Group Work

Working collaboratively with others is an important part of learning at university. Throughout your studies you may be asked to discuss course concepts with other students in tutorials, seminars, workshops, practicals or studio sessions. This type of group work helps you to understand the content you are learning, and provides insight into other people's perspectives. You may also need to complete some assignments in groups. Group assignments provide practice for your future career, as workplace tasks are rarely completed in isolation and most require you to collaborate closely with colleagues. Group work skills, such as communication, problem-solving and negotiation skills, are valued attributes when applying for employment. Here are some suggestions to help you approach group assignments effectively.

Getting started

Sometimes your lecturer will allocate groups for an assignment and other times you will be asked to form your own. Once you have formed your group, have an initial meeting. This can be done on campus or online using real-time programs such as Skype. Actually meeting rather than communicating via email at first is a more efficient way to start and get to know your group.

Getting to know each other

During this meeting, introduce yourself: tell each other your names and a little about yourselves. By getting to know one another at the beginning, you are more likely to develop a good working relationship. Tell each other about your past group work experiences: What worked and what didn't? What tasks did you enjoy doing, and what were you good at? How did you manage differences in skill levels, expectations, and commitment? This type of discussion is necessary to help you decide on group protocols for the assignment, and to agree on the level of quality you want to achieve in the task.

Deciding how the group will operate

Make a plan of action. This might include identifying and allocating tasks, drawing up a time-line with deadlines, arranging meetings, and having a back-up plan.

- Divide the task into smaller parts so everyone has something to do. Tell the group what it is you want to do, but be ready to negotiate a compromise. Everyone needs to be prepared to carry out tasks that they may not have volunteered for but which need doing.
- Draw a timeline that clearly shows when everyone needs to complete their part of the task and when each major section needs to be ready. Your allocated task may take longer than you think so spread out the work. Don't leave things to the last minute!
- Use a study planner and work backwards from the deadline to create a timeline showing when each stage of the task needs to be completed.

Develop group protocols (e.g. set up a contact list, decide how and where to communicate, agree on roles, procedures for missed meetings, documenting decisions and dealing with challenges).

Developing a shared understanding of the task
In order to successfully complete your task, it is important that you understand it individually and as a group. Read all information carefully, and note any questions to discuss with the group. For more on 'Understanding assignments and instruction words' and 'Assignment planning' refer to the Useful Links below.

Keeping it going
Once you have started, effective and consistent communication will help keep you on track.
- Keep communicating regularly regardless of whether things are going smoothly or not.
- Maintain group rapport – be sympathetic to genuine problems group members may experience, and be willing to compromise when appropriate. Sometimes unexpected problems arise which need to be considered by the whole group.
- Make sure that everyone knows what they are preparing and presenting each time you meet. This will help the meeting be efficient and on track. Also set a plan for the following meeting. Consider taking it in turns to email a summary of decisions made after each meeting.
- Consult with the team to reach a consensus before going ahead and making changes.
- Transparency is important. If it is impossible for you to meet a deadline, notify your team immediately so that adjustments can be made. Be aware though that if you miss a deadline, this may affect the assignment quality and the other group members' schedules and commitments.
- Be open to giving and receiving feedback on how the task is progressing, but be considerate in how you express your feedback.
- Regularly check the group's progress against the timeline to ensure tasks are on schedule.

For strategies on dealing with difficulties related to the group work process, see the 'Dealing with group work challenges resource' in the Useful Links section below.

Presentation or submission of the group assignment
Some preparation of a group assignment, for example research and drafting sections, may be done by individual group members. However you need to collaborate so that your final product, whether written or oral, is unified. Schedule plenty of time to discuss and collate individually produced material, and if time allows work on some content together. Either way, you will need to schedule at least 2- 3 meetings to put together the material so that it makes sense overall. This will usually involve making decisions related to editing, proofreading and submission or presentation of the final product.

For a written assignment check that:
- you have a shared understanding of the content
- the argument of the paper is logical and well supported with appropriate sources
- the style of writing is consistent throughout the assignment
- sources have been paraphrased or quoted appropriately and references provided
- the format and layout of the assignment follows the guidelines in the Course Outline
- each person has had the opportunity to contribute equally to the final product
- grammar and punctuation are accurate (but finalise content first)

Ensure that you allow plenty of time to complete these tasks ahead of the due date.

For an oral presentation check that:
- each person contributes equally to preparation of content
- all aspects of the task have been allocated
- each member presents
- someone is responsible for checking the technical equipment needed for the presentation
- the layout of the slides is consistent
- everyone feels comfortable with the final version of the slides
- power-point slides are saved as a whole document and there is a backup copy

And most importantly! Check that:
- you rehearse your entire presentation several times as a group so you can:
    - keep within the time limits for each section
    - improve it by giving each other constructive feedback on your performance
    - think about where and how you all stand
    - build your confidence for the real presentation
    - practice the links between the different sections and speakers (using transition words)
    - look like a cohesive, well-organised group

For more on general oral presentation skills, refer to the Useful Links below.

Reflecting on the group work process

It is very likely that you will need to do more than one group assignment at university, and also use group work skills in your profession. After you have submitted and/or presented your assignment, reflect on the group work experience either individually or with your group members. You could consider these prompting questions:
- What did you like about the group work experience? Why?
- Did you participate actively as a group member? Why or why not?
- What would you do differently next time?
- What did you learn from how other group members contributed and/or participated?
- What challenges did you and your team face? Did you deal with them effectively? If not, what would you do differently to avoid or overcome such challenges if they occur?
- What group work skill(s) would you like to work on for next time?

You can also use any formal feedback you received for the group work assignment to help you with these reflections.

References

Burns, T & Sandra, S 2009, *Essential study skills: the complete guide to success at university*, 2nd edn, Sage, London.

Useful links *(all open in a new window)*

Visit the following modules:
- [Getting Started](#) for more information about:
  - Study planners (see Time management section)
  - Dealing with group work challenges (see Learning at uni section)
  - 12 signs of a healthy group (see Learning at uni section)
- [Improving your academic skills](#) for more information about:
  - Improving your participation at uni (see Speaking section)
  - Assignment planning (see Planning section)
  - Understanding assignments and instruction words (see Planning section)
- [Assignments](#) for more information about Oral presentations

Visit the links below for more information about:
- [Working in Groups (Harvard)](#)

There may be resources that have been created with your lecturers, addressing assignment tasks and topics specific to your courses. Follow the links below to find out:

[Business](#)	[Education, Arts and Social Sciences](#)	[Health Sciences](#)	[IT, Engineering and the Environment](#)