

## **FAST FACTS**

# **Group Study**

## **Making it Work for You**

*“I wish I had a study group for every course! It is an amazing help to know that you can rely on other students for support in learning. You are all in the same place together and when you’re all working toward the same goals, you know that you want each other to succeed.”*

*— Allison, Design*

*“Effective teamwork is all about making a good, well-balanced salad – not whipping individuals into a single batch of V8.”*

*— Sandra Richardson, organizational development consultant*

*“Learning results from what the student does and thinks and only from what the student does and thinks. The teacher can advance learning only by influencing what the student does to learn.” — Herbert Simon*

Studying with peers is perhaps one of the most effective ways to learn and process course material and concepts. Why? Collaborating with others in a learning environment is not a new or modern educational concept. In the United States, the one-room schoolhouse dated back to the 1700’s and was commonplace in rural communities. Students would work together to learn common material in an effort to meet particular learning outcomes. The one-room schoolhouse became its own learning community: a group of peers who collaboratively worked together toward a common goal.

Whether it’s a study group that comes together to prepare for a big test or a group that works together throughout the semester, study groups are a great way to build learning through the sharing of ideas and knowledge. Working with others who share your desire to succeed in a course fosters a working and practical understanding of the course material. Your questions can be answered and discussed in a supportive and understanding environment since everyone is on the same page and speaking from a fellow student perspective. Also, verbalizing what you think you know, read or heard can allow any misperceptions or incomplete understanding to be addressed. Finally, trying out your ideas with others provides feedback to potentially sharpen, deepen or broaden your initial learning.

We’ve outlined a few guidelines for you in this Fast Fact. Many of the following tips may apply primarily to long-term study groups, but may also help when organizing and working in a short-term group. Group study may be a new concept for you, but don’t be afraid to try something new and effective in learning.

**Note:** Before you begin to organize a study group, consult your course syllabus. Some professors don’t permit collaborative work on homework problem sets or projects and policies differ from class to class. Be sure to determine the collaborative parameters for each particular course in which you are enrolled.



# Group Study

## Getting Organized

Now that you are ready to be part of a collaborative learning study group, it is time to think of how to get the group organized and ready to create a successful learning community.

### 1. Put together a small group.

Studies show that limiting the number to six members allows for a manageable and strong collaborative study group.

There are two general approaches to forming a study group:

- Invite students you already know are interested and who would be valuable contributors to a study group. (Keep in mind, however, that a group made up of your best friends may prove counterproductive since you may have lots of other topics of conversation that may distract you).
- Approach the professor and ask him/her to solicit interest from others in the class during lecture or through Blackboard. Give the professor your name as a point of contact for organizing the group.

Either approach requires that you have a clear goal and vision for why the group should exist and what you want to accomplish. This helps give the group immediate focus and ensures that you are gaining members who are participating for similar reasons.

After you have identified the group members:

- Exchange contact information.
- Arrange an initial meeting being careful to find a time that works for all who are interested.

### 2. Hold the planning meeting.

Once your initial meeting is arranged, it is time to plan your first meeting/session. This may not be to cover any course material, but instead to set goals and expectations for the group. This step is very important. It allows your new study group to have a strong sense of expectation for all members and direction for what you want to accomplish. All members of the study group should participate in this process. Following is a sample agenda for your first study group meeting.

Once you have had your first initial meeting, then it is time to learn together! Remember: taking the time to organize your group—with high expectations for its success—will only help the dynamics of the group run more effectively.

#### Study Group Planning Meeting (Sample Agenda)

- A. Introductions
- B. Establish ground rules for attendance and participation:
  - Set meeting time and place.
  - Turn off all cell phones.
  - Agree to attend all classes.
  - Agree that there will be no copying of homework.
- C. Discuss the role of the rotating group leader. Taking turns sharing this role among the group allows each person to participate actively while splitting up leader responsibilities such as: sending e-mail or text reminders, keeping on task and facilitating discussions.
- D. Set goals for your group.
- E. Set guidelines.
  - Be respectful of others and do not interrupt.
  - Feel free to disagree, but do so respectfully.
  - Keep the discussion positive.
  - Do not criticize group members.
  - If a problem arises in the group, open the discussion and fix the problem.

***“Teamwork is the ability to work together toward a common vision. The ability to direct individual accomplishments toward organizational objectives. It is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results”***

***— Andrew Carnegie***



# Group Study

## Working With Your Group

Like any relationship, groups go through a process of development and change throughout the course of their “lifespan.” According to Knapp (1984), there is a period of coming together when group members work to establish what they will be doing together and how they’ll go about doing it. Then there is a period of building and doing — going over lecture notes, doing homework, studying for exams, etc.—which will hopefully lead to achievement. Finally, there’s a period where group members face the option to renew their relationship or part ways.

As the group grows together, members must learn how to interact successfully. The following are required for successful group interaction:

### 1. Expectations.

Clearly establish expectations and goals for the group. Each person has his/her own individual expectations and goals, and it’s important to recognize what overlaps and what does not in order to be able to establish a common goal. Be sure that your individual and collective expectations align with the course collaboration standards. *Suggestion: Write down your group goals and review them periodically.*

### 2. Equal Contribution.

Establish a precedent that encourages all of the members to actively participate. *Suggestion: Clearly establish what each member is to do. For example:*

- Come prepared with five questions on the material to be addressed.

- Write one possible test question. If you can gather test questions weekly, you will have a “bank” of test questions to review prior to the exam.
- Solve and explain a difficult concept to the other members of the group.
- Complete a practice exam.
- Review a set of lecture notes.
- Practice a presentation and/or give feedback

### 3. Balanced Decision Making.

Not all decisions need to be agreed upon by the group as a whole, nor should one person make all of the decisions for the group. Rather, it’s important to recognize that different types of decisions require different levels of group involvement.

