

Academic Skills Program

Working in Groups

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Introduction

In nearly every discipline in the University of Canberra you will encounter group assignments. Generally this is a compulsory part of your course. Students who are not used to this approach sometimes feel anxious about managing the group work process, and indeed, it is often difficult to keep a team together. Some of the problems that students encounter are discussed here, as well as strategies you can use to make sure that your group runs smoothly and achieves a successful outcome.

Remember that successful groupwork requires the following attributes:

- **tolerance**
- **consultation**
- **inclusivity**
- **assertiveness**
- **sensitivity to other cultures and values**

Summary of this page

Group assignments are set to prepare you for your professional future, to give you a chance to tackle significant projects, and to enable you to demonstrate teamwork skills in your CV.

For a group assignment to work well, you will need to:

- get to know each other
- know how to get in contact with each other
- make sure that everyone in the team knows what is going on
- establish clear goals from the outset
- work out your time frame
- plan and attend regular group meetings
- keep notes of what has been decided
- allocate tasks fairly
- deal positively and quickly with 'bludgers' (those who do not pull their weight in the group)

Common problems that occur in group assignments:

- Misunderstandings about responsibilities
- (Perceived) lack of commitment in some group members
- Personality clashes
- One person doing all the work

To avoid these problems occurring, you need to adopt assertive (not aggressive) behaviour. Learn the difference between assertion and aggression.

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Why do lecturers set group assignments?

1. To prepare you for your professional future.

The main reason that lecturers set group assignments is to prepare you for professional situations. In the real world you will find that you will almost certainly have to work in groups usually not groups of your own choosing. You have to be able to pull together and reach a successful goal.

2. To give you a chance to tackle significant projects

You can achieve much more if you have a group of people working together, contributing their different talents and perspectives and, above all, their time. In group assignments you can tackle much more significant projects, and often these are projects of professional importance.

3. To enable you to demonstrate teamwork skills in your CV.

A record of good performance in a group assignment is an excellent contribution to your curriculum vitae. Employers are particularly interested in teamwork skills and what better way to impress them than to show them a really professional piece of work you have produced in a group assignment.

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Making the process work well

You could use the following steps as a checklist when you set up your group.

1. Get to know each other

The serious business of work will go more smoothly if you know each other. So the first thing to do is introductions. Later, you might like to share some social activity even if it's just a coffee at the Iguana. (Make sure that the social activity does not exclude anyone eg some students may not be comfortable with a group excursion to the Gypsy Bar!)

2. Check that you know how to contact each other

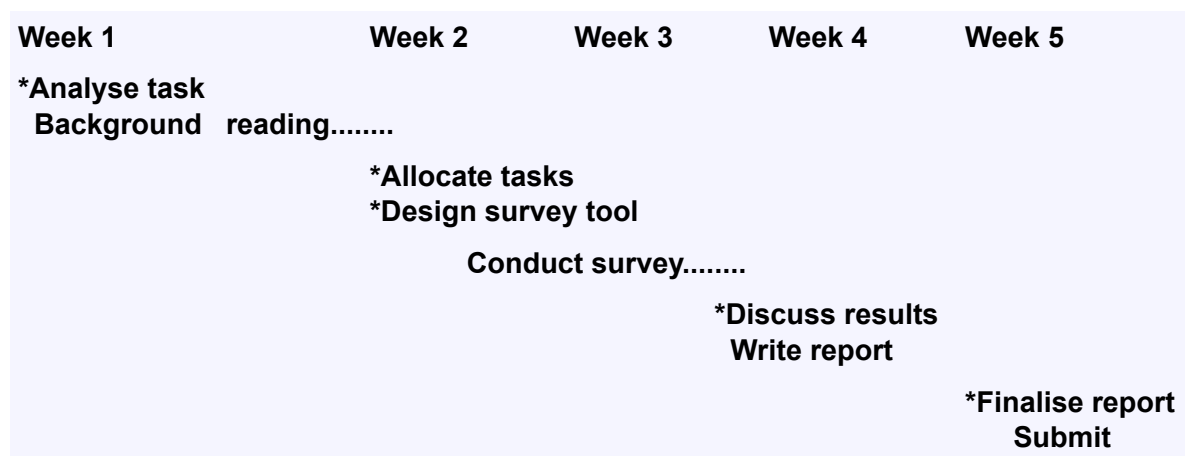
Make sure every member of the group feels equally valued. You might need to make a special effort to include everyone. Don't let anyone feel like an outsider: one male student in a group of women may feel an outsider, as may one Australian student in a group of international students.

