

WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY



LIBRARY
STUDY SMART

ASSIGNMENT HELP
GROUP WORK



PDF resources included in this section

CONTENTS

-
1. Group work 101

 2. Project management

 3. Communication and conflicts

 4. Writing together

 5. Grid for assigning tasks

Group work

Group work can be enjoyable, but challenging. Arm yourself with some helpful resources to make the most out of your group work.

Group work

There's no getting around it: working with others is a key part of life. For this reason, university subjects often include group activities in class and group work for assessment purposes. Working in teams also means that you can get more done than working alone. It's important to learn to work in a group both for success in your studies and for future jobs.

Keep your group assignment on track using the [Study Smart Assignment Calculator](#).

STUDY SMART WEBSITE

Find this section on the Study Smart website here:

https://westernsydney.edu.au/studysmart/home/assignment_help/group_work



Group work 101

Partners and collaborators

Group work helps you to practise for future jobs where you might be part of a team. It's important to get along with people who are different from you, even if you might not normally hang out with them. You can achieve more as a group than you can alone, and sharing the load will mean everyone gets to perform different tasks and maybe learn new skills.

At university, teachers assign group work for assessments so that you can practise being part of a team and working with a diverse group of people. Teachers also organise group work in tutorials so that you can talk to other students and hear different points of view. When you explain your ideas to other people the process helps you to examine your own thoughts. By listening to other people you learn new ideas and points of view.



Good group work comes from teamwork and communication. It's important to allocate roles and tasks fairly, according to individual strengths – so it's important to know what you're good at also. Good teams communicate regularly, keep notes, focus on their goal and commit to the task. It also helps if you can have some fun!

Preparation

If you've been allocated to a specific group for an assignment or are about to join a project team at work, it's a good idea to assess the project you're about to undertake, your team, and what you might need to do to get you through.

You might be feeling a positive or negative reaction towards the idea of group work, depending on your past experiences. Unlike teamwork situations in school, sport, or your personal life, there are professional standards that you must meet in your university studies and the workplace. Before diving into group dynamics, communications, personalities, and schedules, you should assess both your concerns and prospects and how you might troubleshoot these issues as your project progresses.

Self-assess

There are a number of assessment models you can use to evaluate your teamwork situation. One fairly simple approach is a SWOT analysis. This system allows you to assess the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats of your group work task. By evaluating the risks you are better placed to address them at the start of your collaboration.

Example

SWOT	Example Assessment	Solutions
Strengths	Your strengths → I am highly organised and enjoy co-ordinating projects from start to finish.	
	Your teammates' strengths (if known) → Ali is a genius at data manipulation. → Sara is an excellent writer.	
Weaknesses	Your areas for improvement → I feel shy around new people and take a while before I feel comfortable voicing my opinion in front of others.	Energiser/ice breaker games; shared meal or socialising
	Your teammates' areas for improvement (if known) → I don't know my team well enough. → Ali is pretty opinionated and can dominate discussions.	Energiser/ice breaker games Establish clear expectations about roles or jobs and equal contributions
Opportunities	For You → Be challenged by others, different ways of thinking and doing → Grow outside of my comfort zone → Build skills in team dynamics, public speaking and project management	
	For Your Team → Make new friends, real working partners → Complete an amazing project	
Threats	For You → If I don't dedicate enough time to make my individual contribution each week, I won't get the work done	Set a project timeline, assign roles and jobs, allocate specific time in your schedule to complete tasks
	For Your Team → An unfair and unequal allocation of the workload	Establish clear expectations about roles or jobs and equal contributions

Wrapping up

As your team project comes to an end it's critical to set aside time to wrap up, not only to celebrate completing a job and achieving great results, but also to debrief on your individual and group learning experiences and performance.

Successful people use reflection to learn more about themselves, recognising where they were and where they are now. Reflection is also a tool to help people refine their interpersonal skills in how they read and respond to teammates. Did you misread Ali's reaction to your idea as non-supportive when it was actually surprise and an 'aha!' moment in his head? Did Sara ignore your frustration with her constant late submissions?

Debriefs are useful to reflect on your performance and consider ways to address areas of need to make improvements in the future. See [Reflecting on progress](#) for a range of debrief strategies.

More information

Here are some other websites that talk about how to get the best out of group work, and other places to get information or support:

- Visit the [Counselling Service vUWS](#) site and download the *Group Work and Public Speaking Skills iBook*.
- Use the [Careers Service Careers Toolkit](#) to take short courses on team work.
- Have a look at the [PASS website](#) and the PASS (Peer Assisted Study Sessions) [Timetable](#), as well as a [list of PASS units](#).
- Visit [University of Technology, Sydney: Group Work](#).



