EFFECTIVE GROUP WORK

Working in groups is increasingly popular as a form of assessment. However, it can be stressful: not everyone works in the same way or at the same pace, and you may need to find ways to negotiate these issues.

This guide offers research-informed advice on how to help everyone in your group work together effectively, keeping focused and on track.

Getting organised

When you start any group assignment or project it is a good idea to agree on some basic organisation and how the group will work and communicate together.

Think about:

When to meet - pick times that everyone can make.

Where to meet - again, pick a place that is accessible to all group members. You may need to book rooms in advance.

How best to keep in touch - share emails and phone numbers and agree the easiest way to communicate. You might use a blog or wiki on Blackboard.

A realistic schedule to complete your task.

The importance of being committed to the group, and turning up and participating.

A key aspect of good group organisation is starting and finishing with everyone knowing what they are expected to do.

- Start by agreeing on the objectives for the group - what do you want to achieve in this session?
- Keep focused by having a list of tasks or issues to cover
- Perhaps select someone to take notes and keep track of what was agreed
- End by summarising what was agreed on in the meeting
- Ensure all group members understand what they have to do for the next meeting
- Agree on a time and place to meet again if necessary

Developing your speaking and listening skills

Good group work depends on good listening skills. Do you take in what others are saying? Do you pay attention to their feelings? Do you switch off when you are bored or dislike the speaker?

Try these effective listening strategies:

- Concentrate on what the speaker is saying, not on what you want to say next
- Wait until the speaker has finished their point - don't interrupt
- Focus on the content of what they are saying and link it to other ideas - how might it be useful?
- Consider the speaker's feelings

Tip: Let the speaker know you are listening and understanding - give encouraging signals like smiling or nodding

Speak in the group - not at them.

People who speak at a group leave no space for response and tend to dominate. People who speak in a group consider the other members. So:

- Make contributions, but don't dominate
- Ask questions, but not too many
- Speak to the whole group - not just to your friends
- Acknowledge your errors and apologise, "Oh I see, I'm sorry I misunderstood…"
- Keep the discussion flowing
- Encourage the group to keep to the subject by steering the discussion back to the topic, "We were talking about…"
- Build on other people's ideas, "That's an important point you made because…"
- Suggest ideas that the whole group can comment on, "Why don't we…" or "What do people think about…"
- Summarise for the group, "We agreed that…"

Most communication is non-verbal: Pay attention to people's body language as this can reveal a lot about how they feel about the group. Are they looking distracted? Have they crossed their arms and are they looking defensive? Do they look upset or confused? Why might this be?

**Giving constructive feedback**

It doesn't take much to stop people engaging in a group - if they suggest something and get knocked back, they may just withdraw. Think about how you would feel if someone criticised your ideas, and keep this in mind when giving feedback.

**Find something positive to say,** "That was very interesting. I never thought about it like that before…"

**Let people know when you agree** with their point and why, "So do I…", "Yes, that's true…"

**If you disagree with something**, instead of rejecting the other person's ideas, explore them, "What makes you think that…?" Have you thought about…?"

**Be constructive and specific.** If you don't agree, explain why and give evidence or examples rather than just saying no.

**Managing conflict in groups**

Disagreement and differing views isn't always bad - it can lead to creative ideas - but conflict is harmful to the group when it becomes personal and aggressive.

- Stay as objective as possible - focus on the issue that you disagree on, not on the personal qualities of people in the group.
- If everyone starts shouting at once, introduce a system of going round the group asking each person their ideas or opinion in turn.

Try to use language which doesn't single out people and blame them, but instead makes it clear that you are offering your own feelings and thoughts. Rather than, "You're annoying and always speaking…" instead, "I am hurt because I don't think the group listens to my ideas."

If the group really can't agree on something, discuss the pros and cons of the idea, then have a vote and go with the majority decision.

**Being a good group member**

Taking part in a group doesn't just mean speaking a lot or always offering suggestions. Being a good group member is about being committed to the group and making a contribution that plays to your strengths. For a group to work well it takes a variety of people each playing different roles. Play to your strengths - find something you can contribute. For example, if you don't feel confident doing presentations, instead volunteer to produce the handouts.

**What can you do to help the group succeed?**

**Be encouraging**

We indicate to other people how well we are listening through our verbal and non-verbal communication. We can use these responses to encourage other members of the group when they are speaking. For example, through:

- Smiling
- Eye contact
- Reassuring nods and gestures
- Letting them know that you found what they said interesting
- Saying something positive about their contribution

**Help the discussion to flow**

- Encourage the group to keep to the subject
• Make suggestions and share your ideas: 'Why don't we…?'
• Build on other people's ideas: 'That's an important point you made because…'
• Sum up for the group: 'We have agreed on these points so far..'

Avoid sabotaging

It is quite easy to sabotage a group, often unintentionally, through any of the following:

• Being late for the session
• Not preparing
• Whispering or chatting while someone is addressing the group

Be inclusive

Help all group members to feel involved. If someone is not participating, try asking their opinion or seeing if there is a role they'd like to take on. Try making them feel welcome by chatting before or after the group meets. This will benefit you as well as them - they might be really good at doing a task you hate! Be aware of cultural differences which might be shaping how people are behaving within your group.

This guide reproduces the text of our LibGuide on Effective Group Work. The online guide has links to additional information and can be found at:
https://libguides.reading.ac.uk/groups

For tips and guidance on other academic skills, see the Study Advice website at:
www.reading.ac.uk/library/study-advice