

Group Work

Many students find group work challenging—however, it is a common part of undergraduate and graduate learning. The good news? Group work is an effective way to:

- develop academic and workplace skills in teamwork and project management
- learn from others’ experiences, knowledge, and backgrounds
- improve your own—and others’—ideas through group input.

Effective group work

[Research suggests](#) that group work promotes **active learning** and **increases students’ understanding** of course content. However, learning in groups can present some obstacles, and it requires planning and effort.

This resource draws on cross-cultural, Indigenous, and western scholarly understandings of learning and community to promote an approach to group work that focuses on:

- building **relationships** across difference
- leveraging group members’ **strengths** and cultivating their **skills**
- anticipating and addressing **conflicts**
- sharing both **responsibility and success**.

Making the effort to include, understand and work with diverse perspectives is academically responsible, professional behaviour. Your group will likely produce better **results**, build important **skills**, and have a more positive and productive **experience** by adopting an approach based on equity, diversity, and inclusion. Read on to learn how you can manage your group work so it’s both rewarding and successful.

Communication

Effective groups communicate well.

Try this:

Start by **getting to know each other** at your first meeting: **learn about** each person’s expectations, background, and strengths, and the skills each person would like to develop through this project. **Talk together about** what would make this project successful. Things that seem straightforward or obvious to you might not be so to everyone. Good communication requires us to **avoid assumptions**.

Try this:

Your group should aim for **honest, positive working relationships** based on discussion and agreement about:



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- the **goal and purpose** of the assignment or project. What are you supposed to do? Why?
- the meeting. When and where will you meet? Check in with each other to ensure **meeting times** are realistic for and respectful of all members.
- how the group will make time and space for all members to **share their ideas** at meetings.
- **expectations** for attending group meetings and contributing to the workload.
- handling **conflicts**; at what point might the group ask the professor for help?
- **leadership**; will group members take turns chairing meetings, or will one person chair all of them? Who makes decisions? What leadership roles are available for this assignment/project?

Try this:

Your group's members may have **differing but entirely legitimate ideas** about how and when to communicate, expectations around timelines and task distribution, and more. Taking a **flexible, respectful approach**, and **listening to everyone** before creating a plan or expectations, can help the group succeed. Be sure to make space for the quieter members of your group; just because someone may not feel comfortable speaking up at first doesn't mean that person doesn't have ideas or bring value to the team. Consider offering more than one way of communicating, such as sharing ideas in a group document online.

Playing to strengths

Group work is an opportunity for group members to **develop new skills**, but it's also **strategic** to know who in your group is especially skilled at certain types of tasks—for example, keeping the group on track, creating a slide deck, researching or producing content, or editing a paper. Consider reflecting on your own strengths and areas for development, before attending your first group meeting.

Try this:

Take time in your first group meeting to **identify the skills in your group**; we recommend using a tool or inventory made for this purpose. For example, you might [try this tool](#).

Identifying group members' skills can help you **avoid making assumptions** about who has or doesn't have certain skills, knowledge, and experience. These assumptions can impede your group's work and lead to a negative experience. **Don't prejudge** someone's contribution to the group based on how they look, their way of speaking English, or their past academic experiences. A peer might have an unexpected strength or an area of knowledge that does not match your own, but which complements the strengths of the group. **Do your best** to be aware of, and question, your own assumptions about others and their ability to contribute.

Planning and preparation

Effective groups are organized. Plan and prepare carefully and realistically.

Try this:

- Start by **reviewing the assignment's tasks**. Break these down into smaller, manageable tasks. Decide when each task should be done and assign **sub-deadlines**. (For help, see the [SASS Assignment Planner](#).)
- Assume that, at some point, something will go wrong. Computers break, people fall ill, someone hasn't responded to an email as quickly as you'd expected, etc. Leave some **flexibility for each sub-deadline**—add 10-15% more to each task's time estimate—to allow for complications.
- Once you've divided the project into parts, complete the [asset mapping tool](#) so that each group member can indicate what they want to work on.
- **Assign tasks** with equal consideration for individuals' strengths and desired areas for growth. Ensure all members have a chance to review assignments and respond / confirm.
- **Complete a project charter** to ensure all group members understand and remember what you all agreed to. This short (less than one page) document should define:
 - the key assignment tasks and their requirements
 - due dates and timelines for progress
 - roles and responsibilities of each group member
 - how you'll communicate outside of meetings
 - what to do if someone doesn't meet a deadline or misses meetings
 - what to do if someone is dissatisfied with the quality of another's work
 - who is responsible for [communicating with the professor / TA](#) and submitting the final assignment.