Project management

Managing a group project

Co-ordinating a small or large group of people with busy lives and study loads on a single project can be a daunting task. Humanity did manage, however, to make it to the moon and back before the internet and the advent of online creative and collaborative platforms. So if you're feeling overwhelmed, concentrate on what you *can* do in clear, simple, and basic terms.

Roles

It's important to give everyone in the group a role. The types of roles will vary depending on the size of the group and the task, but some options include chair, note taker, and timekeeper, or alternatively president, vice-president, secretary, and treasurer.

Or maybe your group will divide responsibility for different parts of the task so that you have, for example, a writer, an editor, a researcher, a graphics designer, and a presenter. For more examples see:

[University of Queensland: Roles in Groups](#)

[University of Pittsburgh: Roles in Groups](#)



Activity

Think about each of the responsibilities outlined below for the different roles in a team. Which role do you think you would be best at? Why?

Role	Responsibilities
Chair	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Sets the agenda→ Guides the group through the agenda→ Summarises discussion and decisions→ Helps the group decide how much time to allocate to agenda items
Note taker	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Keeps a record of decisions, assigned tasks, etc.→ Makes an outline of notes after each meeting→ Sends a copy of the notes to each team member
Progress chaser	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Makes sure everyone in the group stays on track→ Identifies potential problems and makes sure any gaps are filled→ Reports at the beginning of each meeting 'where the team is at'
Time keeper	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Keeps the group to an agreed-upon schedule→ Alerts the group to timeframes, e.g. 'We allocated 15 minutes to this discussion and we have five minutes left to finish.'

You can rotate roles so that everyone gets a go – just make sure it's clear who is responsible for what and when. You might like to think about what you're good at when considering what role to take. Do you like to lead? Be the chair. Do you find yourself going quiet in large groups? Volunteer to take notes so that you're still involved.

Tackling the task

Once you've got your group together and you've allocated roles, keep the good work going by setting some goals or rules. Discuss when, where, and how often you'll meet, and how much notice needs to be given before missing a meeting. You might talk about how you will make decisions or handle conflict.

You and your group should [analyse the task together](#) (PDF, 236 kB) and come up with an action plan. Carefully read the task description, criteria, and expectations. What do you need to do? How will you be assessed? What is the deadline?

Assigning tasks

You then need to break down the task into smaller activities, and assign them to each person. Or your group might decide instead to divide the task between you, so that for example one person researches, another writes, and another person presents.



Activity: Group work, task allocation

As a group, list all the jobs that need to be done, and estimate the time for each job. Make sure you break bigger tasks down into smaller, manageable ones. Then decide who will do which task.

What needs doing?	How long will it take?	Who will do it?

You can download [a full-page PDF of this table](#) (PDF, 24 kB) and use it with your group.

Make sure everyone has something to do and make clear who is responsible for what. Exchange contact info and keep in touch. Also be prepared to negotiate conflicts within the team – see [Communication and conflicts](#) (PDF, 69 kB).

Need a place to meet? You can [book a Library group study room](#) at a campus that suits your group.

Keeping records

Keep copies of your notes, your writing at all stages, and any important emails or messages. Make sure everyone in the group is updated if and when things change, like when someone writes a new draft of the report. If it isn't in writing, then it didn't happen.

For more information on file management strategies, visit our [Digital Literacy](#) section.



Communication and conflicts

Communication

Communication is the key to quality teamwork. Remember that you need to keep in touch not just at organised meetings but by email or text at regular times, or whatever works for you and your group. At all times be polite and speak clearly but respectfully.

Express your opinion, but don't put down others or aim to offend. Give praise where praise is due, and be constructive in your criticism – that means that you talk about both positives and negatives. If you only focus on the negatives you and your teammates will start to resent each other.

Asserting yourself

Try to communicate in an assertive manner at all times. Eunson (2012, p. 293) defines assertiveness as “getting what you want from others without infringing on their rights”.

Communication styles can be broadly divided into assertive, aggressive, passive, or manipulative styles. The features of these styles are summarised in the matrix below:

	Overt (open)	Covert (secret)
Considers others	Assertive	Passive
Does not consider others	Aggressive	Manipulative

Each style also corresponds to an approach to conflict, in which a person sees things in terms of winning and losing:

	I win	I lose
You win	Assertive	Passive
You lose	Aggressive, manipulative	

The assertive communicator considers others and communicates openly. The outcome of the assertive style is ‘I win and you win’, and that’s what group work is all about.

If you or other members of your team are aggressive, passive, manipulative, or even passive-aggressive, then the team as a whole is going to lose.



