

Working in Groups: There is No "I" in Group Work

Chapter 1: Why Work in Groups

Why work in groups?

In college, your teachers may ask you to work with other students to:

- solve a problem
- study an issue
- develop an argument
- complete a project
- do anything else they can think of!

Your teacher has put you in groups because he or she expects that you will learn more by working together than you will by working alone.

But working in groups is different from individual work and you need techniques to bring your group together successfully, whether it's for a short in-class assignment or a long out-of-class project.

Chapter 2: Team Tips

Group rules and expectations

A group is like a team and to be successful you need you need to work together. Your teacher will expect you to share information and help other group members so that the team accomplishes and learns as much as possible - and probably more than you would have learned if you were doing the project by yourself.

When working in groups, communication and cooperation are the names of the game - but more about that later.

First things first.

Getting your group started

Often you will be assigned to a group by your teacher who has carefully (or not so carefully!) decided which people you will work with. Once you know who is in your group, your teacher will expect you to get going.

The first time your group meets, you can break the ice by making sure you know who everyone is. Introduce yourself and find out everyone else's names.

Hot Tip: This is a way to show respect for each person in the group and make everyone more comfortable from the start.

Long-term projects

If you're going to be working together for a while, you will want to spend a little longer getting to know the people in your group. Find out more about them:

- What do you have in common?
- Do they work as well as go to school?
- What sort of school schedule does each person have?

This information can help you understand the challenges each person faces in scheduling meetings and getting work done. It can also help you plan your time more effectively.

Tips on working with others

Working in groups often means interacting with people different from yourself. They may come from a variety of cultural backgrounds, ethnic groups, countries or religions.

Put aside any temptation to stereotype any of your fellow group members or make judgments about them. Remember that each person in your group is an individual. After all, you wouldn't want someone to judge you before they knew you, right?

Besides, diversity can be a strength in a group situation. Your teacher has given you the opportunity to incorporate a variety of thoughts and experiences into your project, so take advantage of it.

Catch the team spirit!

This is the time for the group to shine, so focus on the group. You may contribute some great ideas, but avoid the temptation to put your name on them, keep score or get credit.

When writing down ideas, describe the idea, not the person who came up with it.

Write:

“the research on computer failures”

NOT

"Jennifer's research.”

Keep your commitments!

Once you have joined a group, it's important to keep and fulfill your responsibilities to the other group members. Your group is relying on you and if you are not doing your fair share of the work, you are not only letting yourself down, but you are detracting from the work that your group produces.

If someone else in your group is not doing his or her share of the project, talk to them and try to work something out so that they contribute equally. If the problem persists, you may want to ask your instructor for advice on how you can approach this problem and solve it.

Whatever you do — don't go negative

Working in a group can be difficult and stressful because you don't have control over the outcome like you do when completing individual work. However, never underestimate the influence you have over group dynamics.

If you are confrontational, you will set a negative tone for your group. If you treat others with respect, they will try harder to get along with you.

Be a good listener

Part of being a good group member is being a good listener. Respectfully listen to everyone's ideas. Even if it's difficult, be sure to let everyone contribute and look for the positive aspect of their ideas.

If you have any questions or concerns about their ideas, you can raise them after they are finished.

Motivation — a key to success

Do what you can to motivate your team members by being a good team member yourself.

Show up on time, complete your work and concentrate on the project at hand. Team members who see that you are taking this seriously will not want to let you down and will put in that extra effort to see that they don't.

Give encouragement to others when you see a job well done. Everyone likes some recognition for their work.

Hot Tip: Make sure that group members know that their efforts are appreciated and valued. It only takes a moment to encourage them and it can keep group members motivated and working.

Chapter 3: The Steps to Success

Be clear. And get it in writing!

There are some communication techniques for when you are working in a group:

- Write down roles and responsibilities of each team member to avoid confusion.
 - Communicate clearly and in writing about deliverables and deadlines, especially when they change.
 - Be as specific as possible so that individuals don't start the next meeting with "I thought you meant..." sentences.
 - Put what you came up with in a meeting in an email so that everyone has the information in writing.
 - Use your calendar and write down meetings times immediately to avoid confusion.
 - Whenever you send an email out, send it to the entire group. This keeps everyone informed no matter what part of the project they are working on.
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Meeting outside of class

If you need to meet outside of class you may need to exchange phone numbers or email addresses to get in touch. Be sure to find out the best time to reach everyone.

If your teacher is using an online course managements system, you may be able to converse with the other students in a discussion board format or through a communication feature on the site.

Make sure each group member agrees to a mode of communication that works for them so that everyone has responsibility for keeping in touch.

