How to work well in a group

1. Benefits of group work
You may wonder why you’ve been asked to work in a group as part of your course. Group work or collaborative work is a key part of studying at a UK university.

Group strength
Working in a group can lead to improved performance. You’ll be able to achieve more than you would on your own. Different group members can bring a varied range of skills to tasks. Sharing and discussing ideas with others can deepen your understanding.

Skills development
Being part of a team will help you to improve your listening and speaking skills. You’ll also develop skills in motivating others and in leadership. These skills will be useful throughout your academic career. They are also valued by employers.

Self-awareness
Collaborating with others will help to identify your own strengths and weaknesses as you’ll be able to see how you compare with others (for example, you may find that you’re more organised than others or find it easier to come up with new ideas). This increased self-awareness will be important when you apply for jobs. It will also make it easier for you to become a more effective learner at university.

If you’re finding group work difficult, it’s worth keeping these potential benefits in mind, so that you can try to remain positive about the experience.

2. Group roles
In successful groups, everyone contributes and has a different role to play. Usually people are naturally suited to some roles more than others. The best teams have a balanced mix of individuals whose contributions complement one another. No single role should be considered better than any other. Swain (2019) identifies seven roles that people can play in group meetings:

Compromiser - Attempts to maintain harmony and rapport among all team members by encouraging others, and recognising and resolving any differences of opinion. Willing to change their own views to reach a team decision. Good listeners, sensitive to the feelings of others and not seen as a threat.

Encourager - Energises groups when motivation is low and break any tension through humour or enthusiasm, suggesting ideas and confronting any problems.

Evaluator - Offers critical analysis of all options before coming to an informed decision. Logical, analytical, objective. Capable of evaluating competing proposals.
Ideas person - Suggests original and potentially radical new ways to organise the task or solve problems. Not too concerned with practicalities. Big picture rather than detail. May get bored

Leader - Ensures the group remains on-task, coordinating resources, assigning tasks and driving members to achieve a positive end result. Tend to be outgoing individuals who have to be careful not to be domineering. They may sometimes steamroller the group but get results quickly

Recorder - Keeps the group focused and organised through timekeeping and note-taking, ensuring that every member understands their individual responsibilities and keep to deadlines (time keeper). Acts as the memory of the group.

Summariser - Clarifies objectives and elaborates on others’ ideas, wrapping up the group’s discussion and conclusions. Calm reflective individuals. Tie-up loose ends. Good mediators and seek consensus

You can have a mismatch between the people in your group and the roles that need to be covered – lots of people with some skills and not many with others. You’ll need to be willing to be flexible and maybe take on a role that isn’t your first preference.

3. Sabotaging the group
Everyone has the potential to sabotage a group, but different personalities can sabotage it in different ways.

- Someone who lacks confidence could disengage, which could make the whole group lack motivation.
- Someone who wants to be the leader or who has a forceful personality could cause conflict.
- Someone who has strong ideas and who goes off on their own could confuse the group leading them to head in different directions.
- Someone who likes to chat could distract the group by preventing them from keeping them to the required task.

Even though there are different ways in which a group can be sabotaged, some of the solutions are similar. They’ll all help to prevent conflict and collisions in your group.

4. Be clear on your project brief
- As a group read the assessment criteria
- As a group read the brief carefully:
  - Break down what is being asked of you
  - Are all parts group work or are there individual elements?

Make sure that you are clear about the extent to which you will be expected to work as a group and whether there are elements of the work that you are expected to produce as an individual.
Discuss the task that you have been set and break it down together. This will help your group to understand what tasks need to be completed to achieve a successful outcome. Try not to end up criticising the task, as this won’t help you to make progress.

5. Set ground rules
All members of the group should strive to create a supportive atmosphere that allows everyone to feel comfortable expressing their thoughts without the threat of being dismissed, ridiculed or ignored. Setting ground rules will help with this.

- Whilst some people are naturally confident in group work situations, others may find putting their points forward challenging.
- Clear expectations will make it easier manage the group work experience and if things do go wrong it’s easier to hold people to account.

