

#39) Suggestions for Writing in Groups

One of the most challenging assignments you may encounter as a student is the group writing project. You know your own strengths as a writer, and you have probably developed ways of working around your weaknesses. The group process demands that you share responsibility for a written work with a number of other people. Thus, to achieve success with a group writing assignment, you need not only writing skills but the determination to bring out and support active participation from fellow group members.

Here are some suggestions for developing a successful group writing assignment.

Set Clear Expectations

Early on (ideally, during your first meeting), decide as a group on the guidelines that will best serve your purposes. When and how often will you meet? How will you communicate? How should each of you be reached with any last-minute messages? How will you divide tasks?

Divide Tasks

The group process requires that you decide together *what* should be done *by whom*. One way for a group to assemble a written work is to divide the paper writing process into tasks and give each participant a part to complete. For example, some or all group members might conduct and report back on research for the paper. Once information is gathered, the group as a whole may wish to divide the writing of the document into sections, giving each member a section of his or her own. Finally, one or two members might take on the role of polishing the paper and working on language consistency. If applicable, another group member may take the role of citing source materials properly, etc. However you divide tasks, keep in mind participants' unique strengths as they fit with the group's needs as a whole.

Hold Each Other Accountable

The biggest challenge in group work is peer-accountability. Generally speaking, group participants will involve themselves in the work to varying degrees, and some do more of the work than others. Setting guidelines in advance can help keep things fair.

- Begin with an email/phone list and a commitment from each member to check regularly.
- Create a written agreement that clarifies group member responsibilities. From the start, member commitments should be clearly detailed and visible to all.
- You might have each member sign a simple contract that lists group agreements regarding tasks and responsibilities.
- You might decide to keep a group "sign-in" for meetings, and ask your instructor to collect it along with your finished assignment. The sheet might include the participants' signatures as well as a quick update on what they have accomplished since the last meeting.
- Communicating with your instructor can help, too. You can ask for help with in-class exercises or other assignments that require group-member accountability. For example, an instructor might have every student turn in his/her own status report on the group's activities, or minutes from a group meeting, as a short assignment.

Finally

Group projects can be complex and difficult. The challenge to produce under pressure in a group situation can teach a great deal, however, and not all of what you learn will show up on the page.