3. Establish clear objectives

Spend time together analysing the task, and make sure that you all have a common understanding of what is required. You might like to discuss your overall goals too are you aiming for the best possible product, or will you be satisfied with a Pass? If there are some group members who are more committed to achieving high grades, they may have to be prepared to do a greater share of the work. It's better to know that up-front than to whinge about it later.

4. Identify your time frame

Work out what tasks have to be done and when. You might like to plot this on a Gantt chart, like the one that follows:



*Denotes task for meeting

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5. Agree on meeting dates, times and venues

Make sure you schedule your group meetings well ahead. There should be an agreed commitment to attend group meetings, so schedule the meetings when everyone can come.

The venue also influences how successfully you can work. It should be a place where you can talk without interruption, with proper work spaces. Its often a good idea to use the study group rooms in the Library (book in advance).

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6. Keep notes during your meetings, and circulate them

This is a good idea, because later you can say, Hey, you promised to do that jobs in the meeting notes! Also, it avoids any misunderstandings about what was agreed, and it avoids people going over the same ground again and again.

7. Identify specific tasks, and allocate them

This is important to make sure that the work is divided fairly and effectively. Who has what skills or resources? do you have a good graphic designer who will organise the layout? or someone who is a good proofreader? someone who is good at theory?

You may also like to choose a chairperson and a secretarybut do so cautiously! A chairperson should be someone who is strongly committed to the task and has the determination (and diplomacy) to keep things running smoothly. So dont just choose the noisiest or most self-confident person.

8. Achieve your agreed outcomes

Remember that not everyone will have the same level of commitment or the same values and attitudes. You should be able to expect commitment from your team membersbut, just as in the real world, you may find yourself working with some bludgers. Try to deal with this as positively as you cangetting angry or offended is not going to help much,and your lecturer (just like your future boss) is not likely to be too sympathetic if you complain about your group members.

9. Debrief

Once you have completed the task, it is a good idea to debrief share with each other what went well and what didnt. Its good to end on a positive note. Even if you just spend five minutes after class one day, its worth doing this.

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Some problems you may encounter

Here are some of the most common problems that occur in group assignments:

- Misunderstandings about responsibilities
- (Perceived) lack of commitment in some group members

- Personality clashes
- One person doing all the work

To avoid these problems occurring, you need to adopt assertive (not aggressive) behaviour.

Assertive behaviour in group work

Assertive behaviour means looking for win-win outcomes in communication in which everyone ends up feeling good about things.

It does NOT mean getting everyone else to behave in the way you would like them to behave (this is aggressive behaviour), and it does NOT mean allowing other people to let you do all the work and have all the worry (this is passive behaviour).

Take a moment to consider the following chart, remembering that cultural ways of communicating will complicate this picture and demand extra consideration and flexibility.

ASSERTIVE BEHAVIOUR	PASSIVE BEHAVIOUR	AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • being prepared to negotiate solutions • listening to other peoples points of view • showing understanding of other peoples situations • finding solutions to difficulties • being clear about your point • having self-respect and respect for others • respecting other peoples values and ideas • expressing your feelings honestly and with care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • keeping quiet for fear of upsetting other people • avoiding conflict • not expressing your feelings • going along with things you dont agree with • apologising excessively • inwardly burning with anger and frustration • being vague about your ideas and needs • appearing indecisive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • getting your own way no matter what • getting your point across at other peoples expense • being loud and noisy • interrupting others • putting people down • manipulating people by using silence or sarcasm <p>NB. Aggressive behaviour can also be conveyed very politely</p>

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