

Group work guidelines for students

Introduction

During your time at University, you are likely to be involved in small group work, either managed by a tutor, e.g. tutorials, or carried out with limited involvement from the tutor, i.e. student-managed group work. The aim of this guide is to provide you with information to help you develop the skills needed to work in a group and is particularly directed at small groups who are assigned a specific task.

The guide introduces the advantages of doing group work as well as indicating the steps leading to the successful completion of the tasks. There are also examples of checklists to help you manage the work and a reflection and evaluation section that encourages you to think about what you have achieved and how well the group functioned. Even if you have done group work before, the guide will still be useful as a reminder of the processes involved and discussing its contents with a new group will help to break the ice.

The quotations used in this guide were taken from questionnaires completed by students involved in group work at the University of Aberdeen.

Further information on group work can be accessed from:
<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/clt/page.php?id=31&sub=7&top=3>

Group Activities

"In the beginning we were five individuals with individual tasks. By the end, we had progressed to one group, looking forward to presenting our project. "

The type of group activity that you may be involved with will depend upon your course (e.g. practical projects, dissertations, tutorials, seminars, role play or field work), but generally it will involve obtaining information from a variety of sources and presenting the information as a written report, a poster or an oral presentation. Whatever form the group work takes, it will provide you with certain advantages which include:

Knowledge of your subject

"I took more information in than if I'd been lectured to on the paper since points were discussed."

As well as an increase in the amount of work that can be achieved by a team rather than an individual, there is also an increase in the depth of the subject knowledge obtained. This is achieved by analysing information, linking it to outside events and applying it to different situations.

Feedback

"The small number gave me more confidence to ask questions."

You will be used to receiving information from tutors, usually in lectures; a lot of learning, however, comes from explaining the subject and your ideas to others and having your views discussed. For many students, this is less intimidating if done with a peer group rather than with a tutor present and can increase your self-confidence.

Skills

"The group work gave me more confidence to speak in front of others."

Being part of a team will help you to acquire inter-personal skills such as speaking and listening, as well as team skills such as leadership, managing a project, working with and motivating other students. Some of these skills are important for other areas of your academic course and all will be important when you become involved with other professionals and are known to be valued by employers.

Knowledge of Yourself

Appraisal and evaluation of the group's activities and your role in the group will help you to recognise your strengths and weaknesses (e.g. arbitrating, being too dominant, being too reserved), knowledge that can be used to gain a better understanding of yourself.

Summary of Advantages of Group Work

- Increasing your subject knowledge
- Obtaining feedback
- Developing inter-personal and team skills.
- Gaining knowledge of yourself

Key Steps to Successful Group Work

There are certain processes that contribute to the success of the group and help you to gain the greatest benefit from your experience. Not all are appropriate to all types of group work but by considering the questions asked below, you should find some information that will apply to your group activity.

Early Stages

1 Do I know the other group members?

"I liked meeting a different group of students whom I didn't really know before."

It is possible that you have not met the other members of your group before. This will apply especially on courses with large numbers, with first or second year students, or on joint honours courses. The group will give you an opportunity to get to know them so spend some time swapping names and course backgrounds. If you are having your group meetings outside formal class time, it may be helpful to have a contact telephone number or address.

2 How do we get started?

At your first meeting, you may find it difficult to get started as a group when no tutor is present. Introducing yourselves will help to break the ice and then it is a good idea to draw up some basic ground rules for the group.

Example: Ground Rules for the Group

- All members of the group will try to attend all meetings.
- The work should be shared fairly between group members.
- Members should encourage everyone to contribute.
- Individual tasks should be completed by the agreed deadline.
- Roles, such as co-ordinator and notetaker, should be rotated round the group.

Make your own list of ground rules and ensure that everyone has a copy.

3 Do we have a clear understanding of the task?

"The problem was deciding exactly what the tasks were so that we didn't end up with completely disjointed information."

It is worth spending some time to ensure that all members have a clear understanding of what the group has to achieve. Information about the task will usually be provided by the course tutor and should include details about:

<i>The product</i>	<i>e.g. poster, oral presentation, written report, bibliography.</i>
<i>The time scale</i>	<i>date of final presentation or closing date for written accounts; how much time you are expected to spend on the task?</i>
<i>The assessment</i>	<i>is the end product and/or group process being assessed? Does this involve peer assessment, self assessment, or tutor assessment. Do you know the assessment criteria?</i>

If any of these need amplification or clarification, ask the tutor at the onset.

4 Do the group members have different roles?

"We chose the roles we would play by what interested us individually"

Meetings of the group will be more successful if the members take on functional roles. These roles will depend upon the activity, but usually include a chairperson, a timekeeper and a note taker. It is always good if special talents that group members have can be used, e.g. for illustrations, computer work etc. It is also a good idea to rotate the roles so that each member experiences different responsibilities.

