

# Ideas for Effective Group Work

This page provides advice for every stage of implementing group work in your course.

## Prepare your students

**Identify the group skills** that are specific and appropriate to your discipline.

**Explain to students** the purpose and advantages of group work, emphasising how group work will help them achieve the course's learning outcomes

**Explain to students why** it might be important for them to gain experience of working cooperatively with others. Emphasise the benefits to both student learning and students' longer-term employability.

**Consider asking employers** or industry representatives to speak to students about the value they place on cooperative experience and abilities.

**Before introducing a group-based learning activity**, find out whether students have any prior experience of working in groups. This can help you design group-work activities that are appropriate for all students in your course or class. It might also help you to overcome any resistance associated with negative experiences.

## Set up groups

**Make your expectations clear** to students and give them an opportunity to clarify the purpose of their group task or project.

**Specify genuine collaboration.** If you ask students to work in groups on a project or assignment, ensure that the task you have assigned cannot be completed by group members working independently on separate tasks. Make sure that it involves a range of roles and responsibilities.

**Limit the size of groups** – three to five people is probably ideal.

**Choose a method of group formation** that is appropriate to the project or task that the group will be undertaking. For example, if the project is meant to simulate a workplace project, consider assigning students to groups, emphasising that, in a real workplace, they are unlikely to be able to choose their own team members. On the other hand, if the project is one in which students are encouraged to pursue their own interests, consider allowing them to form their own groups based on shared interests.

**Encourage diversity.** Help students to understand that the ability to work in diverse groups is highly valued by employers in the workplace, and that real life teams often contain a mixture of people with varying abilities, language capabilities and learning styles etc.

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## When groups first meet

### Before students begin their group projects:

- give them time in class to get to know the members of their group and clarify expectations about the project with you
- give them some guidelines or training on how to work in groups. This might cover issues such as:
  - group formation
  - group dynamics and group conflict
  - roles and responsibilities of group members
  - multicultural groups
  - effective communication strategies.
- provide group-work resources for students—for example, guidelines and checklists for roles and responsibilities, communication, and so on.

**Ask students to develop** group ground rules or contracts as part of their group-work projects. These rules or contracts might cover:

- group members' roles and responsibilities—for example, leader, chair, note-taker, timekeeper, planner, and so on
- communication guidelines
- project timelines.

**Help students to become aware** of the roles they prefer when working in a group environment. You could use a standard team-role test or instrument to help students identify their preferred roles.

**To support those students** who do not feel confident of their ability to communicate face-to-face, use a Moodle course to help them engage in group activities online.

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## During group work

**Allow time in class** for students to get to know each other, conduct meetings and plan their projects. Problems in groups often stem from genuine difficulties such as arranging meeting times outside of class.

**Monitor and support** group-based learning activities—for example, ask students to provide regular updates or reports or meet with groups to check their progress and team processes.



## Deal with difficulties

**Prepare students for uncertainty.** Make sure they understand that group work is often challenging, and that being able to deal with conflict and solve problems that arise in groups is an important skill.

**In class, discuss strategies and tools** for identifying, and dealing with, common problems experienced in groups (e.g. checklists, guidelines for constructive feedback). This helps students to develop problem solving, conflict resolution and interpersonal skills, and can reduce the frequency of requests for help from students.

**When conflict arises** within the group, encourage the group members to negotiate a resolution themselves—step in only as a last resort. Make sure that students understand that negotiation and conflict management/resolution are a normal part of working collaboratively with others, and that they are skills acquired through experience and practice.

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## Assessment and reflection

**Give careful consideration** to how you structure the marking scheme, weighting, and allocation of marks for group work. Make sure that you develop and communicate clear assessment criteria. When considering how you will assess group work, you might wish to:

- allow students to negotiate assessment criteria with you and each other
- assess the group-work process as well as its products
- include elements of student self-assessment and peer-assessment.

**Give students an opportunity** to reflect on their experience of group work—for example, through discussion, a journal, a checklist, or in class. Sharing the final products of group work is also a good way to encourage reflection and critique. Similarly, you can use a group-work evaluation form to encourage students to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their group experiences.

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