So how can you communicate assertively? Here are some tips:

- Express your feelings, even negative ones, in appropriate ways
- Make requests directly (don't 'beat around the bush'), but politely
- Practise making small talk – this is practice for discussing more important matters
- Stand up for yourself
- Say no when appropriate, and give reasons
- Express your thoughts, even when you disagree with someone

If others in the group communicate in passive, aggressive, or manipulative ways, responding assertively can help the group get back on track and working towards that common goal.

Assertive communication skills

Keep these skills in your personal toolkit for when you encounter conflict, miscommunication, and disagreement.

Say no

It sounds simple, because it is. If you do not have the time or ability to do something, then say no. Don't feel compelled to apologise, but you can give reasons if you wish.

Example:

'Sorry, Jessica, I can't do the bar graph tonight. I already spent last night working on the pie chart and tonight I have to work on a different assignment.'

Dismiss and redirect

This is for situations when another person is making excuses or discussing things not relevant to the topic at hand. You dismiss the comment and redirect the conversation back to the original topic.

Example:

'What's on TV tonight isn't relevant, Andrew. We have to finish this draft, so which part would you like to work on?'

Questioning

Sometimes people don't actually realise their behaviours. Questioning is a way to try to get a person to become aware of what they are doing.

Example:

'Niha, have you noticed that every time someone mentions the reference list, you change the subject? Are you having trouble putting it together?'

Fogging

When emotions are involved, some people make personal attacks. When people do this, they want a reaction: they want you to be upset. 'Fogging' means that you let the insults go right through you, like a cloud. When the person doesn't get the reaction they wanted, the dynamics change.

Example:

Insult: 'You're an idiot. How did you even get into uni?'

Response: 'Well, never mind, I'm here now. What's the next step for our assignment?'

Forcing a choice

When there's a lot going on, sometimes people get stressed and find it difficult to make decisions, or they might start demanding more of your time. If you give someone a choice between two options they will usually pick one and won't try to introduce a third.

Example:

'Joseph, do you want to write the introduction to the report or the conclusion?'

Broken record

Sometimes you just have to repeat yourself calmly until your message is heard.

Example:

'Andrew, like I said, we have to finish this draft tonight. Which section do you want to proofread?'

Ask for specifics

Someone who is upset can't always articulate *why* they feel the way they do. You may need to ask some questions to work out what is really bothering them.

Compromise

Yep, the c-word. Sometimes there's nothing to do but compromise. This means no one person 'gets their way', but everyone is part of a solution that works for all.

Example:

'Okay, Niha, since you're having trouble with the reference list, how about I take a look at it and you help Joseph with the conclusion?'

Threats

Make a threat only as a last resort, if none of the above techniques have worked, and only make a threat if you are prepared to follow through. In the case of group work at uni, the threat will probably be going to the lecturer to complain about a fellow student. Again, only do this if you absolutely must.

The above advice also applies to communication by email or other methods – remember to write clearly and say what you mean. There are many collaborative tools and applications available such as instant messaging, social media, wikis, Google Drive, Blackboard/vUWS ([vUWS help](#)), and other apps. Work with your team to find the methods that work best for you all, and visit our [Digital Literacy](#) page to find out more.

Dealing with conflicts

Like group work, conflict is a part of life. Conflict is a disagreement or argument, but it doesn't have to be bad: having an argument can really help two people learn from each other's point of view. There can be many sources of potential conflict, including personality clashes and perceptions that certain members of the group are 'taking over' or 'not pulling their weight'. Whatever the cause, if your team can't cope effectively with conflict, then your work is going to suffer.

If you're feeling angry or annoyed, try to voice your complaint in a calm manner. Use 'I' statements, e.g. 'I feel like I am doing most of the work' and avoid accusing others. Suggest changes to remedy the situation, e.g. 'I would appreciate it if Tasia wrote the conclusion and then John proofread everything.' Don't call names or be mean to other people – just focus on the problem and how to solve it. Give your team mates the benefit of the doubt, because they probably didn't set out to deliberately hurt you.

If someone else in the group says they have an issue, listen politely and calmly and try not to take offence. Don't assume you know how they are feeling or what they are thinking.

If members are not contributing or not participating, try to get them on board using the techniques discussed above. Some group assignments include an element of peer assessment where you can make a note of who may have been absent. Try to resolve conflicts within your group together and only go to the lecturer as a very last resort.

And finally, remember that you all want the same thing: to do well in the assignment. Conflict is an obstacle that has to be overcome so that you can perform the task well.

Adapted from Eunson (2012, pp. 293–303).

