

Working in groups

Throughout your life, both at university and work, you will be asked to work within a group or team. Some students feel intimidated by this and find the process difficult. This advice sheet provides some hints on making group work effective and less stressful.

What are the benefits of group work?

Courses include group work so that you can:

- share ideas and experience
- learn from and help each other
- find alternative ways of solving problems
- draw on everyone's strengths & experiences
- enhance the quality of output
- develop essential team working skills needed for use throughout your career.

What makes a group effective?

For group work to be effective you need to be able to understand how groups work; evaluate the skills, in other words the strengths and weaknesses of individuals and use this to the best advantage of the group; and be able to plan and manage tasks. These skills can be developed and enhanced through practice.

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Key stages of group work

1. Setting ground rules
2. Defining objectives
3. Establishing roles
4. Delegating the tasks
5. Plan of action with deadlines
5. Plan of action
6. Monitoring progress and completing the task.
7. Evaluating your performance.

Skills needed for effective group work

1. Communication
 - Discussion
 - Listening
 - Diplomacy
 - Body language
 - Dealing with feedback
 - Minute / note taking
2. Time management
 - Being on time for meetings
 - Setting realistic deadlines
 - Meeting task deadlines
3. Problem solving
 - Brainstorming
 - Mind maps
4. Reflection

Key stages of group work

1. Setting the ground rules

Any team needs to be guided by a common set of rules that are shared amongst and understood by those involved. This ensures that each of you knows what will be expected of you and how work will be divided, work supported and outcomes developed. For example:

This group will:

- draw on individual expertise
- encourage constructive debate by providing a supportive environment for discussion and feedback
- share work equally
- agree and adhere to deadlines
- attend meetings and turn up on time
- report back at regular meetings
- avoid discriminatory language/behaviour

Discuss your group's ground rules in light of the tasks that you have been set and make sure that each group member has a copy of these ground rules.

2. Identify your objectives and planning your tasks

Discuss what you wish to achieve at the beginning of the project to avoid any confusion. These can be divided into deliverable objectives and personal objectives.

Consider the groups deliverable objectives by answering the following questions:

- a) What does the group need to achieve?
 - What activity have you been set?
 - What is the brief?
- b) What is the projected outcome?
 - Presentation?
 - Report?
- c) What individual elements are involved?
 - How can the activity be divided into tasks?

Consider your personal objectives by answering the following questions:

- What skills can I learn from this activity?
- What subject understanding can I gain?
- How can I consolidate my learning?

Don't forget to discuss deliverable and personal outcomes at a group meeting to develop an overview of the whole project.

3. Establishing roles

In planning your group activities you should try to share responsibilities according to individual strengths. This isn't to say that you should always be doing the same activity, indeed this should be avoided, but individual temperaments are often more suited to one task than they might be to another.

Consider:

- Who is a strong team leader?
- Who is most suited to organising group meetings?
- Who produces good ideas?
- Who is careful and meticulous?
- Who is energetic and decisive?

You will also need to consider your weaknesses.

- Who can be over critical?
- Who is indecisive?
- Who is a bad time keeper?

Discuss your strengths and weaknesses as a group. Identify who might be able to add their expertise to each task and where you might need support and agree roles.

4. Delegating the tasks

Each main activity that you have been set can be broken up into smaller sub-tasks. Divide these amongst the group according to your individual strengths, experiences and preferences. Make sure the work load is evenly distributed amongst all group members.

Do not always work on your own, establish subgroups within a group to tackle tasks requiring substantial amounts of work. Apply the same ground rules to your work here as you would in the main group as a whole.

5. Plan of action with deadlines

Make a plan of work and allocate tasks to individuals / sub-groups with deadlines. Ensure everyone has a copy of the project plan, so everyone is working to the same objectives and time scales. Make sure the deadlines are realistic and encourage each other to keep to them.

Task	Who	Deadline	Done

Semester and weekly planning sheets, plus a task sheet are available from <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/library/skills/planningSheets.html>.

6. Monitoring progress and completing the task

As your work as a group develops you will need to keep a close eye on the project as a whole. To do this, discuss progress regularly. This can be done by email, but is also a good idea to hold regular group meetings to discuss your individual progress, to share ideas and overcome any problems.

Record the outcomes of any such meetings and make sure that each member of the group has a copy. This will help keep everyone informed.

Whilst working in a group can be supportive, having your work exposed to others can also be challenging. Ensure that you are constructive in any discussions and adhere to your ground rules.

Once you have completed many of the small sub-tasks of your work, you may find it easier to regroup and devise a strategy for task completion. Often the skills and roles required to complete a task are different from those needed at the beginning.

7. Evaluation

It is always useful to evaluate your group work individually and as a group. This can focus on how you actually produced the final outcome as well as how you related to each other and how you developed your group working skills. Consider:

- How well did you meet your group objectives?
- How well did you meet your personal objectives?
- What three things went well?
- What three things needed improving?

Communication

When you are working with a group it is important that everyone is aware of how the work is proceeding. You should avoid working as a collection of individuals, work as a team.

To work successfully you should:

- Talk about your work – how is it coming along, what is going well, where are the problems? This can be done electronically and in face-to-face meetings.
- Talk about yourself – how you are feeling about the work or the group?
- Share your ideas, do not be passive
- Offer support and feedback to others
- Listen to other points of view and not be over critical

Communication within a group therefore:

- avoids isolation
- encourages productivity

It is important whenever you are involved in group activities to hold a series of meetings with the group as a whole. This allows you to plan as a group, to make joint decisions and to support each other's work. The first of these meetings should be held right at the beginning of your work together to carry out many of the essential planning stages that follow.

Giving feedback

When working in a group, you will have many opportunities to comment upon other people's work. There are several golden rules to follow if you are to help people improve by supplying constructive feedback.

- Listen to / read the other persons work carefully
- Start and finish with something positive - be helpful, not harmful.
- Don't simply criticise, always be aware of how something could be improved
- Offer three main items of criticism, any more disheartens
- Focus on the main issues, don't focus on minor issues unless they are the only things that are wrong
- Remember that everyone has a different way of doing things, be flexible and avoid focusing on how you would have done it
- Ask for feedback on your comments - were you helpful? Did you say too much or too little?

Dealing with problems

Occasionally groups can experience problems. These could include:

- Some group members not turning up to meetings – remind them of the ground rules and send agendas for meetings a couple of days before the meeting is due
- Some group members being too quiet – encourage them to speak and be positive about their contributions
- Some members not taking the project seriously – ignore their antics and ask them to consider the work at hand
- Some group members can be quite negative - ask them to consider positive points
- Some members being too assertive – encourage them to chair the meetings, a good chair has to encourage other group members view points.

All study advice sheets are also available to view and download on the following website:

<http://www.lboro.ac.uk/library/skills/studySkills.html>.