

→ SAGE Study Skills

Essential Study Skills

The Complete Guide to
Success at University

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companion
website



9 How to Get on in Groups

If you have issues with group work, or if you don't know how to succeed in *assessed* group or team tasks, then this chapter is for you.

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Introduction

'I was going to drop out – I was so miserable. But I was doing a group project with someone and I couldn't let her down. I stayed to finish our presentation – and then I just stayed.'

Group work can be brilliant or it can have you tearing out your hair. It is one of the most emotionally charged areas of university life. Feeling part of a good group can make university feel 'do-able' and having responsibility for your group can help you stay when you otherwise might drop out. This chapter explores some of the positives of personal, informal study groups – and moves on with a special focus on how to succeed at and reflect on *assessed* group work.

Study groups

Many people arrive at university feeling shy and alone. People like us write about making friends and getting a study group going and you just want to shout at us to leave you alone. Don't we know how shy you are – don't we know how difficult that is! But finding and making friends is the best way to make sure that you stay at and succeed in university. If you are shy – push through your shyness and reach out to make friends anyway.

One of the first things we do with our students is to get them into groups speaking with and listening to each other. We invest much time and energy in the first weeks of our course so that our students start to find out about each other and they start to see who in the class they like – or who shares their attitudes and values. They start to work out who could become a friend.

Gradually people find that they talk about the different lessons with another person. They find themselves discussing the assignments in the coffee shop. Our goal is that by week four of their first year at university, our students are forming their friendship and study groups so that they feel welcome in our class, they feel they belong in the university and they are able to support each other in their studies.

Tips

- Even if your tutor does not specifically set aside time for you to get to know the other students in your class – make time yourself. Listen to people. Go for coffee with people. Smile at people and encourage them. Be the brave one who says *Let's go for lunch* – or, *Should we all go to the library together?*
- Make sure you have a study partner and a study group. Share the reading – discuss your assignments – critique each other's work. This is supportive, dialogic, collaborative learning – with all those big words, don't you just know that this is a good thing?

Assessed group work

So, we argue that your own informal groups will help you enjoy university more – and the collaborative talking, reading, thinking and writing that you do in your own groups will improve the depth and breadth of your learning and the quality of your work. On top of that, most universities build assessed group activities into their teaching programmes:

- because they believe in collaborative learning – we are interdependent beings and should recognise and build on that
- because group work offers support – social and academic. Tasks are easier when they are shared – and learning is easier when we discuss it with others
- because they are pragmatically preparing students for the world of work – if you cannot work with other people, you are unlikely to keep a job.

Whatever your university's reasons for asking you to engage in group work, see this as an opportunity and get the most from it.

Some people do see assessed group work only as a problem – it feels too difficult to get a task done when you don't know the other people in the group – and perhaps you feel you would not like them if you did know them. This is another good reason to make the effort to get to know your fellow students in the first few weeks of your course – and for you to start to make friends. It is easier to work with people if you already know and like them. As always, whatever your feelings, it helps if you adopt a positive approach: be prepared to make your groups work, whoever you

have in the group with you. Whatever your group is like – be prepared to like and support *them*. To help you, we are going to explore the what, why and how of group work.

What is group work?

‘I love group work. I enjoy working with other people – I like the camaraderie and I like the fact that I’m not on my own as usual.’

A group has to have a membership of two or more people. There should be a sense of shared identity: you should all *feel* like a group with shared goals. You should feel a connection to and be able to interact with each other – with a sense that you can achieve your goals together.

Perhaps it is in these initial definitions that we have hit upon some of the problems with academic groups. How many people in an academic group do *feel* that sense of identity and interdependence? How many embrace the task and the sense of shared goals? How many resent and resist the whole group work process?

If the latter sounds like groups that you have been in – or that you are in now – what are you going to do to make your group feel and operate like a group? This is important not only because it makes the task more enjoyable, but also because, your group process may be assessed. You may be asked to reflect on the whole group work experience – and this reflection will be awarded a grade. This is not an opportunity to moan about the people who did no work and how much you hate group work – it is about how you worked as a group, roles that were adopted, problems that occurred and how they were solved.

Tips

Make notes as you go along. Use the pyramid discussion – also known as think-pair-share to get started. When asked to start a group project, do the following:

- everyone thinks about the topic on their own
- discuss ideas in pairs
- build ideas in fours
- only then get going on the task.

Why groups?