Hot Tip: Make sure everyone is comfortable with giving their information out to the entire group. If not, you may want to designate a single person to hold onto the list.

Case Study

Imagine that your teacher has just divided everyone into small groups near the end of class. Each group needs to meet at least once out of class and must arrange a meeting time and location.

Several group members say they do not have any time to meet at all. This is frustrating for those who do not have time and want to do a good job on the assignment. Tempers rise and the group members leave without arranging a new meeting or making any progress on the project.

Question # 1

What would you suggest to the group before everyone leaves frustrated?

Think about your suggestions and then compare them with ours.

Our Suggestions:

- A. Continue planning the project with the available time, no matter how brief. Make sure the group selects a team leader to coordinate everything. Share email and phone contact information.
- B. Divide the work up so that everyone is involved. Some group members could meet in person, while others could work online or over the phone. Think positive!
- C. Try to work with everyone's strengths or interests when sharing the work load to save time and don't forget to motivate them. Some group members may prefer to do research in the library or online. Others may prefer to find images, make phone calls, write, or conduct interviews.

Question #2

What would you suggest to the group if you were one of the group members who did not have time to meet outside of class?

Think about your suggestions and then compare them with ours

Our Suggestions:

- A. Take a bit longer to look at the school, work, and family schedules to see where you have flexibility to meet with the group or even with one or two group members.
 - B. Consider how you can still be a productive member of the team. Suggest to your group members that you can work on your part of the project individually or with a partner. However, it is very important that you let the leader of the group know about your progress regularly by email or phone in case of project changes.
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Evaluate the project or “What are we doing?”

Often the first thing that your group needs to do is review the task:

- What exactly is the teacher asking for?
- What will you need to do to get this done?
- Are there any materials that each person needs, like a book or a handout?

If you have an assignment sheet, go over it quickly and carefully as a group at the very beginning. You may want to refer to it throughout the course of the project.

Make sure everyone is prepared to contribute and get started!

Dividing up the roles and responsibilities

You may want to define particular roles for certain individuals in the group. Take a few moments to think about what some of the responsibilities for your group might be and determine individual roles.

Perhaps you will need a:

- Facilitator/Team Leader
- Note-taker or Scribe
- Time-keeper
- Spokesperson

You can assign roles that will last throughout the duration of the project or you can change roles each time you get together.

Hot Tip: Communicating expectations and responsibilities is essential.

An important role: the facilitator

Have you ever been in a group that just can't seem to stay on track?

Assigning one person to the role of the facilitator may help.

The facilitator is like a team leader; he or she keeps things on track by helping to assign roles and responsibilities to each person in the group. The facilitator makes sure each person has his or her questions answered and may collect and distribute contact information if necessary or be the person to decide who will do this.

Hot Tip: While big decisions within the group should be made democratically for the most part, a facilitator may be the person to suggest that its time for a group vote and take it.

Another important role: the note-taker

Assign one person to be the note-taker at each meeting. This person needs to make sure to write down all the ideas that members bring up and should also be sure to get detailed notes on future meetings and plans, individual responsibilities and decisions the group makes.

The note-taker is responsible for distributing the notes as soon as possible after the meeting. This person probably will need clarification of some ideas during the meeting so he or she should speak up when there is a question or a point is unclear. This is an important role.

Chapter 4: Avoid Conflict

Communication is key to avoiding conflict

As we mentioned at the beginning, communication is the name of the game. It's important to discuss what is going on with the project with the entire group. Emails should go out to all of the members of the group so that everyone knows what's happening, even if it doesn't affect them at that moment.

Communicating with everyone keeps people from feeling left out and helps you avoid misunderstandings. Also, being open and honest builds trust within the group and can help you avoid conflict.

Strategies to avoid conflict

Here are a few other ideas to help you to avoid conflict within your group:

Listen - sometimes conflict arises when someone doesn't feel like anyone is listening. Ask the group member if they can explain what the problem is and how they would like to fix it. Don't interrupt, allow them to finish. When they are done, take just a few moments to let everyone think about what was said before commenting.

Take breaks - no matter how big the project or daunting the task, you need to schedule times in for breaks and rest. Have one person in the group monitor when it's time to take a break.

Apologize if needed - okay, it may seem silly but even when you don't want to make one, an apology can go a long way. If it seems like someone needs an apology, make one, ease the tension and move on.

Communicate in a non-confrontational manner - instead of making statements, try posing ideas as questions or suggestions. "Why don't we try it this way and see how it goes?" If you're pushy, others will notice and push back and this can hold up the whole meeting.

Dealing with conflict

Sometimes conflict can't be avoided.

