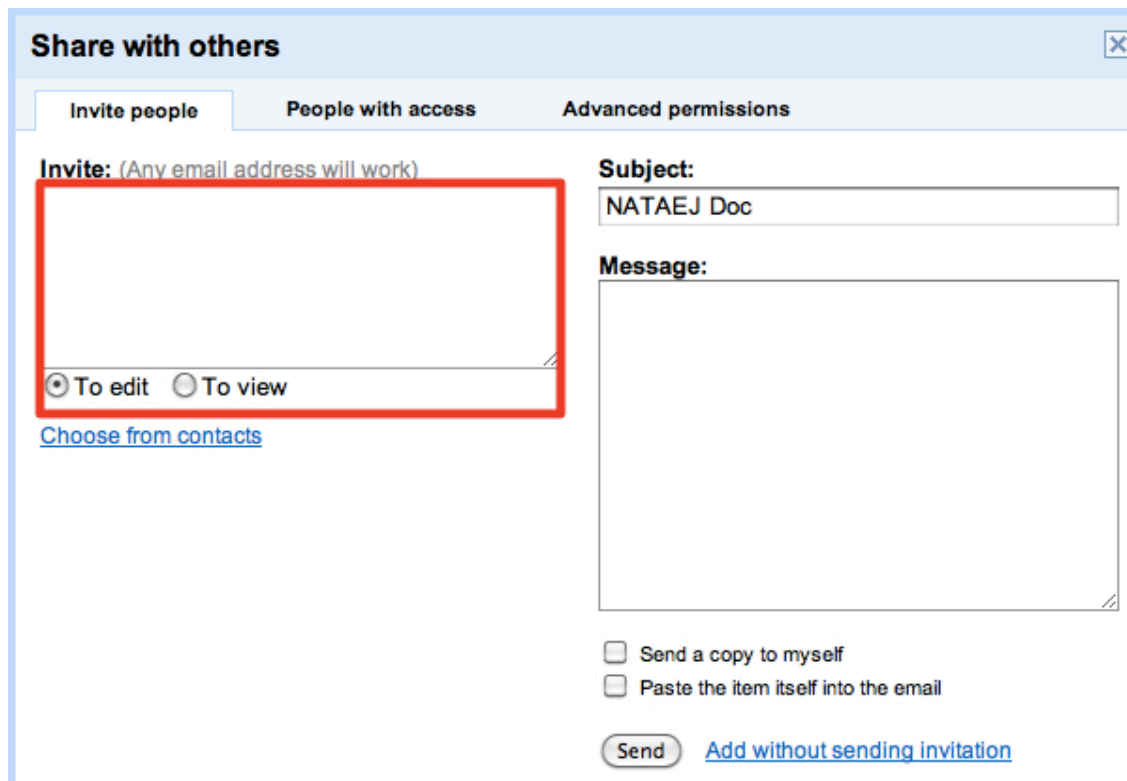


Figure 2. Sharing your Google Doc

### Monitoring participation in Google Docs

Google Docs tracks all changes made to the document. You can either view the changes within the body of the document or view a list of the compiled changes to the document. Figure 3 is an example of in-text changes. Figure 4 illustrates the compiled list of changes to the document. In order to access a list of changes to the document, click on "See Revision History". Note that the email address of the person making the change and date are listed. At anytime during your review of the document, you can revert back to a previous version of a document by clicking on the hyper-linked revision number.

### Best Practices for Using Google Docs for Collaborative Projects

The following best practices should be taken into consideration when using Google Docs for collaborative purposes.

1. Require each student to create a Gmail account that includes some rendition of his or her first and last name (e.g. ronald1906wagner). This will make it easier for you to decipher which student made the edits to the documents.
2. Be sure to require the student to add your email address to the list of collaborators. This will allow you to monitor collaborative activity.
3. Require the students to use a pre-determined file name convention. For example: CoursePrefix\_CourseNumber\_FinalProject\_WagnerRonald. This will make it much easier for you to sort your documents. I typically create a folder for each class and move the documents to the correct folder as they are shared with me.

5. Cohen SM, Rousseau ME, Carey BL. Can acupuncture ease the symptoms of menopause? *Holistic Nurs Pract.* Nov-Dec 2003; 17(6): 295-9

This research study is different from the others in that it focuses on acupuncture only. It is designed to explore the efficacy of acupuncture treatment (a holistic therapy) for menopausal symptom management. The study is similar to many others in its management. This was a small scale, randomized trial to examine the effect of acupuncture on hot flashes, sleep disturbances, and mood changes on the severity of symptoms. The main audience for this study was the holistic nurse practitioner. The researchers used a convenience sample. The experimental acupuncture treatment consisted of specific acupuncture body points related to menopausal symptoms designated as a general tonic specifically designed to benefit the flow of Chi (energy). Acupuncture using menopausal symptom-specific sites was used for treatment and the month following treatment. Both sleep disturbances and mood changes decreased in severity over the treatment phase of the study. The School of Nursing provided the grant to support the research.

Figure 3. In-text changes to Google Docs

<a href="#">← Back to editing</a> <span style="float: right;">Compare Checked</span>		
Revision	Last Edited	Changes
<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Revision 31</a>	5 months ago by	<i>no text added</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Revision 30</a>	5 months ago by	7 Only because it is not complete. Once the paper is complete I a
<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Revision 28</a>	5 months ago by	Organization - Layout of paper is functional - Flows smoothly - Tra
<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Revision 24</a>	5 months ago by	background of the authors is missing, not sure if this is a complet
<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Revision 14</a>	5 months ago by	Peer Review Summary Criteria Score 0-10 (0=po
<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Revision 4</a>	5 months ago by	<i>no text added</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Revision 3</a>	5 months ago by	<i>no text added</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Revision 2</a>	5 months ago by	Semester Project Fall 2009 The Benefits of Exerc

Figure 4. List of changes to Google Docs

- Post your grading rubric in each student's document. You can make edits and fill in your rubric during the grading period. The students can access your comments through Google Docs.
- Encourage your students to back up their documents by downloading a copy of the document each time they make edits. It is also a good idea to create the document using a word processing program and upload it to Google Docs as a new document.

### Overall Impressions

There are many implications for Google Docs, including but not limited to, peer review, group projects, research paper collaborations, evaluation forms, meeting minutes, storyboarding,

wire framing, etc. Personally, Google Docs has transformed my classroom. I am able to assign peer review assignments with ease. Google Docs is a reliable tool that is free, intuitive, and accessible to anyone who has a computer. As with any computer application, there is always a chance of malfunctions, lost work, power outages, etc. however, the benefits outweigh the risks. By following the best practices outlined above you will be well on your way to assigning group projects with ease.

Essentially, Google Docs is a wiki. If you are familiar with wikis, you can apply these same principles. The following are two that I recommend:

- ▶ Wikispaces – [www.wikispaces.com](http://www.wikispaces.com)
- ▶ Wikidot – [www.wikidot.com](http://www.wikidot.com)