

Muhlenberg

Guide to Effective Study Groups

Academic Resource Center

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Benefits

Participation in a study group is not a substitute for individual study and reflection. However, working cooperatively with others can help to clarify and consolidate information you are trying to learn. There are a number of advantages to learning within a social context.

Study groups can:

- Expose you to different ways of thinking and learning.
- Allow for reinforcement of information—teaching others helps to develop and strengthen your own understanding.
- Provide a safe place to develop and discuss your ideas.
- Provide support and motivation for learning.
- Help you develop metacognitive strategies.
- Increase your self-confidence and ease anxiety.
- Help you learn to work as part of a team—which can be advantageous down the road.
- Provide an awareness of different perspectives and promote diversity.
- Help develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
- Improve retention and recall of information.

Nuts and Bolts

How to Connect

Be observant in class—look for students who pay attention, ask questions, and seem interested in the course. Ask if they would be interested in meeting to talk about forming a group.

Where to Meet

- An empty classroom (check availability)
- Department “common area” (if one exists)
- Dormitory lounge
- Library

What to Bring

- Syllabus
- Class notes
- Textbook(s)
- Study guides/handouts
- Calendar/planner

Remember

It’s important to select the members of your group carefully—aim for compatibility and manageability (no more than 4-5 people). Choose a place to meet that is relatively free of distractions, and a time when everyone is functional and alert—late at night is often not a good time to meet. Also, make sure you bring everything you need for planning and participation so your sessions run smoothly and everyone is on the same page.

The First Session

An effective study group requires planning and organization. Ideally, participants should be compatible and well-balanced in terms of goals, abilities, and commitment to the group. Limiting the size of your group to 4-5 members will make scheduling easier and will reduce the potential for conflict and disorganization. It is particularly important that the first few sessions are well-run and productive so that members will see their participation in the group as time well spent.

Get Acquainted

If you don't already know each other, spend a few minutes on introductions and exchange contact information.

Establish Roles

In order for a group to run efficiently, it is recommended that participants take on specific roles or responsibilities. A group should at least have a leader/facilitator to keep sessions on-track and moving forward and a scribe/organizer to keep track of information and act as a contact person. The group can determine who might be best suited for these roles, and whether or when these responsibilities should be rotated.

Work Out the Details

Decide when, where, and how often to meet (choose times and places that are conducive to productive study). Determine how long your sessions should last. Discuss how conflicts should be resolved and agree on expectations and sanctions regarding attendance and preparation. Consider what the goals are for the group—what do you hope to accomplish by working together?

Decide on a Format

Once you have determined the goals and expectations for the group, you can decide on a format. Will you be comparing notes, discussing assigned readings, working on problems, or creating a long-term project? The specific subject matter and your purpose for meeting will influence how your sessions are organized and conducted, but it is important to agree on an agenda at the end of each meeting so everyone is prepared to participate.

Suggestions

An effective study group will eventually develop a rhythm and routine that is comfortable for the participants. To that end, it's important to maintain the sense that preparation for and participation in the study group is time well spent. Below are a few suggestions to help get your group off to a good start and to maintain its vitality throughout the semester.

Organization

Any group will quickly dissolve into chaos without some sort of leadership and organization. As mentioned previously, a group should at least have a facilitator to keep sessions on-track and moving forward and an organizer to keep track of information and act as a contact person.

Conducting the Study Group

It's a good idea to follow an outline or agenda so everyone knows what to expect and how to prepare for each session. A little time should be set aside at the end of each meeting to determine what will be covered in the next. Participants may want to take turns being the presenter or "teacher" so that everyone has the opportunity to reinforce their learning in that way.

Sample Agenda

1. Introduce the topic to be covered
2. Review/compare class notes
3. Discuss readings/concepts
4. Questions?
5. Work through a sample problem (math/science)
6. Develop potential test questions for practice test
7. Plan for next meeting

It's a good idea to allow 5 minutes at the start of each meeting to chat/vent before getting down to business.

Etc.

Let your instructor know that you have formed a study group, and who is participating in it. Invite him/her to sit in on a session from time to time. Make sure everyone understands what

sort of collaborative learning is acceptable and what constitutes a violation of the Academic Integrity Code.

Guidelines (Dos and Don'ts)

- Arrive on time
- Come prepared to work (review notes, complete assigned readings, write out potential test questions)
- Be willing to contribute ideas
- Don't be afraid to ask questions
- Be an active participant (listening and speaking)
- Share strategies you have found to be helpful
- Exchange contact information
- Stay focused on the task at hand
- Have an agenda for each session so expectations are clear (what will be covered, how, and by whom)
- Don't split up the work (for example: math problems—group members should each do all the problems, but could take turns going over them)
- Don't view the study group as a substitute for tutoring (if needed) or individual study

Group Dynamics

There are many ways that cooperative learning can promote a deeper understanding of course material. However, working with others involves certain challenges and responsibilities that need to be addressed in order to maintain the cohesion and effectiveness of your study group. Consider the following as you begin to establish parameters for your group:

- Different people bring different abilities and personalities to the group, which can foster or inhibit success—the group needs to agree on what is acceptable or appropriate in terms of interactions and participation.
- It's important to stay focused—sessions should not be allowed to degenerate into a forum for gossip or complaints.
- Group members need to feel comfortable, safe, and valued—be polite and patient; avoid aggressive, critical responses that might inhibit participation; don't interrupt; be respectful of others' opinions.
- Although there may be a dominant personality within the group, one person should not be allowed to monopolize the sessions—all members should be encouraged to participate.
- Conflicts need to be recognized and resolved quickly. Decide early on how to handle disagreements and decision-making.
- A study group is not a substitute for individual study or tutoring (if needed). Do you have the time, energy, and interest to commit to active participation in the group?
- A study group is cooperative, not competitive—make use of individual members' interests and abilities.
- Periodically assess how the group is working—do changes need to be made? Is interest, motivation, and commitment being maintained?

Characteristics of an Effective Group

1. The goals of the group are clearly understood.
2. People in the group work well together.
3. There is a feeling of “belonging” to the group.
4. There is a shared sense of responsibility for making the group work.
5. Members of the group are able to communicate openly.
6. People in the group are willing to listen and respect other points of view.
7. The introduction of new ideas helps maintain interest and motivation.
8. Roles and responsibilities within the group are shared and interdependent.
9. Conflicts and differences are confronted and resolved.

Taken from Students Helping Students. Ender, Steven C. and Fred B. Newton. San Francisco: John C. Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2000.

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