The charter is your group's **roadmap**; you will refer to it throughout the duration of your project. Discuss, as a group, the meaning of **success** and how it should shape your charter; adopt a communal attitude that prioritizes the group's success over individual achievements. You may wish to have all group members sign the charter to improve accountability.

Here is a [sample of a charter](#) from a science report.

Working online

Attempting a group assignment entirely online presents communication and timing challenges, but with some thought and planning, your group can still be successful.

Try this:

Consider and discuss questions such as:

- How will you manage communication across different time zones?
- What alternatives are there to video chats, if one or more members of the group doesn't have a quiet and private place to chat online, or has poor internet access?
- How will you handle concerns about online privacy?
- What if some group members aren't familiar with the technology the group wants to use?
- How can you build a strong sense of team commitment, despite the psychological and physical distance of online communication?

Such issues could have a profound impact on group dynamics, respect and full participation if your group fails to address them; taking a proactive approach to problem-solving can help to ensure the group's ability to function smoothly.

Try this:

See more [online learning strategies in our resource](#).

Intercultural considerations

One of the benefits of a diverse learning community is that its members have different ways of thinking and perceiving, communicating and interacting with others, and managing tasks. There is no one "correct" or "better" approach to any of these activities. Having multiple approaches among group members enriches the group's work and makes it more **inclusive, functional and valuable**.

Developing awareness and acceptance of intercultural differences will help you and your group members understand each other and work together effectively. Being open to ways of approaching tasks that differ from your own can enrich your perspective and increase the value you bring to a team. Therefore, taking this opportunity to build your **intercultural skills** will benefit you in the long run; this skill set is particularly [valued by employers](#).

To help you get started, we've briefly described some areas of intercultural variation below. Keep in mind that the considerations listed are cultural *tendencies* rather than set characteristics. One tendency is not inherently better than another. When the group disagrees about an issue, it can be helpful to reflect on whether any of these considerations play a role, and how the group can look at the issue from more than one perspective.

Individualist and collectivist orientations

Some cultures tend towards collectivism; others towards individualism. For members of collectivist cultures, all members' voices and experiences are valuable; therefore, **listening fully to others** as they share their ideas and experiences is important. In a group project, a collectivist expectation might be that **each member participates fully in every** discussion or activity. Western cultures have typically favoured individualism, which tends to promote a more **hierarchical** group structure with one person as the **leader**, and **others being delegated separate tasks**, sometimes in isolation from other group members. These two orientations can affect elements of group work such as meeting structure and timing, decision-making styles, task distribution, etc.

Try this:

It can be helpful to draw from both orientations in academic work. When it comes to ownership over work, for example, a collectivist attitude encourages all group members to be invested in the quality of the project as a whole, and an individualist attitude requires each member to take responsibility for their particular part. These two attitudes don't have to conflict; the group can adopt them both to improve their chances of success.



Time

Cultural differences also affect how people perceive time. People from **polychronic** cultures tend to see time as flexible. Multitasking is common, even during meetings, and is not considered disrespectful of others. In **monochronic** cultures, it's common to focus on one thing at a time and to plan and complete tasks systematically to meet deadlines.

Try this:

If your group has diverse perceptions of time, you may have conflicting ideas about how to use meeting time or how to set deadlines, for example. **Taking time to listen and communicate your expectations and concerns** about these aspects of group work can help avoid difficulty.

Direct and indirect communication styles

People's communication styles are individual, but also very much informed by their cultural identities and experiences, and the values they learn through these identities and experiences.

For example, some group members may be very **direct** in their communication, focusing on clarity and efficiency. Direct communicators may take words at face value, without analyzing them for an underlying meaning. To some people, direct communicators may seem overly blunt, dismissive or disrespectful of their listeners. Others appreciate direct communication.

Some group members may use an **indirect** communication style, prioritizing politeness to avoid possible conflict or discomfort. (For example, indirect communicators may say "maybe" or "possibly" when the real answer is "no.") Some people who are unaccustomed to this approach may want more clarity, perhaps via a concrete example, from an indirect speaker.

Difficulty can arise when a group member judges another group member's communication by their own personal approach to communication or makes assumptions about why someone uses a particular style of communication.

Try this:

Group members can feel reluctant to ask for clarity or to share feelings of discomfort about someone's way of communicating. It's not easy to do, but it can help to **ask, respectfully and openly, for clarification** if someone's meaning is unclear. **Paraphrasing** someone's message back to them and **asking** if your interpretation is correct is another good way to build understanding. If you are upset, take a breath and think before you speak.

Conflict resolution

Conflict is acceptable, even normal, in group work. The important thing is to figure out a way to move past the conflict, ensure the group remains functioning—even thriving—and move forward. Some of the

potential conflict-related lessons of group work include how to cooperate, share responsibility, solve problems and maintain a sense of perspective.