Group work offers many advantages to students of all ages – yes, really. Group work can foster supportive, active learning giving you the opportunity to discuss ideas, collaborate with others, deepen your personal knowledge and develop your personal and interpersonal skills. Working with others means you share the workload; it really is easier to do all the reading if you share it out and discuss it.

When engaged in a group project, you can develop assertiveness rather than aggression; tact and diplomacy rather than bullying and hectoring; flexibility and compromise rather than intractability and stubbornness. You can learn to listen as well as to speak, to encourage others as well as to establish yourself – and to work co-operatively and collegially with a team.

All these things will help you get that job – if you have noted them, if you have collected evidence for your CV file. Another advantage of group work is that a good group offers social support that can break down the isolation often associated with being a student.

Advantages and disadvantages of group work

‘They keep making us work in groups, but university is a competition – why should I help other people?’

Of course, there can be disadvantages to group work. For one thing, many students are competitive and are chasing their own good grades. If a group activity is assessed, they do not want *their* group grade based on the effort – or lack of effort – of others. Thus they are incredibly resentful of those in the group who do not pull their weight, who do not turn up, who do not stay on track, who dominate or bully or distract, who stay silent, or who talk too much, who are not interested or committed. None of this feels satisfactory and it causes much resentment. But, every disadvantage can become an advantage if you work out how to resolve the problems that you encounter. So notice what is happening in your groups.

Notice the difficult situations that arise and how they are resolved. For example, if there are people who do not speak or don’t turn up for meetings or do not contribute to the group task; instead of being angry and frustrated, try to discover the real problem – and see if you can find a solution. Take the time and trouble to find out what is going wrong for those other people. Ask them – talk with them. Be the helpful and friendly one – not only might this solve your group work problems, your own problems and worries will also diminish.

Be creative – if people are really too busy to come in to university for extra meetings on your group project, can you use virtual meetings or blogs to take your projects forward? Your attempts at finding solutions may not work, but that doesn’t matter. That you recognised and attempted to address a problem is what will make you employable.

Put notes about your group activities – your problem solving and your project successes – in your CV file ([Chapter 13](#)). When applying for jobs, you will be able to *prove* that you are good at group work by giving examples from your time at university. It is the examples that you give – and the way that you tackled your problems – that will make all the difference in that vital job interview. And this refers to another ‘why’ of group work – it can and does prepare you for your future

employment.

Tip

If you have to write a reflective account of your group work: make notes of your group sessions, your conflicts and resolutions, your strengths and weaknesses, the plusses and minuses of the experience.

SWOT your group work

SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats.

- What are your group work strengths? What do you already like about group work and the way that you perform in a group? How are you going to build on your strengths?
- What are your weaknesses? What do you really dislike about group work and/or your own performance in groups? How are you going to tackle your own problems and issues?
- What opportunities are there for you in group work? What do you get out of your group projects? How have you managed to grow as a person and as a student through group tasks?
- What are the threats? What are you really worried about? What are you going to do about that? What is wrong with group work as far as you are concerned? What have you done to tackle your fears and overcome your concerns?

Once you have answered these questions, think about your answers – discuss them with a study partner: what do they tell you about yourself? How can you harness your responses to help you succeed in group work? Put notes in your CV file and read on.

How to 'do' group work

The best way to get the most from group work is to approach it positively, determined to get the most from it. If you really dislike group work, but have to engage in it, fake it to make it. Role-play being an active, positive student who enjoys group work. Do not sit there scowling and punishing the people in your group because you don't like group work – it's not their fault.

Another simple and very effective strategy is to choose your groups with care. Do not just team up with those people sitting next to you – or those nice chatty people from the canteen. Group tasks normally involve hard work: choose people who are as motivated, positive and industrious as you.

A business-like approach

Management theorists like Belbin and Adair have attempted to de-mystify group work so that businesses can run more effectively. Critics say that they offer rigid

and inflexible descriptions which do little to help us either to understand groups or to perform better in them; however, we have found that students like using Belbin and Adair to help them make sense of group work. As always when you consider these approaches to groups, ask yourself, 'How will knowing this make me a more successful student?' For, in the end you must work out if and how knowing those things will help you to succeed in your group activities.

Belbin's group roles

There are eight key roles that management experts like Belbin (1981) have described in group activities. We have listed these below indicating the possible strengths and weaknesses involved.