Think about:
- how often you will meet
- what technology you will use for those meetings
- how the group will communicate between meetings
- how decisions will be documented
- interpersonal issues such as making sure that everyone has a role and treating one another professionally

Time management can be a problem as different people think about time in different ways. This can be cultural or it can just be personal. Just because someone is always late to your meetings does not necessarily mean they do not care about the work. Some people like to get work done as soon as it is set, some only work well close to a deadline.

In your initial meetings find out how other people feel and how they like to work. If you know what to expect from your fellow group members you are less likely to get stressed by it. Set some ground rules that are about minimum expectations so that you feel you are making progress.

6. Find communication methods that work for everyone
Don’t just rely on face to face meetings – use email and technology too. Share ideas about what communication methods you’ve used in the past and what has worked well for you. Be supportive if others are struggling to communicate easily.

Don’t just take notes from your meetings, think about sharing photos, documents etc in a shared online space which everyone can use. There are lots of apps and software that you could use for this. All Teesside students have access to Microsoft Teams. This might be a good place to start.

Language differences
In some groups you will have people from different backgrounds who speak different languages. This can be a real benefit because more interesting ideas come from more diverse teams. There may however be issues with communication and understanding. The strategies that you use to overcome this are part of a set of internationalisation skills that you need to develop.
Many domestic students see language issues as someone else's problem: that international students simply need to improve their English. This is not true. The ability to communicate well when there are language differences is a skill that EVERYONE needs to learn. Understanding English spoken in different accents can be an extremely useful skill to develop.

Be honest and open when you do not understand something. Try not to feel embarrassed if you have to ask someone to repeat something or explain it in a different way. Equally, don't feel offended if you are asked to repeat something several times. Remember that words are only part of how we communicate. Facial expressions, gesture and other body language can all help understanding.

7. Agree how decisions will be made
Your group should discuss in the first meeting how you want decisions made. Hartley and Dawson (2010) give a number of different options. They all have different advantages and disadvantages.

Consensus
Everyone comes to agreement as to the best option.
Pros = everyone is committed to the decision and feels part of it
Cons = can take more time. May need a chairperson who is good at managing discussion

Compromise
Some group members change their view to meet others half-way
Pros = Gets the group to a decision
Cons = Does not always resolve underlying issues. May lead to conflict later

Leader decides
The group leader decides on behalf of everyone else
Pros = Simple, often quick
Cons = Possible team resentment, risk of poor choice and limited group responsibility

Vote
Members choose from different options - the majority wins
Pros = usually considered fair, efficient in ‘non-even’ groups
Cons = can lead to a split group if there’s an equal number on each side. May give problems if there are strong minority opinions

Pros/Cons table
The group sets out the advantages and disadvantages of different options.
Pros = Efficient and can help to clarify a difficult and complicated decision
Cons = Can be time consuming and choices may still appear quite closely matched

Random
Different options are 'put in the hat'. The winner is selected by chance.
Pros = Quick, allows groups to move forward where other methods have failed
Cons = Can result in poor/ill-informed choices
8. Troubleshooting: the problem of free-loaders
One of the main areas of conflict within groups can be perceived free-loaders. You may have a group member who is not pulling their weight: not attending meetings, missing deadlines, not completing work assigned to them. It 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.

This can be more of a problem if you do not start off in the best way. 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.

BUT a lot of students who are thought to be free-loading have other issues:

- Are they actually finding the work really difficult? You can help by supporting them to gain confidence in the work.
- Are they struggling to find time (perhaps due to other assignments or family or work commitments)? You can help by being more flexible with meeting times and ways of communicating.
- Are they having other very real non-university problems? You can sympathise and suggest they talk to the tutor to see what can be done, or encourage them to seek help from Student Life.
- Do they feel that their ideas are unwanted by the rest of the group? Sometimes students aren’t encouraged to contribute if the rest of the group gives them the impression that their skills are poor. You can help by being encouraging.
- Are they just not bothered about the group work? Do they have different personal goals? If so, these should be talked about in the early meetings so that you are aware of how each other feels about the work and how important it is to each other.

Many group work assignments give you the opportunity to rate the input from your fellow group members and marks are awarded accordingly. Alternatively you may need to submit minutes of meetings or contribute to a forum. Non-contributions are therefore noted. If you have a bad free-loader in your team the other members may have to share out their workload to make sure everything is covered.