### 4. Shared Leadership.

For any kind of achievement, certain tasks must be completed. If everyone in the group wants to be the spokesperson and no one wants to take care of the details of the project, such as scheduling meetings, then the group will fail. True group leadership is demonstrated by an individual filling whatever role is most needed by the group in order to work toward cohesiveness and group success—even if that role is not the most visible. *Suggestion: Designate a group leader for each group session. This leader will be responsible for sending out a meeting reminder and leading the group discussion.*

### 5. Mutual Respect.

Demonstrating respect for other people is important in any interaction. A simple way to do this is to remain goal-oriented and show your group members that

all of you are equals, especially when distributing work. Respect is also important in a discussion: you won’t always have positive comments for your group members, so it’s important to learn how to give constructive criticism and assert your thoughts without being needlessly aggressive. *Suggestion: Exert your energy into communicating clearly, and approach disagreements intentionally (See How to Disagree Respectfully).*

### 6. Commitment.

It’s important to let your group members know that you are committed to the group. And while **your actions** (such as showing up for meetings and doing what you’ve said you’d do) **speak louder than words**, giving confirming messages or expressing your solidarity with the group’s identity and goals is another way to establish a positive group dynamic. *Suggestion: At the planning meeting, establish in writing what will be expected of each group member so that everyone is clear on what they will need to do and can agree on it.*

### 7. Group Ownership.

Invest yourself in the work of your group so that you can feel proud to sign your name to the final product. By doing the needed coursework, coming to the study group prepared, and involving yourself in group interaction, you are taking ownership of both your own learning and the success of the group. *Suggestion: Keep your progress in mind as you work together toward the group goals. Seeing your progress can help to keep you motivated.*



# Group Study

## Communication

Effective communication is one of the most important aspects in an effective group dynamic. The following communication strategies can help you avoid possible issues.

**How to Avoid Miscommunication.** Miscommunication is one of the most common and difficult obstacles to a productive group discussion. So rather than jumping to conclusions or reacting in the moment, check again to make sure you've understood correctly.

Try paraphrasing what the other person has said and directly ask if what you've heard is what they meant. The same goes with your messages. Try to make sure that your group members really understand what you're saying and own your ideas by using "I" messages that won't put your group mates on the defensive.

(For example, saying, "I'm not clear on what you mean" as opposed to "That makes no sense").

### How to Disagree Respectfully.

Even when group members have communicated clearly, they won't always agree with each other. However, encountering differing opinions in a group discussion is actually a good thing; it shows that the members feel free to think for themselves.

The power of having different perspectives aimed at a common outcome is lost when those perspectives are stifled. It's better to disagree within the group and catch a mistake, than to agree and have a flawed final product.

When disagreements happen, members should follow these guidelines:

- Allow everyone a chance to be heard.
- Discuss the idea, not each other.
- Negotiate the best possible decision for the group as a whole.
- Once the decision is made, move on.

**How to Stay Focused.** There is a time for socializing and a time for getting work done. Make sure that all discussions, projects, and tasks contribute to the main goals of the study group. Initially—and then periodically—revisit the shared vision, project deadline and progress of the group to ensure that everyone keeps these in mind.

Encourage group members to point out when the meetings are getting off track and drifting from the shared goals. Use the attached "Study Group Session Report" to collect feedback and help reflect on the group process.

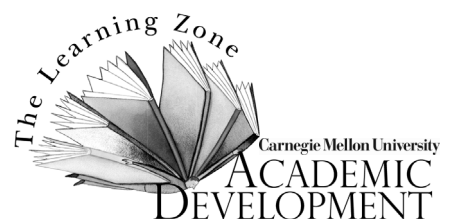
Taking a few minutes to collect feedback at the end of the session is a good way to provide an opportunity for members to raise concerns they may not be comfortable raising with the entire group. It is also an opportune way to increase retention of what was studied by asking members to reflect and summarize what they have learned.

*"I feel like I should have joined the group much sooner. Interactive discussion and practice are so much more useful to me than lectures."*

— *Corinne, Engineering*

*"Study groups are a great way to get a different perspective on your course material. With a study group, other students can walk you through their thought process and teach the material in a way that you can understand. Study groups are a vital part of my study schedule."*

— *Alex, Engineering*



# Study Group CONTRACT

Course: \_\_\_\_\_

Group Members:

Name	Signature	E-Mail	Cell Phone

## Get Organized

Why are you forming this study group?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

When will you meet (day and time)? \_\_\_\_\_

Where will you meet? \_\_\_\_\_

How will you remind each other of your meeting? \_\_\_ E-mail \_\_\_ Phone/Text

What responsibilities will you assign each group member?

Name	Responsibility

## Remember to:

1. Set goal(s) for each session using the Session Report on the back of the contract.
2. Discuss openly and respectfully; listen to each other.
3. Reflect on how you met your goal(s) for the study group session.
4. Set responsibilities for each group member.
5. Assign a rotating group leader, who will remind members of the session meeting time and location.
6. Set your next meeting day and time.

## Study GROUP SESSION REPORT

Course: \_\_\_\_\_ Date & Time of Session: \_\_\_\_\_ Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Sign-In	Name	Responsibility

Study Session Goal: \_\_\_\_\_

Study Session Reflection:

- What content did you cover in this session?
  
- Describe the group interaction. Give examples of positive interaction and ways you can improve.
  
- Do you feel that you gained a better understanding of the material from participating in this study group session? Why or why not?

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