- *Company person*: dutiful and organised – possibly inflexible.
- *Chair*: calm and open minded – not necessarily creative.
- *Shaper*: dynamic – but impatient.
- *Creative thinker*: brilliant ideas – but may be unrealistic.
- *Resource investigator*: extrovert, responds well to the challenge – may lose interest.
- *Monitor*: sober, hard-headed, keeps everything on track – may lack inspiration.
- *Team worker*: mild, social person, plenty of team spirit – may be indecisive.
- *Completer/finisher*: conscientious, perfectionist – may be a worrier.

You can find online questionnaires that help you discover the role you might like to play in your group; but be flexible and be prepared to adopt different roles in different groups – do not just stay with a role with which you are already comfortable – this is your time to grow.

Tips

- Even in a small group, make sure that you have a chairperson and a minute-taker so that everyone knows what their task is, what they are doing and by when it all has to be completed.
- Experiment with group work. Adopt different roles in different academic groups. Each time you vary your role in a group you will develop different aspects of your personality; this is a good thing.
- Use your group work experiences to develop your CV – and get you that job. So, as you move through team worker, leader, information gatherer, creative thinker, completer, etc., make notes on your experiences for your CV folder.
- Whilst eight roles are indicated here, research indicates that academic groups work best if they only contain about five people – any more and you start to get passengers. So, have a group leader, share the tasks, make sure someone keeps notes of group meetings – with action points. That is, at the end of every meeting there should be a list of all the things that the group has agreed to do – with a *name* by each activity. Everyone should leave a meeting knowing who is doing what – by when. Keep in contact – share email addresses and mobile numbers.

Adair's processes

Belbin describes the roles adopted in group situations, Adair describes the *processes* that groups go through. Adair argues that groups pass through distinct transformations, as they come together, complete a task and then dissolve. These have been described as forming, storming, norming and performing – some people also speak of a fifth stage, mourning. Read through these descriptions and see how they might help you work better in academic groups.

- *Forming* is where the group comes together and takes shape. It is a time of high anxiety as people work out:
 - who is in the group – and what they are like
 - what the assignment is – what it involves
 - what the 'rules' are – about their behaviour and about the task
 - what they will have to do to get the job done – and who will be doing 'all the work'.
- *Storming* is where conflict arises as people sort out all the confusions highlighted above. This is where people seek to assert their authority, and get challenged. Typically this is a 'black and white' phase – everything seems all good or all bad: compromise is not seen. At this stage people are reacting emotionally against everything as they challenge:
 - each other
 - the value of the task
 - the feasibility of the task (you cannot be serious!).
- *Norming*, as the name suggests, is where the group begins to settle down. Here that sense of interdependence develops as:
 - plans are made
 - standards are set
 - co-operation begins
 - people are able to communicate their feelings more positively.
- *Performing* is where the group gets on and does what it was asked to do. Jobs get done – by everybody in the group. Success can be achieved as the research is completed, the presentation is delivered, the report written ... Here it is useful if:
 - roles are accepted and understood
 - deadlines are set and kept to
 - communication is facilitated by good interpersonal skills.
- *Mourning*, the fifth stage, is supposed to follow a successful and intense group experience. As you work hard with people, you develop links and bonds. Typically you enjoy the sense of mutual support and commitment. The feeling of interdependence is very satisfying – and people can enjoy getting lost in the 'flow' of a really meaningful group task. When all this ends as the task ends, there can be a real sense of loss.

Do you recognise any of these stages? Now that you have read about them, think how you might use this knowledge in your next assessed group activity.

Tip

Keep in contact, share phone numbers. Make dates to meet. Work out who is doing what by when.

Tip

If you do not like group work, ask yourself, is it because you do not like conflict? Perhaps you just find this phase uncomfortable? If this is so, remind yourself that *this phase passes*.

Tip

Be a team player. Be punctual for meetings. Apologise if you cannot attend. Pay attention. Keep in contact with the whole group. Do what you say you will do.

Tip

Use those phone numbers and email addresses. If you are group leader, learn how to chivvy people politely; if chivvied – do what you said you would do.

Tip

Be prepared for the sense of loss. Keep in contact with good team players, you may be able to work with them again.

A beginner's guide to group work

In your group, role-play the kind supportive person who wants everybody to contribute and succeed. Useful things to say include:

- That sounds interesting, could you say a bit more?
- This has worked for me before ...
- I see what you mean ...
- We are making good progress here – what does everybody else think?
- We seem to be stuck ... does anybody have an idea about how we can move forward?
- You two seem to be seeing this differently, but what about ...?
- Is there anything that we/you can find to agree on?
- To sum up, do you think this is what we have agreed so far ...?

