

Use language which doesn't single out people and blame them, but instead makes it clear that you are offering your own feelings and thoughts. Rather than, "You're annoying and always speaking..." instead, "I am hurt because I don't think the group listens to my ideas." If the group really can't agree on something, discuss the pros and cons of the idea, then have a vote and go with the majority decision.

## Being a good group member

Taking part in a group doesn't just mean speaking a lot or always offering suggestions. Being a good group member is about being committed to the group and making a contribution that plays to your strengths. For a group to work well it takes a variety of people each playing different roles. What can you do to help the group succeed?

- Be committed – turn up on time; do any work you have promised to do; and persevere with the group even if there are problems. Try to find solutions to these problems.
- Play to your strengths – find something you can contribute. For example, if you don't feel confident doing presentations, instead volunteer to produce the handouts.
- Be inclusive – help all group members to feel involved. If someone is not participating, try asking their opinion or seeing if there is a role they'd like to take on. Try making them feel welcome by chatting before or after the group meets.

For more information....

See **LearnHigher Group Work** website: [www.learnhighergroupwork.com](http://www.learnhighergroupwork.com)

See **Lectures, seminars & group work 2. Getting the most from seminars**

For more on this and other aspects of academic study, see our website at

[www.reading.ac.uk/studyadvice](http://www.reading.ac.uk/studyadvice)

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# Effective group work



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This guide offers advice on how to help everyone in your group work together effectively, keeping focussed and on track, including:

- Getting organised
- Developing your speaking and listening skills
- Managing conflict in groups
- Being a good group member

## Getting organised

When you start any group assignment or project it is a good idea to agree on some basic organisation and how the group will work and communicate together.

Think about:

- When to meet – pick times that everyone can make
- Where to meet – again, pick a place that is accessible to all group members. You may need to book rooms in advance
- How best to keep in touch – share emails and phone numbers and agree the easiest way to communicate. You might use a blog or wiki on Blackboard
- A realistic schedule to complete your task
- The importance of being committed to the group, and turning up and participating

Top tip: See [www.learnhighergroupwork.com](http://www.learnhighergroupwork.com) for lots of excellent resources to support better group work.

A key aspect of good group organisation is **starting and finishing** with everyone knowing what they are expected to do.

- Start by agreeing on the objectives for the group – what do you want to achieve in this session?
- Keep focussed by having a list of tasks or issues to cover
- Perhaps select someone to take notes and keep track of what was agreed
- End by summarising what was agreed on in the meeting
- Ensure all group members understand what they have to do for the next meeting
- Agree on a time and place to meet again if necessary

## Developing your speaking and listening skills

**Good group work depends on good listening skills.** Do you take in what others are saying? Do you pay attention to their feelings? Do you switch off when you are bored or dislike the speaker?

Try these effective listening strategies:

- Concentrate on what the speaker is saying, not on what you want to say next
- Wait until the speaker has finished their point – don't interrupt
- Focus on the content of what they are saying and link it to other ideas – how might it be useful?
- Consider the speaker's feelings

**Top Tip:** Let the speaker know you are listening and understanding – give encouraging signals like smiling or nodding

**Speak in the group – not at them.** People who speak at a group leave no space for response and tend to dominate. People who speak in a group consider the other members. So:

- Make contributions, but don't dominate
- Ask questions, but not too many
- Speak to the whole group - not just to your friends
- Acknowledge your errors and apologise, "Oh I see, I'm sorry I misunderstood..."

## Keep the discussion flowing

- Encourage the group to keep to the subject by steering the discussion back to the topic, "We were talking about..."
- Build on other people's ideas, "That's an important point you made because..."
- Suggest ideas that the whole group can comment on, "Why don't we..." or "What do people think about..."
- Summarise for the group, "We agreed that..."

Most communication is non-verbal: Pay attention to people's body language as this can reveal a lot about how they feel about the group. Are they looking distracted? Have they crossed their arms and are they looking defensive? Do they look upset or confused? Why might this be?

## Giving constructive feedback

Think about how you would feel if someone criticised your ideas, and keep this in mind when giving feedback.

- Find something positive to say, "That was very interesting. I never thought about it like that before..."
- Let people know when you agree with their point and why, "So do I...", "Yes, that's true..."
- If you disagree with something, instead of rejecting the other person's ideas, explore them, "What makes you think that...?" "Have you thought about...?"
- Be constructive and specific. If you don't agree, explain why and give evidence or examples rather than just saying no.

## Managing conflict in groups

Disagreement and differing views can lead to creative ideas, but conflict is harmful to the group when it becomes personal and aggressive.



- Stay as objective as possible – focus on the issue that you disagree on, not on the personal qualities of people in the group.
- If everyone starts shouting at once, introduce a system of going round the group asking each person their ideas or opinion in turn.