More information

- For information about bullying and what to do if you are bullied: [the Counselling Service page on bullying](#).
- [University of Queensland: Problems associated with group work](#)

References

Eunson, B. (2012). *Communicating in the 21st century*. Milton, Australia: John Wiley & Sons Australia.



Writing together

Collaborative writing

We'll be honest. Writing as a group is not easy. There are several models you might follow, such as the [models for 'Sharing and organising work online' described by UNSW](#), where either one person writes a lot, or each person writes a bit, or everyone writes jointly. Each method has its pros and cons, and whatever approach your group takes, you need to make sure the division of labour is fair and that you follow any assessment guidelines.

It turns out that there is a lot of ongoing research into the collaborative writing process (see for example Dillon, 1993; Hill, 2003). Wolfe (2010, p. 6) identifies three types of collaborative models:



1. Face-to-face: teams work together in person, usually with one person typing or writing at a time.
2. Divided: each team member works on a section or two of the assignment.
3. Layered: each team member is assigned a specific role. Team members work on the document in stages, adding layers and revising each other's work.

Each model has its pros and cons, depending on the type of task. A combination of methods and models may also be used. [The Writing Center at UNC-Chapel Hill](#) instead conceptualises collaboration as a spectrum.

However your team does the work, we suggest the following activity to keep things going smoothly:



Activity: Assessment plan

1. Develop a team report plan: discuss the structure of the assignment, the number of sections, and the function of each section.
2. Allocate roles for each section: instead of putting one person in charge per section, share the workload so that each part has a main writer and a reviewer. You might add a proofreading role as well. Use this table:

Section	Writer	Reviewer 1	Reviewer 2

3. Conduct a team review: go over the assignment as a team long before it's due. Make sure everything is clear, the structure is logical, and the document is coherent. Compare your work against the marking criteria and standards. Make revisions as appropriate.

Other tips for collaborative writing

Digitise

Go digital early on, and set up a document in Google Drive or a similar platform that multiple people can edit at the same time. See our [Digital Literacy](#) section for more information.

Communicate

Communicating about the writing is just as important as the writing itself. Don't make changes without discussion unless you've been allocated as proofreader. Instead, use 'track changes' in Word or 'Suggesting Mode' in Google Docs or a similar tool so that your changes and suggestions can be viewed by all and only made if everyone agrees. Pen and paper hard copy editing can also be a particularly effective mode of editing and proofreading, not least because it's often easier to catch mistakes on paper than on a computer screen.

Whatever you use, just make sure that everyone is kept up to date and that everybody knows which version of the document is the most recent. Your group might need to come up with a roster or schedule for writing and editing, and stick to it. That might sound like a lot of work to begin with, but it will save time later. Use the grid in [Assigning Tasks](#) (PDF, 31 kB) or the table above to help you decide on who will do what and when.

Edit and proofread

Writing is not a one-step process. Don't forget the [redrafting, editing, and rewriting stages](#). One approach is to assign different parts of the first draft to different people. Then have a meeting and go over the first draft as a team. What can be improved? What else needs to be done? Rewrite together or separately, and then come together again to discuss.

Then it's time to [proofread and polish](#) (PDF, 52 kB). You can do this as a group, or take turns checking each other's work. The important thing is not to proofread the parts that you've written, because you'll never pick up all the errors that someone new will.

Keep it fair

Lastly, remember to keep it fair and make sure everyone contributes to the process. Remember also not to plagiarise, either from sources or from each other. Visit our [Academic Integrity and Plagiarism](#) page to find out more, especially about collusion. If things go wrong, find help with our [strategies for dealing with conflict](#) (PDF, 61 kB).

More information

- Web-based tools you can use: [5 tools for collaborative writing](#)
- [UNSW: Group work](#) – see especially the 'Team writing' and 'Collaborative writing' sections
- [The Writing Center at UNC-Chapel Hill: Group Writing](#)
- [Pomona College: Tips for Team Work and Team Writing by Angelica Morgan](#)

References

- Dillon, A. (1993). How collaborative is collaborative writing? An analysis of the production of two technical reports. In M. Sharples (Ed.), *Computer supported collaborative writing* (pp. 69-86). London, England: Springer-Verlag.
- Hill, B. M. (2003). *Collaborative literary creation and control: A socio-historic, technological and legal analysis*. Retrieved from https://mako.cc/academic/collablit/writing/BenjMakoHill-CollabLit_and_Control.pdf
- Wolfe, J. (2010). *Team writing: A guide to working in groups*. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's.

Contact Information

ic@westernsydney.edu.au

Western Sydney University
Locked Bag 1797
Penrith NSW 2751 Australia



[WESTERNSYDNEY.EDU.AU/STUDYSMART](https://westernsydney.edu.au/studysmart)