- If conflict becomes a problem for the group, try to determine the root of the conflict.
- Is it just a difference of opinion or is it something more?
- Remember to be open and honest.
- Do other group members have suggestions on how to handle it?
- Have you tried several different methods to deal with the conflict?

Hot Tip: Remember when you are explaining the situation to remain as objective as possible and talk about the problem as it relates to the work, not the individuals or personalities.

If you've tried working out the conflict in all the ways suggested in this tutorial and a problem still exists, evaluate whether this conflict is hurting your final project.

Sometimes you can get through it by focusing on the project and not the interpersonal relationships.

If nothing else works, check with the teacher to see if he or she has any ideas for you and your group.

It's a pretty good bet that you will be working with groups often in college and in your career. Take every opportunity to use these skills and you are guaranteed to find out more about yourself and your abilities in the process.

Managing stress

School can be stressful, but working in groups can be even harder. No one in the group has complete control and this can cause some pretty high levels of anxiety.

You'll need to find a way to manage the stress that works for you. Whatever happens, be sure to speak up right away if you recognize a problem so that you can deal with it before it gets too big.

Finally, remember not to take things too personally. Although it may seem like your group is trying to drive you crazy, you all have the same assignment and the same goals: to do your best.

Pop Quiz!

Please select the correct answer:

1. What are some appropriate methods to avoid conflict within groups?
 - a. If there is a conflict, just ignore it, it will often go away.
 - b. Talk to the person who you think is causing the problem and get them to join another group.
 - c. Communicate with each person in the group and listen to their ideas.
 - d. Abandon the group, if necessary, and do the work on your own.

c is the correct answer

2. It is important to 'keep score' by tracking each person's contributions.
 - a. True
 - b. False

False is the correct answer

3. Working in groups is an effective way to learn.
 - a. True
 - b. False

True is the correct answer

4. Developing skills to work well in groups is worthwhile and will help me:
 - a. in school
 - b. in my work
 - c. throughout life
 - d. all of the above

d is the correct answer

5. When starting to work in a group, the most important thing to do first is:
- Get coffee
 - Introduce yourselves
 - Choose to work on the project alone
 - Leave class without discussing the group project

b is the correct answer

6. Why is it important to share notes in writing?
- To be organized
 - To avoid confusion
 - To make sure each group member knows what's happening
 - All of the above

d is the correct answer

7. By which of the following options might a teacher grade team or group work?
- Each group member receives the same overall grade for their contribution
 - Each group member receives a different grade according to their contribution
 - Group members grade/evaluate each other or themselves and turn in a report to the teacher
 - Any of the above

d is the correct answer

8. If you are having difficulty fulfilling your part of the group project, what is the best solution?
- Don't mention it until the day the project is due
 - Be honest and expect other group members to complete your work

- c. Ask group members for help and suggestions as soon as possible
- d. Assume that no one will notice and it will no matter anyway

c is the correct answer

9. What are some of the roles that you could assign to people in your group?

Think about your answer and then compare it with ours.

Our answer:

Facilitator, time-keeper, note-taker or scribe, spokesperson. You may also develop a specific role as needed for your project.

10. What are some ways to avoid conflict in your group?

Think about your answer and then compare it with ours.

Our answer:

Clarify each person's role. Listen to everyone's contributions, communicate often and in writing. There are many others as well – see if you can develop some new ones!

EXTRA's

Six quick guides for students working in groups:

<http://bokcenter.fas.harvard.edu/docs/wigintro.html>

Some tips and information from Cal Poly:

<http://www.polyu.edu.hk/learn-to-learn/student/html/GroupProject/groupskills.htm>

This Web site had some good information on forming and making groups work:

Teamworks: Skills for Collaborative Groups

<http://www.vta.spcomm.uiuc.edu/index.html>

Advice on Group-working

<http://www.hope.ac.uk/gnu/stuhelp/groupwk.htm>

Certificate of Completion

Your teacher may have asked you to provide some proof of completion in the form of a certificate. If so, print the Certificate of Completion for this tutorial on the following page and fill in the required information for your instructor before handing it in.

Certificate of Completion

Working in Groups: *There is no "I" in Group Work*

Please print this document, neatly fill in the requested information and do the self-evaluation. Sign it and submit it to your instructor.

Student Name: _____

Last

First

Course Number: _____

Section: _____

Course Title: _____

Semester: _____

Year: _____

Instructor Name: _____

By signing below, I certify that I have completed this tutorial as requested by the instructor.

Signature _____

Date _____



Self Evaluation

What is (are) the most important thing(s) that you learned from the tutorial?

Is there anything about working in groups that you are still unclear about? Please be specific.

What other questions do you still have about working in groups?