

# Group Work

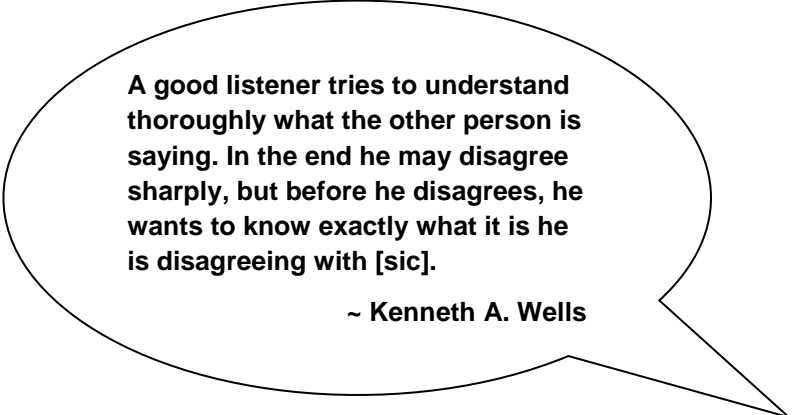
## Writing Centre Learning Guide

*Group work at university enables students to connect with each other personally and intellectually, reducing the sense of isolation felt by many students, and building a community of learners. Groups can gather more ideas than individuals, pool resources, share the workload, and promote collaboration across members. The ability to work effectively within a group is a skill that we need to develop and continue to develop throughout our lives.*

### Introduction

Group work has been shown to enhance the quality and depth of learning for students, as well as extend teamwork capabilities. Often, effective group work requires members to focus on the 'process' rather than the 'product'. This factor is valued not only at university, but also by employers in the workplace. Moreover, group work tasks provide the opportunity to develop many interpersonal skills such as:

- collaboration
- communication
- cooperation
- delegation
- diplomacy
- leadership
- mediation
- negotiation
- organisation
- responsibility
- time management
- tolerance.



**A good listener tries to understand thoroughly what the other person is saying. In the end he may disagree sharply, but before he disagrees, he wants to know exactly what it is he is disagreeing with [sic].**

~ Kenneth A. Wells

### Group assessment

Before you begin, make sure that you know how your group will be assessed. Each lecturer/tutor may assess group work differently. You will likely have to consider one of the following scenarios:

- 100% of your mark is based on the group project
- 50% of your mark is based on the project and 50% on your own contribution
- Final product receives a group mark, but you also receive a mark for your part/contribution.

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## Group expectations

It is imperative that your group has clear expectations—as individual members, and as a whole group. Your group should be able to answer the following questions:

- Who are the members of the group?
- What are the aims and objectives of the group task?
- How much time does the group have to complete the task?
- How can all members of the group contribute?
- How can all members of the group stay on task?
- What are the negotiated and agreed-upon rules of the group?

## Getting started

If you have a group of people working together contributing their different talents and perspectives and, above all, their time, you can achieve excellent results. Consider the following suggestions for how to get your group started:

- Get to know one another.
- Know how to contact each group member.
- Make sure that everyone in the group knows what is going on.
- Work out a time frame.
- Plan regular group meetings.
- Keep notes of what has been decided.
- Establish clear goals from the outset.
- Allocate tasks fairly.

## Contact details

Ask each group member for permission to make a list of contact details. In fact, you can usually send emails to class members through *MyUni*. Your group should also agree on regular contact or meeting times, perhaps immediately before or after lectures/tutorials. If a member of your group is failing to reply to emails or attend meetings, keep a record of all correspondence, in case you need to show your lecturer/tutor.

## Active listening

Often, our natural disposition at university is to fight to have our ideas heard, to attempt to command the consideration of others or to put forth our side of the argument. Communication, however, is a two-way process and if a group is to be productive, each person's position must be clearly understood. Employing active listening strategies can help to make sure this happens.

## Group roles

To aid in active listening, each member can take one of these roles to help the group be more productive. Consider the following:

- **Information Giver** - provides information and answers to the group
- **Information Seeker** - asks other group members to share information on a topic
- **Initiator** - makes suggestions and offers ideas to the group
- **Summariser** - summarises the discussion during the group meeting.

## Group dynamics

Group dynamics refers to the attitudinal and behavioural characteristics of a group. 'Norms' are the acceptable standards of conduct that should be shared by all members. To facilitate group survival, a list of norms or rules should be created to express the values of the group.

When a group establishes its own set of norms, the level of commitment, motivation and performance of the group will be enhanced. The following dynamics would be considered acceptable:

- **Compromiser** - helps the group agree when there are opposing views
- **Gatekeeper** - chairs the group discussion
- **Harmoniser** - finds something useful in other group members' contributions
- **Social Supporter** - encourages other group members.

Group cohesiveness refers to the bonding of members and their desire to remain part of the group. Despite all good intentions, however, emergent roles may develop. The following dynamics would be considered unacceptable:

- **Attacker** - is aggressive and disapproves of other contributions
- **Clown** - distracts other members and does not take discussion seriously
- **Dominator** - talks too much, interrupts and/or patronises other members
- **Non-Participant** - will not contribute and/or discourages other members.

Many other factors influence group dynamics. Attitudinal and behavioural characteristics of a group can take many forms with positive and negative outcomes. Consider the following:

ASSERTIVE BEHAVIOUR	PASSIVE BEHAVIOUR	AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ being clear about your point</li> <li>▪ being prepared to negotiate solutions</li> <li>▪ expressing your feelings honestly and with care</li> <li>▪ finding solutions to difficulties</li> <li>▪ having respect for others</li> <li>▪ listening to other people's points of view</li> <li>▪ showing understanding of other people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ apologising excessively</li> <li>▪ appearing indecisive</li> <li>▪ avoiding conflict</li> <li>▪ being vague about your ideas and needs</li> <li>▪ going along with things you do not agree with</li> <li>▪ inwardly burning with anger and frustration</li> <li>▪ keeping quiet for fear of upsetting other people</li> <li>▪ not expressing your feelings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ being loud and noisy</li> <li>▪ getting your own way no matter what</li> <li>▪ interrupting others</li> <li>▪ putting people down or manipulating them by using silence or sarcasm</li> <li>▪ putting your point across at other people's expense</li> </ul>

Adapted from <http://www.canberra.edu.au/studyskills/learning/groups> [Accessed: 7 May 2009]

## Individual expectations

Once your group has outlined its general approach to the task, you will need to divide the project into smaller subtasks and estimate how much time and effort each of them is likely to take. These subtasks need to be carefully and fairly divided amongst group members.

Group members should identify their own particular skills and preference. However, you should be prepared to renegotiate the allocation of subtasks, as a job that looked relatively small and easy in the beginning may turn out to be the most difficult.

Create a timeline for the completion of tasks and subtasks, with clear and realistic objectives to be completed by each group member before each group meeting. Write down who is responsible for what and by when, and then distribute a copy of this schedule so that individual responsibility is clearly recorded.

DATE	TIME	LOCATION	MEMBER	TASK
24 May 2009	10.00am – 12.00pm	Barr Smith Library	Joe Student	Find credible definitions for the terms (a) intercultural and (b) transnational.

## Useful resources

### *Websites*

<http://www.monash.edu.au/library/skills/resources/quick-refs/18-a-guide-to-group-work.doc>

### *Printable Resources*

<http://www.virtualteacher.com.au/groupr.pdf>

### *Online Videos*

Selection of group work videos - <http://library.leeds.ac.uk/skills-group-work>