

# group papers

*Working in a group is a fundamental professional skill. However, group papers often present unique challenges for writers. This handout will help you navigate the process of writing a group paper.*

## Building the Team

### Make Introductions

To begin, group members should introduce themselves and describe their writing strengths and weaknesses.

**Example:** Hi! I'm Sal. I feel like I'm good at organizing and outlining, but I'm not as familiar with APA.

Group members should also discuss their past experiences writing group papers. If you had a particularly successful group paper experience, be sure to share the strategy that made it work.

**Example:** In the last group I was in, we made a style guide before we started writing, and that made merging everything together so much easier.

### Exchange Contact Information

Group members should exchange contact information (cell phone numbers, emails, etc.) so that all members can communicate efficiently as they complete the assignment.

### Assign Roles

If the group deems it necessary, select a leader. This person can act as the group facilitator (e.g., finding a space and time to meet) and also help keep the group accountable.

Even if you don't select a leader, you should elect a note taker. This person can provide equal access to comprehensive notes, provide a record of group meetings, and assist in information management.

## Planning the Paper

### Review the Assignment

Make sure that everyone in the group understands the assignment. If the assignment includes a rubric, review it, and make sure that everyone agrees on what is most important about the assignment.

Pay attention to specific requirements such as page limit and preferred format.

## Brainstorm

Once everyone understands the assignment, the group should begin brainstorming. There are several questions to ask at this stage in the process:

- What do we already know about our topic?
- What do we still need to learn about our topic?
- What are the professor's expectations for this assignment?

Make sure that your note taker records the material generated during this process.

*Note:* For more information on rhetorical constraints and what to do during the planning stage of the writing process, please see our "Writing Process" [handout](#).

## Delegate Assignments

After you brainstorm, you will have a sense of the initial work that needs to be done. Sometimes, this work will be conducting research. Other times, it will be jumping into the first draft. Regardless of the task, make use of each member's strengths when dividing the work. Also, be sure to divide tasks equitably to ensure buy-in and a sense of fairness within the group.

If responsibilities need to be changed during the writing process, make sure that all group members agree on the changes. If not, it is important to compromise with each other so that no group member feels responsible for more than their share of the work.

## Create an Outline

Creating an outline reduces the duplication of work. Before beginning your draft, sit down together and outline your paper, plotting specific items that need to be addressed in each section. Be as specific as you can. It is frustrating to spend hours on a section only to find that it is ultimately redundant.

*Note:* For more information on creating an outline, please see our "Organization" [handout](#).

## Establish a Timeline

Once specific tasks have been assigned and recorded, assign due dates for completion, bearing in mind that the different components will still need to be compiled and reviewed at the end.

In order to determine appropriate dates for individual tasks, work backwards from the final due date of the assignment.

## Standardize Your Writing Style

Use a consistent writing style throughout the entire project. This includes using the same acronyms, pronouns, and format (e.g., headings, margins, font, etc.).

## Look Ahead to Compiling

There are multiple ways to combine the writing of the group members (e.g., a Google Doc, a Word document, an e-mail to the group leader). The group should decide on one method to be used to simplify the process.

# Writing the Draft

## Tracking Your Progress

Team members need to communicate with each other as they work on their assigned tasks. This can be done through scheduled check-ins, a shared Google Doc, e-mails, or texting.

It is not the responsibility of the leader to track down group members; everyone should be reporting to the leader independently and take responsibility for their portion of the work.

## Compiling & Synthesizing

When compiling the document, compare each member's section to the original outline. Look for areas that are redundant or missing.

# Finishing the Project

## Revision

Once the initial draft is compiled, the first read-through should focus on global concerns. Don't worry about typos at this stage. Instead, ask yourselves,

- Does the paper fulfill the assignment?
- Are there any redundant sections?
- Are there any missing sections?
- Does the paper have a cohesive voice?

*Note:* For more information on revision, please see our [handout](#) on this topic.

## Editing

Based on what you find during the revision process, edit the paragraphs and sentences of the paper until it feels cohesive. This task may be performed by all group members or by one.

*Note:* For more information on editing, please see our [handout](#) on this topic.

## Proofreading

Finally, each group member should read through the final document to catch any lingering typos or errors.

*Note:* For more information on proofreading, please see our [handout](#) on this topic.

# Handling Emotions & Interpersonal Problems

Working in a group can create difficult emotions like distrust, fear, anger, and humiliation. These emotions are very strong, and—if left unattended—may derail your working relationships.

If emotional problems arise in your group, separate “people problems” (i.e., something is wrong with one of the team members) from substantive problems:

- Try to see the situation from the other person's perspective.

- Don't deduce the other person's intentions from your own fears. It is common to assume that someone plans to do what you fear they will.
- Avoid blaming the other person for the problem. Blame is generally counterproductive.
- Discuss each other's perceptions of the problem. Explicit discussion of each side's perception will help both sides to better understand each other. Also, such discussion may reveal shared perceptions. Acknowledging shared perceptions can strengthen relationships and facilitate productive negotiations.

In addition, group members should use effective communication and seek creative solutions to problems:

- Focus on the person speaking. Don't listen with one ear while planning your response simultaneously.
- When it is your time to respond, think quietly for a minute until you know what you want to say and how you want to say it. Don't just blurt out a response without thinking about the consequences.
- Use active listening (e.g., eye contact, head nodding, positioning body toward speaker), which allows you to confirm that you understood both the substantive content and the feelings behind the words.
- Use "I messages," versus "you statements," which allow you to express your feelings without directly attacking the other person. Attacking someone is likely to evoke a defensive and/or hostile response.

**Incorrect:** Why can't you just respond? It's a simple email. Tell us what you think!

**Correct:** When people do not respond to group emails, I feel like thoughts are being ignored.

## References

- The Beyond Intractability Project, the Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado. (n.d.). Group projects: A conflict resolution guide for students. Retrieved from <http://www.beyondintractability.org/educationtraining/group-projects>
- Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning. (n.d.). Working in groups. Retrieved from <http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/wigintro.html>
- Gradschools.com. (n.d.). Teamwork: Seven technologies to make group work easier. Retrieved from <http://www.gradschools.com/article-detail/teamwork-seven-technologies-to-make-group-work-easier-2093>
- Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. (n.d.). Making a thesis or dissertation support group work for you. Retrieved from <http://www.rackham.umich.edu/downloads/publications/DissSuppGrp.pdf>
- University of Pittsburgh. (2008, August 21). Tips for working in groups. Retrieved from <http://www.speaking.pitt.edu/student/groups/smallgrouptips.html>
- University of South Carolina Libraries. (2015, March 31). Organizing your social sciences research paper: How to manage projects. Retrieved from <http://libguides.usc.edu/content.php?pid=83009&sid=1486574>