Learning Enhancement Team

UEA
University of East Anglia

STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICE

Successful Group Projects

This study guide has been written for students undertaking group projects as part of their course. It will help you to manage your group activities effectively, increase group performance and maximise the benefits of group assessment.

Related guides: 'Planning a Presentation' and 'Contributing to Seminars and Tutorials'.

Group work at university

There are many occasions when you will be asked to work with other students on your course: tutorials and seminars rely on group discussion whilst group projects involve students working together to complete a piece of assessed work. This guide focuses in particular on group projects that involve such activities as:

- researching and writing a report
- devising and writing up an experiment
- working to a design brief to design a new product or service.

Group projects often involve a substantial task that is undertaken over an extended period. You may be required to manage your own work independently of your teaching staff and the outcomes of your group's work (a report, poster or presentation) may be assessed in a variety of different ways. Advice on assessment methods can be found later on in this guide.

The benefits of group work

Whatever form the group work takes on your course, the opportunity to work with others, rather than on your own, can provide distinct benefits.

- **Increased productivity and performance:** groups that work well together can achieve much more than individuals working on their own. A broader range of skills can be applied to practical activities and sharing and discussing ideas can play a pivotal role in deepening your understanding of a particular subject area.

- **Skills development:** being part of a team will help you develop your interpersonal skills such as speaking and listening as well as team working skills such as leadership, and working with and motivating others. Some of these skills will be useful throughout your academic career and all are valued by employers.

- **Knowing more about yourself:** collaborating with others will help identify your own strengths and weaknesses (for example, you may be a better leader than listener, or you might be good at coming up with the 'big ideas' but not so good at putting them into action). Enhanced self-awareness will both help your approach to learning and will be invaluable when you come to write your CV or complete job application forms.

In order to maximise these benefits, you will need to manage your group work effectively.

Stages in group work

To ensure a successful group outcome, you will find it helpful to divide your activities into a series of stages:

- familiarisation
- planning and preparation
- implementation
- completion.

Managing each of these stages effectively will greatly enhance your group performance.

Stage One - Familiarisation
This is the stage when the individual members of the group get to know each other and begin to understand the task they need to undertake. Time spent at this stage discussing your individual areas of interest and skills will be invaluable in helping your group develop a sense of its own identity (including its strengths and weaknesses). Make sure everyone understands what it is they will need to achieve. Think about:

- **the product:** i.e. a report, oral presentation or poster
    - *what guidelines have been set by your department to govern this work*?

- **the time scale:** i.e. date of final presentation or submission
    - *what things need to be done before you hand in your work?*
    - *how much time should you spend on the group project in relation to your other commitments?*

- **the assessment:** i.e. the way your activity or output will be marked
    - *do you know the assessment criteria?*
    - *will you be assessed as a group or as individuals?*

If your group needs clarification of any of these issues then consult your course tutor.

Stage Two - Planning and preparation

This is the stage when your group should plan exactly what needs to be done, how it needs to be done, and who should do what. Pay attention to the following:

- agree the different elements of the task (e.g. a poster might involve background research, written text, an overall design, graphs and images, final assembly and so on);

- agree the best way of achieving these tasks by dividing areas of responsibility amongst the group, making sure that roles and time commitments are as evenly balanced as possible;

- make the most of your different areas of expertise by dividing tasks up according to the skills of different group members;

- make an action plan of what needs to be done by when, working towards the final deadline.

Stage Three - Implementation

Whilst your group carries out its tasks you will need to preserve your group's sense of purpose. Effective communication is vital, particularly when your group activity extends over time. Here are some tips to promote good communication.

- Share addresses, telephone numbers and email addresses at an early stage to facilitate contact between members of the group.

- If possible, set up an email distribution list for rapid communication so that issues or problems can be flagged up as and when they arise.

- Establish regular meetings of the whole group to check on progress and review action plans. Take notes at these meetings to help record complex discussions.

