

Organization and Leadership

Though it may sound easier to keep things informal and just “go with the flow”, putting a clear structure in place gets the work done more efficiently, clarifies tasks and expectations and keeps disagreements to a minimum.

The keys to a successful group experience are organization and leadership. For each meeting you will need:

(1) A person to keep the meeting task-focused and on track. This can be the same chairperson each time if someone is willing, or you can take turns, but the person has to be comfortable stepping in when necessary, to keep the group on task.

(2) A person to take notes at each meeting. These needn't be lengthy or complicated – brief, point-form is fine - but make sure you always record any information about deadlines, the assignment of tasks and responsibilities, and any decisions taken. That way, there can be no misunderstanding or disagreement about who does what, or what was decided at the last meeting.

Make Differences Work for You

Not everyone has the same skills and strengths, so “fair and equal” doesn't always mean that each group member has to contribute equally to every task. The bonus of working in a group is that individual differences can complement one another and make for a better final product.

Deciding Who Does What

As part of your first meeting, ask everyone to identify their own work-related skills and strengths; likes and dislikes. Unless the professor or the task instructions say otherwise, it's OK to divide the work up in a way that maximizes individual skills and strengths, as long as everyone agrees the division of labour is fair. If there are jobs no one wants to do, then divide these up equally, so no one is stuck with all the dirty work.

Process Matters

With group work, process (how the work gets done) matters almost as much as content, because without an effective group process, the work needed to get a good grade on your group assignment may never get done. A little lead time spent sorting out group expectations and the process will lead to not just a better result for that completed assignment but a better experience for everyone.

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**MASTERING
GROUP ASSIGNMENTS**

Working in Groups

No matter what your major or course of study, you can be guaranteed that at some point in your university experience, you will be asked to do group presentations or assignments. Working collaboratively is an important skill sought by prospective employers – every field values “team players”. But what does that mean in the university setting? How can you be sure that you don’t end up with a group of slackers who expect you to do all the work – or a team of keeners who demand that you meet with them 24/7? Negotiating successful group work involves some challenges, but it’s definitely worth the effort.

Why Group Work?

Why are professors so keen on group work? If you’re a cynic, you may think they just want to cut down on the number of papers they have to grade, but there are lots of good reasons to assign group work. A group can explore a research question in greater depth than one person working alone, with each member taking responsibility for one component or subarea. Also, out there in the “real world”, no matter what the work setting, colleagues are often required to work collaboratively. So the sooner you learn how to do this effectively, the better.

Start With A Positive Attitude

Even if you’re not a big fan of group work, make the decision right now that you will approach all group assignments with a positive attitude. Remember: some of the best learning experiences at university aren’t just about the subject matter. Let go of negative expectations, and approach your group assignment as a valuable learning experience in itself.

Picking Your Group

Sometimes you don’t have a choice about who will be on your team, but when you do, what’s the best strategy for forming a group, or deciding which group you want to be on? First, it’s not usually a good idea to base study groups on friendship circles. Though it may feel more comfortable to work with people you already know and like, that isn’t always the best way to get the job done. Study/assignment groups need to be task-focused. You don’t want an entire 2-hour meeting taken up with discussing last night’s party, or your friend’s latest break-up drama. And you don’t want to worry about role conflict or the awkwardness of having to criticize a friend’s substandard work. Think about the task that needs to be done, and its component parts, then try to build/join a group of people with complementary skills and similar levels of commitment to the task. Above all, you want people who will pull their weight and motivate you to do your best. You also want to be sure your team mates are reliable and can be trusted to deliver their piece of the assignment on time.

Establishing Ground Rules

The best way to be sure that all members contribute their fair share to the end product, is to establish clear ground rules right from the beginning. Prevention is always easier than cleaning up a mess after the fact. It’s a great idea to draw up a contract, early on, which everyone signs. That way you’re all on the same page and if there’s a dispute later on, you can go back to the original terms which everyone agreed to.

The Contract

Start off on the right track by spending the first meeting creating a contract together, so everyone knows exactly how the project will proceed.

Your group contract should include:

- Contact information (email; phone) and scheduling availability for each person
- Outline of steps, with deadlines
- Duties and responsibilities of each member
- Times/locations of next meetings (plan ahead as much as you can)
- Contingency plans – how will the group decide when work is of acceptable quality and when it isn’t? How will you handle problems such as someone not delivering their piece of work when they’re supposed to?

It’s important to discuss these issues ahead of time, so everyone knows exactly what the group rules and expectations are.