WORKING IN GROUPS

Group work
Whether you are allocated a group or form a study group with your friends, a key to good group work is remembering that everyone has different skills and strengths.

Find out each group member’s strengths at the start: the group’s mix of knowledge, personalities and talents can make for successful teamwork.

Tips for effective group work:
At the first group meeting, set the group’s goals and objectives. You might also want to create a timeline with due dates for tasks to be completed.

Establish some principles or rules for your group that require each member to:

- do the pre-reading and any other preparation required,
- respect what each person has to say,
- be prepared to put forward differing points of view, and
- criticise ideas but not other members of the group.

Group meetings
To be effective, group meetings should be scheduled at a regular time and place convenient for all group members.

As a group, ensure that meetings start and finish on time and that everyone is informed of any change of plans.

Before the end of each meeting, it is a good idea to make a list of items to be discussed / decided on at the next meeting, as well as any tasks to be completed before the next meeting.

Meeting roles
On a rotational basis, appoint:

- a facilitator whose task is to keep the discussion on track and ensure that everyone contributes. This is particularly important if English is not everyone’s first language.
- a note taker who types up meeting notes with action items for distribution to the group.
- a timekeeper to keep the meeting on track.

Study groups
For study groups, try this procedure:

- Begin with a different person each week explaining his/her understanding of the concept / topic / question at the beginning of each session.
- Follow with open discussion.
- Conclude with one or two individuals summarising the discussion and the facilitator checking that each person in the group knows what he/she has to do for the next meeting.

TIP: At the first meeting, discuss and agree on a set of working practices for your group that ensure everyone is included and equally responsible for the group’s success.
Group dynamics
Each group will have a mix of personalities, skills and strengths. In addition, each member will have preferences for what they want to do.

Some personality types you may encounter:
- the ‘organiser’
- the ‘quiet’ one
- the ‘studious’ one
- the ‘chatty’ one
- the ‘disorganised’ one

Group challenges
Working in groups presents many challenges. These include:
- Finding out what each person’s strengths are.
- Making the most of those strengths while giving each person the opportunity to try out and develop new skills.
- Dealing with those who are not pulling their weight.

Dealing with conflict
Conflict can arise in groups, especially if:
- members feel they are not being heard/respected/supported,
- one person dominates the group,
- Some members feel they are doing more than their fair share of the work, or
- someone is not doing their fair share of the work.

Some ways to avoid conflict:
- Rotate the role of meeting facilitator to give everyone a chance to manage the group (to avoid one person dominating).
- Make sure everyone is clear about the action items they are responsible for and the timeframe for completing them.
- Ask members to give a brief update on their action items at each meeting.
- Be mindful that group members may sometimes not meet a deadline for a good reason; avoid being judgemental.
- Keep in regular contact and support each other, especially if someone is struggling to manage their workload.

TIP: At the first group meeting, ask each group member what their strengths are and which tasks they prefer doing.

TIP: Each group is different so be flexible and be prepared to make changes to suit the needs and goals of your group.

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