

Study Groups



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This handout has two parts: one on creating and using study groups and one on communication. Since these are related topics, we will cover them together.

Good study groups can solve a number of studying issues: They can

- **resolve procrastination issues.** Because your study group times are planned in advance, you will tend to get your work done on a more regular schedule and not put it off until “later.”
- **help you learn faster.** Students in study groups learn faster than students studying alone. When you get “stuck,” you can get help and advice quickly. Explaining concepts to others helps solidify your understanding so that you need less study time later. Study group members can also help each other figure out which material is the most important and focus their time and energy.
- **get new perspectives.** Someone else may approach a problem differently, and their method might actually work better for you! Learn shortcuts from others and share what you know.
- **learn new study skills and methods.** Different people study in different ways. Take the methods that you think might help you and modify them.
- **breaks the monotony.** Studying alone can be boring and tedious. Being with other people as you study can make it more enjoyable.
- **fill in the holes of your knowledge.** Sometimes, while taking notes, you may miss an important concept. With others, you will almost certainly figure this out. On your own, you might not.



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Developing an Effective Study Group

▪ How many?

- It's best to keep a study group between 4–6 people. In mathematics, *3–5 may be better*. You should be able to fit around a long table. Having too few people is not as effective, and too many people can result in a more social group where little gets done.

▪ Who?

- You should do a *mental “interview” of each potential member*. Who comes to class on time with their work done? Who has a good attitude and pays attention in class? Who is respectful of the instructor and other class members? Who is serious about getting a good grade and not wasting time? You don't need to look for the “best” students in the class; the most effective study groups have students at a variety of levels, some more advanced, some less so. What all good group members have in common, however, is a desire to do well.

▪ Where?

- Study in *environments with few distractions*. Some study groups prefer a local coffee shop, others a study lounge on campus, and others a library.

▪ How long?

- Like individual study sessions, you should plan on *no more than 2 to 3 hours* at a time.

▪ When?

- The best study sessions meet at *regular times and days*. Many students get together after a class to begin the homework assignment, or they will schedule the study session for the day before an exam.

▪ What?

- *Have a clear goal and objective* for both the study group as a whole and for each study session. Some study groups focus on exam preparation, while others focus on completing homework assignments and understanding concepts. When you first meet, take 5 minutes to agree on what the group would like to focus on that day.

▪ Who is in charge?

Appoint a leader to keep the group on track and focused on the goal. This person can also indicate when the group is getting bogged down on a problem and suggest moving on or asking the instructor for help. While it sounds wonderful for everyone to help lead, what usually happens without an appointed leader is that no one leads.

Communicating with your peers (fellow students): Some things to consider...

- A conversation involves **more than one person talking**. If you have been talking for more than 2 minutes, stop and let someone else have a say. Then wait and see if one or two other people would like to contribute before you chime back in. If others aren't saying much, try one of the following questions?
 - Would you like to add to that idea?
 - What do you think of that strategy?
 - Can you tell me more about how you solved this problem?
 - Can you explain how you got from line 3 to line 5?
 - Can you explain that in another way?
 - Do you have a different approach to this problem?

- Encourage conversation with your **nonverbal behavior**. Remember to *SLANT*.
 - **S**it up straight.
 - **L**isten.
 - **A**nswer and ask questions.
 - **N**od to show interest.
 - **T**rack the speaker with your eyes.

- **Challenge put-downs and hurtful comments**. Humans have an innate sense of when good-natured teasing crosses the line into hurtful behavior. Do not tolerate this in your study group. For example, if a student says "that's a stupid way to solve it," simply say, "ouch! You mean you disagree with their strategy? Why?" If they repeat a comment about it being stupid, then say something like "saying it's stupid is hurtful, and that is not helpful at all. What part of it does not make sense to you?" Don't dwell on it; simply correct it and move the focus onto what matters. Above all, don't react emotionally. Be clear, be direct, be firm, but be polite.

- **Make eye contact**.

- **Encourage turn-taking**. If someone in your group is monopolizing the conversation, redirect it by asking a quiet member, "Hey, Joe, we haven't heard from you in a while. What did you do on this problem?"

- **Give people time to answer**. Some people need more time to think before they frame a response. Wait for it!

- When someone has explained some concept/idea to you, **explain it back** to them to be sure you got it correct.