If you are required to write a reflective account of your group work as part of the formal assessment of your course or module:

- Do ask your tutor exactly what it is that they are assessing before you even

start the group activity. In this way you can note the relevant things as they arise and have information there ready for when you perform your formal review of your group project.

- Do not just write things like, 'We all argued and did not agree on anything'. Or, 'I really like group work'. You need to comment on how you made your group function effectively. It helps if you note problems and how you overcame them.
- Do have a group observer who makes notes on how your meetings run – the issues you have – and how you tackled them.
- Do mention Belbin and Adair and how their theories helped you do better in your group task.
- Do use theory and practical examples from your weeks working as a group to justify your arguments and make your reflective account sufficiently academically rigorous.
- Do read [Chapter 12.2](#) on the report to see one way to report back on your group experience.
- Do search online for LearnHigher's award winning 'Making Group Work'. This video resource follows students going through group work struggles. It runs like a mini-soap opera – with lots of advice and useful things to think about and do to make your group work.

Summary

We have used this section of the book to explore group work in the academic setting – from the study and friendship groups that will be personally valuable, to the more formal, assessed group work task that you may be set. We have stressed that group work can be a positive, supportive and interactive learning experience – especially if you tackle group activities with enthusiasm and commitment and with the co-operation of similarly committed group members. Finally, we suggested that where group activities require a formal reflective account, you will complete a better one if you make notes of all your ideas, problems and solutions as you go. Good luck with your group activities. Enjoy your group work – groups really can be supportive, exciting and productive.

Further reading

If you are interested in this topic you may wish to have a look at the following:

Adair, J. (1983) *Effective Leadership*, (1987a) *Effective Team Building*, (1987b) *Not Bosses but Leaders* (3rd edn, 2003). Explore Adair's publications – check out: www.johnadair.co.uk/published.html (accessed 15 October 2015).

Belbin, R. Meredith (1981) *Management Teams: Why They Succeed or Fail*. London: Heinemann.

LearnHigher resource 'Making Group Work'. Available at: <http://archive.learnhigher.ac.uk/groupwork/> (accessed 15 October 2015).

Activity

Use the ten stage approach – with an observer

When undertaking a group task it still helps to use the ten step approach to assignments ([Chapter 11.3](#)) – and also to have one person who acts as a group observer or facilitator. The observer makes notes on how all the different people in the group are behaving – and how the task is getting done.

Your observer can feed back to the group at the end of each meeting – and everybody in the group should try to listen quietly to this feedback before responding. Try not to get defensive if it seems like you are being criticised. Try to work out – individually and collectively – what you can all do to make the group work better as a group. Use all these notes, reflections and discussions as the basis for your group work report:

1. Prepare to research *as a group*:
 1. understand the task – know what you have been asked to produce
 2. analyse the question – all of it – know what you have to cover
 3. have the overview – fit the task to the module learning outcomes
 4. use creative brainstorming and notemaking strategies
 5. action plan – work out who is doing what, why, where and when.
2. Follow the action plan: do what you said you would do – when you said you would do it.
Communicate: keep in contact with other members of the group. If a problem arises do not just disappear – talk to someone.
3. Review your findings: everybody should share their research – and share their ideas about how to finish the task.
4. Plan the final product – together. Know who will be doing which bits of the presentation or writing which bits of the report. Who will be preparing which sections of the newsletter – or who is responsible for which bits of the video or workshop that you are preparing together.
5. Prepare a first draft or first version or first ‘cut’ of whatever it is you have to produce as a group. If working independently, meet up and show each other what you have achieved so far.
6. Have a break from this task (and work on something else). Let the brain know that the task is not over – but put it on the back burner.
7. Review, revise and edit – agree on a final draft. The group has to come together to agree the final version of the presentation or report or other end product. This is another difficult time for a group – typically everybody thinks their version or opinion is the best – and it takes real skills to agree a version that everyone is happy with. Ride the storm.
8. If producing a written product, proof read. If preparing a group presentation, put all your ideas together into one poster, PowerPoint presentation – or one group website. And rehearse together as a group. *Make sure everybody knows the whole presentation in case someone does not or cannot turn up on the day.*
9. Hand in or deliver the final product on or before a deadline.
10. Review your progress – using your observer’s comments – and the notes you made on how you developed your processes in the light of their feedback.