Stage Four - Completion

The final stage of your project is often the most difficult and may require a different management approach. It will be vital to ensure that you pay close attention to detail, tie up loose ends and review the whole product rather than your discrete part of it. It is important to regroup at this stage to agree a new action plan for the final burst of activity.

Troubleshooting

Occasionally, groups can run into trouble, and it is useful to be aware of some of the problems (and the appropriate solutions) right from the start. The following list highlights some of the most common difficulties.

- **Unfair division or take-up of labour between different group members:** this can lead to resentment if someone feels they are doing all the hard work or if the group thinks that one or more members aren't doing their fair share. Use your meetings to check that people are happy with their workloads and discuss problems openly, making sure that issues are addressed as a group concern rather than putting pressure on individuals.

- **Conflict between different group members:** this might arise for many different reasons including two people competing for leadership or simple disagreement about ways forward. Don't be afraid to rotate leadership responsibilities or find ways of accommodating differing opinions. Your group practices should be flexible and democratic rather than rigid and leader-led.

- **Tackling inappropriate tasks as a whole group:** groups are notoriously bad environments for carrying out such activities as writing first drafts of documents or carrying out detailed searches. Be aware of the limitations of group activity and don't be afraid to delegate responsibility for particular tasks to individuals.

Always consult your course tutor if there are overwhelming problems in your group. An independent voice can often help diffuse tension and help your group get back on the right track.

Making the most of assessment

Group work may be assessed in a number of ways. Most commonly, groups are asked to produce a single piece of assessed work (this could be an oral presentation or written report) whilst the individual members might be asked to provide a personal account of their work (this could be another report or a work diary). Group assessment can also take place through the use of a viva with small groups being interviewed together to discuss their work or individual group members interviewed in turn to talk about their contribution.

Planning effective oral presentations

If you are making a group presentation, make sure that this is written and rehearsed as a group. Share opportunities for speaking rather than making one person do all the work (unless there are too many people in your group or there just isn't enough time). Change speakers in strategic places, using the different voices to structure your presentation (e.g. one person could take the introduction, another the main discussion, a third the conclusions). Finally, use effective linking statements to announce the handover from one speaker to another, e.g.

So far we've looked at the methods used in the design process. I would

now like to hand over to Melissa to talk about the features of the final product.

Writing a group report

Writing a group report can be challenging. If you divide responsibility for drafting chapters or sections between the different members of your group, you will need to nominate someone to take overall responsibility for pulling the final piece together. Careful copyediting at this stage is essential to make sure that the document is logical and consistent. Key things to watch out for here include:

- have the authors used the same writing style (tense/voice/person)?
- do the individual sections lead on from each other logically?
- is the use of references, units, abbreviations and notation consistent?

You will need to make sure that you have left plenty of time for this final stage.

Preparing for your viva

A viva is an oral examination. If you have been asked to discuss your group's performance in this way, make sure you meet to plan for this activity in the same way you planned your other work. This will give you an opportunity to address issues such as allocation of roles, time management and task completion. Use the notes from your group meetings to evaluate your group's performance, identifying negative as well as positive aspects (no group performs flawlessly all of the time). Remember to talk about your group's performance as a group rather than discussing the performance of individual group members.

Summary

The skills acquired from successfully managed group work will be of great use to your academic and future careers. It is essential to manage your group work effectively, planning for the different stages of group activity. Time spent discussing how your group will work together will be invaluable in helping to create a constructive working team. The effective organisation, communication and troubleshooting strategies described in this guide will help your group work productively to complete its task.

Want to know more?

If you have any further questions about this topic you can make an appointment to see a **Learning Enhancement Tutor** in the **Student Support Service**, as well as speaking to your lecturer or adviser.

  ☽ Call: 01603 592761
  🖥 Ask: ask.let@uea.ac.uk
  🖱 Click: https://portal.uea.ac.uk/student-support-service/learning-enhancement

There are many other resources to help you with your studies on our website.

Your comments or suggestions about our resources are very welcome.

	Scan the QR-code with a smartphone app for more resources.	**This guide is based on a study guide produced by Student Learning Development at the University of Leicester.**