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On Writing With Others

By [JOHN KAAG](#)



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Sometimes I need some guarantee that another human being will actually read this little thing I'm spending far too much of my life creating. The silent covenant that I make with myself before writing anything — namely that I promise not to destroy it in the end — is simply not enough to prevent self-sabotage. On these occasions, the loneliness of being a professional philosopher is more intolerable than usual. This is why I frequently write with others.

I become a co-author because I can't stand writing by myself.

Margaret Atwood has said, "Perhaps I write for no one. Perhaps for the same person children are writing for, when they scrawl their names in the snow." Perhaps she's just wrong about this. Many children may scrawl their names in snow — and in sand, on dirty windows, [bathroom stalls](#) and old desks — with the secret hope that someone will take note. At least some of these children go on to become academics whose feverish scrawling belies the fear that all of it will go unacknowledged. If they go into the humanities, as I did, this fear may never go away.

If I'm really honest, I'll acknowledge that it's this fear that drove me to do the unthinkable, at least for a philosopher. It drove me to write with others.



Tim Lahan

All writers write in response to others' writings. We write for communities, if only imagined ones. Sometimes we acknowledge this communal work and call it collaboration. But in the discipline of philosophy we call [it](#)

[professional](#) suicide. Little has changed since Aristophanes wrote “The Clouds”: real philosophers, the type that get tenure, are supposed to fly their intellectual balloons all by themselves. So I waited until I submitted my tenure packet, that six-inch monument to unknown genius. And then I started writing with others.

To be clear, it wasn’t easy. After all, I had to find someone who wanted to write with me. And then there was the small issue of my not playing particularly well with others. This isn’t exactly the same as disliking others, but I’d usually been the kid writing my name in the snow while everyone else went sledding. And this temperament becomes more entrenched when you’re taught that being friendly is a sign of being weak and that being understood is a sign of being simple-minded. Such are the norms of professional philosophy. But sometimes the risk of appearing weak and simple-minded is better than being solely responsible for one’s complete irrelevance. Of course, finding a co-author doesn’t necessarily mean that you won’t be irrelevant or that you will want to go sledding with everyone else.

Obviously, scholars working in the natural or social sciences will find all of this ridiculous, only slightly less ridiculous than the idea of not writing with others. They have, for centuries, collaborated in productive ways on the most relevant issues of their day. And so their disciplines, as a rule, are not on the verge of extinction. I’m not suggesting that co-writing in the humanities can save fields like philosophy from this fate — I suspect it will take more than this — only that writing with others might be a first [step](#) in writing for others.

At least it was for me. Finding co-authors, ones who insisted on my writing for them, was my first intimation of a world beyond what David Foster Wallace describes as each person’s “tiny skull-sized kingdom.”

Writing with others involved abnegating absolute power over the subjects of my little kingdom, a type of power that most “real” philosophers spend their lives attempting to maintain. The subjects in philosophy are precious scarce, and the intellectual realm painfully small, so being forced to give up my dominion over them initially struck me as a bit of a cosmic injustice. But in the end, my co-authors have helped me see that I was giving up next to nothing in sharing this so-called power.

So what is it, precisely, that a co-author gives you? Co-authors catch the things you can’t remove by yourself: your blind spots, your stylistic tics, your unfounded assumptions, your implicit biases, your inelegance, your vagueness. Your repetition. They give you the opportunity to bounce your half-baked ideas off another, and this sometimes results in the creation of something completely new, something that neither of you could have come up with on your own.

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If I were writing this particular piece with others, for example, they might insist that I say more about the virtues of academic collaboration. They might suggest that I use words like “synergy” and “interdisciplinarity” and “dialogue.” They might tell me that the allusion to “The Clouds” was oblique and assumed too much of my reader. Or that I was still coming across as mildly misanthropic. They might remind me that Louisa May Alcott envisioned a philosopher as “a man up in a balloon, with his family and friends pulling the ropes which confine him to earth and trying to haul him down.” And they might gently remind me that despite my best efforts to play with others that I was still up in my balloon — writing all by myself.

And if I were writing with others, I might just listen to them.

I am, for the time being, trying to follow Gertrude Stein in “writing for myself and for strangers.” As a philosopher I had grown very accustomed to writing for myself, by myself. I had also grown rather unhappy doing it. It was the “writing for strangers” part that only recently began to make sense. When you write your name in the snow, you may secretly hope that someone will take note. You may secretly hope that you are, in fact, writing for strangers. But usually you aren’t — because what you write on that snowy hill is usually

profoundly interesting to exactly one person. Now that I write with others, I take solace in the fact that at least one other reader might also be interested.



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