5. How do we plan the work?

"Lack of organisation led to time wasting."

Proper planning of your work in the group is one of the major keys to its success.

- Share out the job of researching information or collecting resources for the task so as to avoid everyone looking for the same books etc.
- Use the time effectively by making an overall timetable for the work and planning how often the group will meet.
- Have a structured approach to each meeting so that there is a sense of purpose~ but maintain a degree of flexibility so that any "matters arising" can be addressed.
- Before the end of each meeting arrange the time and place of the next meeting.

Example: Meeting Agenda

- 1 Notes of the last meeting (including responsibilities).
- 2 Matters arising from the last meeting - what progress has been made.
- 3 Items for discussion (main part of the meeting).
- 4 Any other business (AOB).
- 5 Time and place of the next meeting and statement of purpose.

Meetings Checklist:

- We had a chairperson.
- Someone was taking notes.
- We reviewed our progress.
- We had a clear list of things to discuss.
- We made decisions and recorded these.
- We agreed a time and place for the next meeting.

Middle Stages

Are we progressing?

"We more or less left each other to do their own thing and the project suffered as a result."

The group should check the progress of the work at regular intervals before completion so that changes can be made if necessary. It can be disappointing to realise that you have overlooked an aspect of the work when it is too late to do anything about it.

Group Checklist

The group has understood and agreed upon the task.

The group has agreed upon the ground rules for the group.

The group understands the assessment procedures and criteria.

All members of the group are involved and understand their role.

Add other statements that you feel apply to your group.

Use this list to identify problems the group may be having and discuss them with the other members of the group.

Can we get help?

"Our tutor was available and willing to help."

Although the group work is self-managed, your tutor will be acting as a facilitator and can be approached for help if you need it. Look upon him/her as a resource that you can use, giving them as much time as possible to respond. This also applies to technicians, library staff and to other students who have already completed the course.

Am I pulling my weight in the group?

"You need a lot of discipline and trust in one another in order to benefit from the idea of teamwork."

Being part of a team means that you have ownership of the work being done by the team and therefore a responsibility to the other team members. The most common complaint expressed by students doing this kind of work is lack of effort and consideration by some group members. If you are going to miss a meeting or you are having difficulty with your task due to other commitments, let the others in the group know. They will probably be quite understanding and find a way to work around your problem.

Problems

It is often the case that groups have problems, both with the task and with the maintenance of the group. The problems may not be easy to identify or sort out but should be tackled rather than ignored. You may need some assistance from the tutor who will be able to help more if the group have identified and agreed the problem.

Task-based

- Lack of clarity about goals.
- Lack of time.
- Lack of resources.
- Lack of skills for the task.
- Difficulty with organising meetings.
- Not reviewing the work.

Maintenance of the group

- Members are too dominant.
- Members do not contribute.
- Members are excluded.
- Conflict between members.
- Members will not compromise.

Final Stages

Have we delivered?

"We were let down on the day of the display by a member not turning up."

Your task should be completed on time and presented, in whatever form, as agreed at the start of the project. Ideally, all members of the group should be involved as it is unfair to leave only some members to turn up to the final presentation session.

Have we got the most out of the experience?

At the end of the project, it is important to evaluate your experience. This evaluation should involve your tutor and many courses will give you the opportunity to assess or appraise the outcome, how the group worked and what experience you have gained. If this opportunity is not available as part of the course, it is worth doing it yourself as your learning will be increased by this process.

Summary of Key Steps to Good Group Work

- 1 Get to know the group members.
- 2 Establish the ground rules.
- 3 Understand the task.
- 4 Define your roles.
- 5 Plan the work.
- 6 Check your progress.
- 7 Address the problems.
- 8 Help everyone pull their weight.
- 9 Complete on time.'
- 10 Evaluate your experience.

Reflection and Evaluation

Subject Knowledge

Think about the subject knowledge that you have gained during your group work:

- *Have you learned more by working in a group?*
- *How did the assessment procedure influence your learning?*
- *Can you use these techniques in other areas of your learning?*

Skill Development

Think about the skills that you have developed during your group work.

- *Communication*
- *Listening*
- *Presentation*
- *Leadership*
- *Negotiating*
- *Computing*

Group Function

Use these statements and your response to think about the activity of the group and your role within it.

- *Members of the group trusted each other.*
- *Members of the group supported each other.*
- *I felt comfortable expressing my ideas to the group.*
- *I encouraged others to express their ideas.*
- *What was my role in the group and why did I have it?*
- *What stages did the group go through?*
- *How did the group handle conflicts?*
- *How successful was the group?*
- *What factors contributed to its success or failure?*
- *What more could I have done?*
- *What more could others have done?*

Working in a self-managed group is an excellent way to become involved in your own learning and although you may feel nervous about it at the beginning, most students find it an enjoyable and worthwhile process.

All viewpoints are valuable and every group member can make a unique contribution.