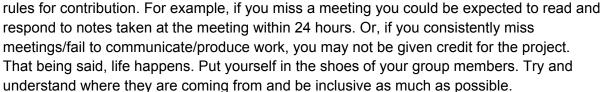# Working effectively in groups

Group work is a fantastic opportunity for students to draw on the strengths and experience of their peers. However, often group work is a new experience for some students and can result in stressful situations. The following material is meant to give students some helpful advice in order to create a successful group.

Get organized

1. **Assign roles**. See examples of roles below.

2. **Create a timeline.** A timeline is important to make sure the project isn't left until the last minute.

3. **Divide projects into chunks.** Distribute work between members to make it less overwhelming. This also makes it easier to complete because group members can work independently on their sections.

4. **Schedule meetings.** Group meetings do not have to be done in person. They could use virtual technology such as Skype or chat applications. Sometimes projects can be organized mostly via email which makes it easy to share notes and research.

5. **Create a communication plan.** However you decide to organize your communication, it is important to set mutually agreed upon ground rules for contribution. For example, if you miss a meeting you could be expected to read and respond to notes taken at the meeting within 24 hours. Or, if you consistently miss meetings/fail to communicate/produce work, you may not be given credit for the project. That being said, life happens. Put yourself in the shoes of your group members. Try and understand where they are coming from and be inclusive as much as possible.

Group roles

In order to work effectively as a group assigning group roles and division of labour is critical. The following list is not exhaustive, but it can be a starting place of assigning roles to suit your group's needs.

1. **Leader**

   - Leads discussion with open-ended questions
   - Encourages all group members
   - Facilitates brainstorming by summarizing and clarifying group comments
   - Helps guide conversation and focuses on positive statements
   - Checks for consensus or questions from group members

2. **Organizer**

   - Schedules meetings
   - Keeps the project on track
   - Thinks about the 'big picture'
   - Ensures meetings follow a time line/agenda
   - Takes notes at meetings to send to everyone afterwards

3. **Editor(s)**

   - Edits completed work
   - Compiles different pieces of reports/presentations from different group members to create 'flow' and consistency

4. **Researcher(s)**

   - Researches topics for the project
   - Presents information to the group
   - Provides the group members with sources and information

5. **Writer(s)**

   - Writes the project/report/presentation
   - Responsible to follow guideline so that editor(s) have time to review and compile information

6. **Trouble-Shooter/Brainstormer**

   - Thinks about positive/negatives of ideas presented by the group
   - Thinks about possible solutions to problems
   - Critiques project based on assignment expectations/rubric to ensure success

7. **Presenter(s)**

   - Works with group members to compile and create presentation
   - Presents information to class

Group work challenges and solutions

Group work challenges	Description	Solution
Scheduling problems	This can create roadblocks to getting started/continuing with projects. It is frustrating for students who feel that others aren't compromising and don't take their situation into consideration.	• Try and be understanding of others' schedules and responsibilities which may be different from your own. • Consider using virtual meeting spaces such as messenger chats, Skype, and email to communicate. • Take turns picking the venue and time of the meeting.
Group conflict	Group conflict is natural and often necessary for effective projects. Sometimes though, it escalates and makes it even more difficult to focus.	• Don't let personal feelings impact your work in the group. Focus on the task. • Try and find common ground between two ideas to reach reconciliation. • Address conflicts directly and respectfully.
Uneven contribution	• Some group members don't contribute to the group project or aren't perceived to be contributing to the group. • This creates tension in the group and is unfair to the group members	• Set up clear guidelines and work expectations at the beginning of the group project. • Assign roles and responsi-bilities so that each person will be making an equal contribution. • Speak directly, but respectfully to the person who is not completing their work.

Group work challenges	Description	Solution
Different expectations	• Some members strive for perfection, while others simply want to pass. Some begin projects in advance, while others procrastinate. • This can create tension because the group is not working towards the same goal.	• Early communication is key to make sure everyone is focused on common goals. • Keep goals realistic and understand that your actions affect others in the group. • Make a timeline so that your group can stay on an agreed plan for getting the project done.
Getting stuck	At some point groups may get 'stuck' and hit a mental road block. This is discouraging and can lead to procrastination and avoidance.	Reread project expectations and goals. Have a brainstorming session where ideas are discussed. Create a mind map to link common ideas and trains of thought. Seek help from your professor if you remain stuck.
Groupthink	'Groupthink' occurs when members of a group agree with other group members in order to avoid conflict. This stifles creativity and constructive evaluation of alternative ideas.	Thinking critically about ideas presented, offering and assessing alternatives, and embracing diverse opinions from group members. Work through projects analytically using the groups' combined knowledge and experience.

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