Potential sources of conflict:

- absent / struggling teammates: one of the most common issues in group work
- leadership issues: too many leaders, a lack of leadership, or poor leadership
- group members leaping in to “fix” or complete another member’s work, taking on more than their fair share but also devaluing a teammate’s efforts
- “groupthink”: well-functioning groups who are comfortable with each other can often fall into the trap of thinking too much alike, or prioritizing group harmony over questioning the group’s assumptions or considering different ideas.

Try this:

Set clear expectations around participation, roles, timelines, quality of work and team communication, using the team charter discussed earlier, to help prevent some conflicts.

Avoid serious disagreements within the group by discussing what is working well and what is not. Solve small issues as they come up. One good practice is to **reserve ten minutes** of each group meeting to address issues; doing so suggests that the group expects and accepts conflict as part of the process of group work, and recognizes the value of addressing conflict.

Factors to consider

- **What is it** about the situation or group member, or your perception of them, that might be causing an issue?
- Consider the **other person’s perspective**, difficult as that may be. Have you been making judgments that could be based on inaccurate assumptions? Are you missing information?
- Has your own behaviour been respectful, accountable, and sincerely positive?
- Are you taking a **helpful approach** to the conflict? Is your goal to win and preserve your own image, or to mend working relationships and support the group’s goals?
- How does leadership play into the conflict? Are **valuable roles** available to everyone in the group?
- **Focus** on the **future**, not the past.

De-escalate

- Solve it tomorrow; **take time out** to reflect and calm down before discussing it.
- State **facts**, not your opinions, about others’ behaviour. Try writing them down before sharing them with the group.
- **Praise your colleagues for work well done.** Even during conflict, good things are likely still happening. Appreciate what others do.
- **Remember your colleagues’ desire for growth.** Part of the experience of group work is developing skills that will allow you all to become better colleagues.
- **Raise others up when you can**, and don’t be afraid to ask for others’ help when you need it.

Get help

Groups should not hesitate to bring up concerns with instructors—if there are issues, don't wait until it's too big to handle on your own. However, **do raise concerns within the group first**, in keeping with the goal of honest, positive relationship building. Keep your instructor informed of problems and any interventions and outcomes as the project continues.

After the project

Completing group work successfully is something to celebrate!

Try this:

Once the project is submitted, connect once more as a group to **reflect together** on what went well and what you've learned from the experience. What would you do differently next time? **Discuss feedback** you receive from the course instructor. Consider taking notes (and sharing them) for future reference.

Make sure to **thank** each other for your efforts and attitudes, and for any particular effort that someone has contributed. Congratulate anyone who has overcome an obstacle or learned something new. There are probably at least a few small **successes to acknowledge**.

Try this:

Finally, consider writing down **your own reflection** on what you've learned from this project. What did you struggle with? What did you enjoy or do well at? Did you take on an unfamiliar role? You will almost certainly be part of another project team in the future; what goals and concerns do you have about future group work, and what can you do about them?

Additional resources

We encourage you to further explore this topic via the articles and books below:

Brame, C.J. and Biel, R. (2015). Setting up and facilitating group work: Using cooperative learning groups effectively. Retrieved June 9, 2020 from <http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/setting-up-and-facilitating-group-work-using-cooperative-learning-groups-effectively/>.

Kimmel, K & Volet, S. (2012). University students; perceptions of and attitudes towards culturally diverse group work: Does context matter? *Journal of Studies in International Education* 16(2): 157-181.

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Mulholland, J. (2013). Why employers value intercultural skills. Retrieved June 9, 2020 from <https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/why-employers-value-intercultural-skills>.



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Rafferty, P.D. (2013). Group work experiences: Domestic MBA student experiences and outcomes when working with international students. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 37(6): 737-749.

Shaw, J. Mitchell, C. & Del Fabbro, L. (2015). Group work: Facilitating the learning of international and domestic undergraduate nursing students. *Education for Health* 28(2): 124-129.

Smith, P. Designing Teams and Assigning Roles. Retrieved May 26, 2020 from <https://www.wit.edu/sites/default/files/learning-innovation/resources/Designing%20Teams%20and%20Assigning%20Roles.pdf>.

Toulouse, P. (2016). What Matters in Indigenous Education: Implementing a Vision Committed to Holism, Diversity and Engagement. In *Measuring What Matters, People for Education*. Workshop presented in Toronto: March 2016.

Yefanova, D.N., Woodruff, G.A., Johnstone, C.J. & Kappler, B. (2017). Instructional practices facilitating cross-national interactions in the undergraduate classroom. *Journal of International Students* 7(3): 786-805.