Effective group work

Getting the most out of group work

Group assignments are an important part of university assessment. Group work develops knowledge, and communication, teamwork and learning skills, all essential for your future career. People are complex organisms, so group work is complicated. Here's how to work effectively in a group in FIVE steps.

1. Understand lecturer expectations

Group assignments are assessed in different ways: a single grade or mark as a group; individual grades or marks; or peer assessment of group performance. Check the assessment criteria on VU Collaborate or in our Unit Guide. If in doubt, ask your lecturer or tutor.

2. Build a strong group identity

At the first meeting:
- **Break the ice**: get to know each other, and sharing something personal about yourself.
- **Share your academic strengths and weaknesses.**
- **Share one or two skills you want to develop** during the group project and assessment.
- Analyse the assessment task and plan each stage of action together.
- As a group, **choose a group facilitator and a deputy**. The facilitator coordinates group meetings, offers support and suggestions, keeps the group working to deadlines, ensures that everyone has a voice, and liaises with the lecturer or support services as required. The deputy supports the work of the facilitator and takes on tasks in collaboration with the facilitator.
- **Establish one key responsibility for each member of the group**, in addition to participation in the completion of the assessment task. *It is essential that individuals agree to perform the assigned roles and seek support from others if they find it difficult.* Some important roles include:
  - The **note-taker** takes notes at meetings and emails them to group members and others as relevant
  - The **image or diagram adviser**/designer/collector and final proofreader of images and diagrams
  - The **proof-reader** checks that the task meets assessment requirements, checks for meaning and clarity at the three levels of organisation and checks required format. This is a big job, and it needs a person who is able to encourage the group to rewrite and review together as necessary.
  - The **reference overseer** checks the references in the text, and the bibliography/reference list to make sure they are complete, accurate and using the correct style.
  - The **group motivator** models supportive group behaviours. They supply prizes and snacks (from the group fund) at meetings, and they send group emails that inspire confidence and group solidarity

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- **Set some group rules**. Come to an agreement on the rules regarding group conduct. One of the big pressures is when one student does not complete the agreed tasks, and does not become a part of the group. Decide together on an appropriate response (see **Be collectively responsible** below). Remember, consensus tends to work better than majority rule or directives.

3. Meet regularly

- Meet often to review the plan and share information.
- Be clear about the purpose of the meeting.
- Make sure the meeting is run smoothly and for a set amount of time, agreed on by the whole group.
- Be positive and work to motivate each other.
- Do not leave individuals alone for too long. Make sure all are honest about their progress. Be open to the group.
- Everyone in the group reads the work of the others in the group and agrees on/adds to the information included.
- Set a meeting for final review, and don't forget to celebrate!

4. Proofread the whole document

Work together as much as possible to agree on a final proof the group assignment. Your final draft should have a consistent voice – as if you are One!

5. Be collectively responsible

- Be prepared to accept the consequences of poor group performance.
- Don't expect every member of the group to perform at the same level. Tolerate difference.
- If one member chooses not to participate and does not complete tasks as agreed, the group should decide on an appropriate course of action. This is best if it is addressed in the rules on Day 1. If there is conflict and you are not sure how to manage it as a group, the facilitator should talk with the lecturer or tutor. The note-taker should be able to provide email documentation of participation by group members.

Other resources

- Editing and Proofreading Assignments
- University of Melbourne Teaching and Learning Unit, *Groupwork as a Form of Assessment,* Staff Development Guides for Academics in the Faculty of Business and Economics, http://fbe.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/633131/Groupwork_Assessment.pdf
- Hong Kong Polytechnic University, *Basic Elements of Effective Group Work,* http://www.polyu.edu.hk/learn-to-learn/student/html/GroupProject/basicElements.htm
- Melbourne Law School Legal Academic Skills Centre, *Tips for Effective Teamwork*, http://www.law.unimelb.edu.au/lasc/professional-skills/tips-for-effective-teamwork

Having trouble planning the task or writing your ideas?

VU services are here for you:
- Make an appointment with an Academic Support and Development lecturer.
- Visit the Student Writing Mentor Space in the Learning Commons on your campus.
- Information about these services is at: www.vu.edu.au/learningsupport

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