9. Troubleshooting: managing conflict
Be flexible
Is there a different way of doing something? For example, you might be trying to do something as a whole group that would be better carried out by individuals. Groups are not good places to write first drafts of documents or carry out detailed searches. Be aware of the limitations of group activity and don’t be afraid to delegate responsibility for particular tasks to individuals.

Rotate leadership
If conflict is being caused by clashes between two people competing for leadership or disagreements 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.
**Acknowledge diversity**
Be conscious of disabilities, mental health conditions and learning difficulties – other group members may or may not disclose a disability. Be aware that someone with autism may experience difficulties with group work. Autism can affect social interactions and time management which are essential parts of group work. Students who have been through the disability assessment process may be able to choose an alternative form of assessment (e.g. do their section of the presentation alone with the lecturer).

**Create a supportive atmosphere**
Be open and willing to listening to other views. If it is YOU that is in conflict with another group member, then remember that the others may not see things the same way as you and may not recognise your issues. Take the time to explain them, even if you find it difficult, people cannot help or change unless they understand fully.

### 10. Tips for group presentations

**Content: who is doing what?**
- Be clear about dividing sections and identifying who is responsible for which section.
- How much time have you got? Divide your material into main points you want to make.
- Decide together what the **title** of each slide is going to be and in what **order** they are going to come. Based on your research you should be able to come up with a sentence that sums up each slide (this should be the title). Make sure there is a clear beginning, middle and end to the presentation. Now **decide who is creating each slide**. Titles can be adapted slightly by individuals if necessary.
- Decide on one person (or two if they will work together) to bring the whole thing together at the end and make the presentation look like a coherent whole – consistent layout. This should be the person with the most design skills, give that person fewer slides to prepare as bringing it together is not necessarily a quick job.

**Make sure everyone is involved**
If some group members are keener or more confident than others, it can be tempting to allow them to create the whole presentation and to either present it all or to delegate sections to other group members. Neither approach is likely to work well. If only one person presents, it does not show good group work. If people are given slides without being involved in creating them, they may struggle to explain their content.

**Plan a rehearsal schedule that everyone can attend**
- You ideally need to rehearse more than once together as you will probably overrun to start with.
- Think about possible questions from the audience.
- If possible check the room layout and equipment before the presentation.
- Where will everyone sit/stand when not speaking? Sit in the order that you present.
- It will be best if you each deliver the slides you created but the person who brought it together should also have an equal role so you may want to decide to give them a few extra too.
Handovers should demonstrate good teamwork
Make sure you know what the next person is going to say. This makes a good structure as well because you can then sum up and then pass on. (e.g. "I'm now going to hand over to xxxx who will talk about..." "Thank you xxxx"

Listen to the other speakers
- It’s tempting to switch off you’re said your own piece but the audience will pick up on those not paying attention and it shows a lack of team spirit.
- Making eye contact for even a sentence or two per slide can make a different to audience engagement – you shouldn’t however get marked down if you don't make eye contact (you may have autism and find making/maintaining eye contact difficult).

Have a Plan B
Have a back-up plan in case someone is sick or can't attend for other reasons. Be familiar with what the others are delivering. Have an understudy for each section, who is ready to step in if necessary.

11. Reflect on your own strengths and weaknesses
- What qualities do you bring to a group? What areas might you need to work on?
- The more aware you are of how you work and your own strengths and weaknesses, the more prepared you will be to take on the most suitable role within a group, reducing the risk of you sabotaging a group. Self-awareness will also enable you to be more considerate of other people who are different from you.
- You may be asked to reflect on the process of group work as part of the assignment, or you may be asked at a future job or work placement interview to give an example of how you have worked well in a group.
- Keep a journal during your group activities – record your feelings and observations. After the event draw up a strategy for developing aspects that you feel you could perform better.

There are tools you can use to gain more insight into your personality, learning preference or possible group role. For example you could fill in a free questionnaire to find out your MBTI personality type or your VARK learning preference. You could read through Belbin team roles. The questionnaire costs money but you can read the descriptions and check which one sounds most like you.

References