

Creating A Study Group

A study group is a group of students taking the same course, often the same section of a course, who work together to increase their learning in the course. Such groups can make a significant difference to student success. This handout suggests strategies for organizing and conducting study groups in ways that will maximize their effectiveness. Successful study groups usually establish clear guidelines for how they will operate and discuss group dynamics and study strategies as well as content knowledge issues.

Benefits of Study Groups

Students have reported a wide range of benefits from participating in study groups. Study groups can create opportunities:

- ✓ to be part of a cooperative, rather than competitive, learning experience
- ✓ to make friends and have fun
- ✓ to deepen your learning
- ✓ to develop your study strategies.
- ✓ to increase motivation
- ✓ to feel a sense of commitment and accountability
- ✓ to develop teamwork, leadership (and sometimes conflict-management) skills

How to Form a Study Group

Some instructors require you to participate in study groups; in such cases, your group is often assigned. However, in most cases, study groups are established by students who find 2 to 5 other people who are dedicated, easy to work with, and offer a range of perspectives. Recruit members by asking your classmates and peers, by advertising (using posters on bulletin boards, announcement in class, and online forums) and/or by asking your instructor for assistance.

Getting Started

Getting off to a good start is crucial to the development of an effective study group. Start with an informal meeting of interested people. In that meeting you may want to consider:

Goals and learning needs of the group	Why do people want to participate in the group? Do they want to clarify understanding, share ideas, prepare for exams, or something else? Talking about goals explicitly can help the group to develop a shared mission.
Schedules	Establish a time for regular group meetings. Without a regular, established time, groups typically don't last very long.
Location	Choose a public place you can count on being available, or you can also choose to meet online. The library has some small rooms that you can book for study groups.
Communication strategy	How will members contact one another? Often that means choosing an online group chat you all are comfortable using.
Learning strategies	Discuss what learning strategies seem most appropriate to the group's needs. We've included a list titled Possible Learning Activities to support you in this discussion. Re-examine these regularly to make sure what you are doing is working for everyone.
Leadership	Discuss whether having someone lead the sessions would be beneficial. Rotate this role.
Guidelines for participation	Clarifying these issues early sets the group up for success.

Examples of guidelines:

- Everyone must come prepared for each session – this isn't the place to get caught up on homework people haven't had time to do. Try to read your chapter, review lecture notes and complete assignments before coming to the study group session. Bring specific questions or requests based on the work you have trouble understanding or doing.
- Everyone agrees that the study group will promote a *collaborative* learning environment where everyone will help and encourage others to find answers to the questions and concerns at hand. Everybody should have an opportunity to raise questions and express their concerns.
- Everyone agrees that they will show up on time and will let others know if they can't come.

Structure of a Typical Study Group Session

To make your regular study group sessions most productive, try following this structure:

Beginning the Session

- Create the agenda write it down where everyone can see it.
- Update members on things done in preparation for the session. Remind yourselves of any plans made last session for today's session.
- Group members talk about their current needs. Make sure every member has a chance to contribute at this stage. Add the issues raised to the written list you started in #1.
- Prioritize the issues raised. What are the most important ones to get to today? Which ones should be put off to another day?
- Decide on an activity for working on each priority issue. (See the Possible Study Group Learning Activities section of this handout for ideas on activities you might choose.) Assign a time limit to each activity. Assign one member to be the timekeeper for the session.

The Middle of the Session

- Work on the activities you identified on your agenda. If you run out of time, briefly discuss whether to extend the time or move on to other issues.

Ending the Session

- End your activities about 10 minutes prior to your time being up to discuss the following:
 - What the group accomplished today.
 - What the group wants to work on next time.
 - What group members should do to prepare for the next study group session.

Possible Study Group Learning Activities

This section includes some activities that students have found to be successful that you can try out and modify. Activities can be done by the whole group, or smaller groups of students can work together and report back to the whole group.

- ~ Take turns explaining material to the group (teaching is a great way of learning). Take an inventory of the key topics in the material, and then divide up the topics according to the number of members in the group. Take turns giving a mini lesson.
- ~ Compare notes. Make sure your notes match and check out any areas that you had trouble understanding a lecture.
- ~ Generate a list of possible test questions and make a practice test for the group. Discuss your answers at the next session.
- ~ Discuss assignments instructions. What are you supposed to do? What resources should you use? What small steps could you take that would lead to the completion of a larger assignment? What criteria is the instructor going to use to evaluate the assignment?

- ~ Peer-edit each other's written assignments. Don't tell others what to write, just give them feedback on what they wrote. How does the work measure up to the evaluation criteria for the assignment?
- ~ Practice class presentations in front of the group and give each other constructive feedback.
- ~ Work in small groups creating summaries of lectures and chapters. One person writes, another dictates the summaries, others cross-reference lecture notes with textbooks and other materials.
- ~ Create large mind maps, tables, or flow charts to illustrate the relationship between concepts in several different chapters or lectures. Break the group up into pairs and assign one branch of the map or section of the table or chart to each pair.
- ~ Have discussions about important issues or concepts, compare two theories or processes, examine the real-life application of a theory, or work through problems out loud.
- ~ Work through the study guide together.
- ~ To learn terminology or vocabulary, create flashcards and use them to practice together. Be sure to alternate between showing the side with the word and the side with the definition so that you learn the material both ways.
- ~ Have a regular study group check-up time when people can talk about what activities they are finding most useful, what activities they don't find useful and issues of group dynamics.

Overcoming Potential Obstacles

Study groups can experience difficulties, and your group should discuss those when they arise. Below are some suggestions of strategies for dealing with common study group problems:

- Does your group have people who participate too much or who don't participate enough?
 - Talk about the importance of everyone participating and have the group develop strategies to make that happen.
 - Do some learning tasks in pairs, matching quiet people with other quiet ones and talkative with talkative. Later, have each pair report back to the larger groups.
 - Break up tasks so that everyone has a part (e.g., everyone explains one concept or reviews one section) and go around the table giving each person a turn.
 - Whenever input on important issues is needed, go around the table giving each person a chance to contribute.
 - Assign each person a task for upcoming sessions. This way quieter members aren't put on the spot.
 - Occasionally give quieter members quieter tasks such as taking notes and reporting back, or timekeeping. Give more talkative members chairperson duties; making it clear that part of their role is to make sure everyone gets a turn to participate.
- Does your group get sidetracked, e.g., the session turns into a gripe-fest or becomes too much of a social event?
 - Build in break time and agree that this is when people can "vent" or tell everyone what they did on the weekend
- Do people in the group prefer learning in different ways?
 - Include a variety of study activities in your sessions so that different learning preferences are accommodated. A side benefit is that students become familiar with a broader range of learning strategies.
- Do people in the group want to focus on different things?
 - Share the time so that all members' priorities get some attention. In larger groups, divide people up into smaller groups to focus on individual interests.