

Successful Study Groups

stud-y group
noun

plural noun: **study groups**

- When students come together to work in a small group to achieve a common goal. Study groups can be one of the most effective methods of studying, but
- they can also be distracting and unproductive. Here are some ideas about how to effectively use a group study session.



THE SET UP

Find people to study with

There are a lot of ways to ask people to form a study group, but “Are you in a study group yet? I was thinking of starting one” might be your easiest entry point. Ask in class or lab or recitation, or post your invite on Canvas. Nervous to ask? Remember that most people think it’s awkward to ask, but chances are they’ll be grateful to you for asking first and for getting a study group started.

Q: Is it better to study with friends or with people you don’t know?

A: That’s up to you! Try it both ways, and see what works.

Identify your purpose

Study groups can be structured to accomplish different things. Some groups meet weekly to keep on top of the material for that week, while others are focused on doing practice-problems or reviewing for exams. Here are some examples of different purposes that study groups have:

- Discuss and review content each week
- Quiz each other in preparation for an exam or test
- Brainstorm ideas for papers or projects
- Work through difficult problems for lab or homework

Ask professors first!

Before you start a study group, check in with your professor and clarify their expectations regarding study groups. What types of assignments are okay to work on together? What do they expect you to work on individually?

Example: Some professors may encourage you to practice together for an exam, but those same professors may also expect lab reports to be completed independently.

Keep it small

A study “group” can be as small as two people. When they get large they can be loud and hard to organize. Remember, you want to be able to practice with each other; taking turns with a large groups means less practice time for you. Cap a group at 5-6 people. If more people join, break out into smaller groups.

Where, when, what

Where: Set a location that meets your needs. A study room in the library? Someone’s house? Be sure to minimize distractions and choose a neutral territory everyone can access. Don’t forget that where doesn’t have to mean a shared physical space. Some study groups work together using online tools like Slack or Google Docs to ask and answer questions, compile study guides, draft practice tests.

When: Set breaks and a time limit. Take a break every 45-60 minutes. Avoid the marathon sessions over 3-4 hours.

What: Identify a goal for your session. “I want to study for the test together” is an intention but because it lacks a specific plan it can keep a group from being productive. Instead, try “I want to create a study guide over chapters 4 & 5 (what) completed in the next 2 hours (how long) with at least 2 sentences for every item in the guide (how much).”



Develop expectations for working together

You’ve identified your purpose and decided where, when and what. Now, consider these additional questions together:

1. What should each person do to prepare for meetings?
2. What will we do if we get off track?
3. What steps will we take to stay productive?
4. Do we want a convener? (If so, consider rotating each time, or each month, or otherwise.)
5. How will we contact each other outside of meetings?
6. What else should we discuss before we get started? (Child-care? Transportation? Fidget toys? Etc.?)



Identify your group's **GOAL**, then consider these strategies:

GOAL:

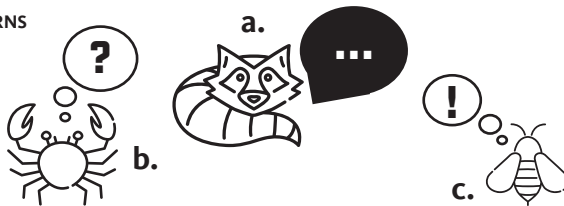
TO UNDERSTAND MATERIAL AND CLARIFY QUESTIONS.

Achievable in one-time meetings arranged to answer questions and get unstuck, or by connecting weekly to discuss that week's material. (We recommend weekly!)

The key to learning in groups: Taking turns

1. **Don't just look at your notes.** Look up as people speak and as you speak – as you work to commit information to memory, looking up will help more than simply reading off the page.
2. **Work on putting concepts in your own words.** Using your own words is more effective learning technique than copying what you've read or heard verbatim.
3. **Disagreement isn't bad.** Gently ask for clarification or offer another interpretation. Sharing differing viewpoints and processes will help the group clarify the idea.
4. **Ask questions to each other** as a way to practice applying the material. When you ask, your peers are in a position to answer, and vice versa when your peers ask and you answer. The more easily and readily you can explain your answers to each other, the more you're demonstrating your understanding.
5. **It's okay if you don't feel confident.** Study groups are about working through ideas together, and those ideas don't have to be perfect. Just give it a shot.
6. **Be gracious as people learn.** Make your group space a safe space to ask questions and talk through ideas.

DIAGRAM 1: TAKING TURNS



In Diagram 1, you'll see that Raccoon (a.) is talking through a concept while Crab (b.) and Bee (c.) listen attentively. Next they'll take turns elaborating and/or revisiting areas of confusion. When they're ready to move on, Crab will take the lead, and when they move on from there, Bee will lead.

ACTIVITY TYPES

Review and clarify information

Take turns summarizing from your notes -- both lecture and/or text -- and walk through any difficult reading together. Stop after each section and talk about what you understand. Help each other develop a rich understanding of the topic by building off what other group members say. This activity helps to foster a strong initial understanding of the concepts. If group members are already familiar with the concepts they can listen and check their understanding from memory.

Teach each other

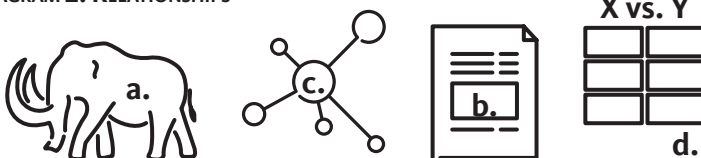
Choose concepts and then trade off teaching these to the group. Again, try to summarize things in your own words. Use a whiteboard or chalkboard to draw diagrams or explain a problem (for distance-based groups there are virtual whiteboards!). Don't be afraid of the messiness – muddle through! You'll learn from the process. Once you've talked through the concept, be sure to ask if anyone has questions or can help clarify any areas you got stuck.

Outline or mind-map

Work together to create an outline, mind map, comparison grid, timeline, or process diagram from the learning materials*. Create schemas. Our brains have an easier time remembering information when they're placed in relationship to other pieces of information. Here's how:

- One person draws from memory what they remember, then others add what they remember, too, then you all revisit the text, videos or lecture notes to add missing information or correct anything.
- Have one person draw a process or diagram, or complete a problem, and have another person in the group label the steps in the process.

DIAGRAM 2: RELATIONSHIPS



In Diagram 2, you'll see different ways to illustrate relationships. The mammoth (a.) was drawn from memory by the group. The outline (b.) was compiled using everyone's notes. The mind-map (c.) was made to show how ideas nest and concepts branch from each other. The comparison grid (d.) will be helpful to determine similarities and differences between X and Y.

Identify key ideas and important vocabulary

Have each person take 5-7 minutes to identify some of the most important ideas emphasized in learning materials* that week. Then, compare your lists and talk about the different ideas you've identified. This can create a start to a study guide. In vocab-heavy and technical courses, use a whiteboard to compile a list of key vocab for the week. Clarify the definitions of each word and identify a few examples or applications for the concept. Like flashcards? While you're discussing, start a list of words or concepts for flashcards.

* Learning materials = lecture material, PPT, textbook, lab notes, videos, homework, etc.

Work ahead

Each week, generate test questions or work on filling out a study guide that everyone has access to (work on it a little each week and your midterms will go so much quicker!). The act of completing a study guide – looking up information and summarizing it in your own words – is a valuable study technique itself. If you choose to split up the work, make sure everyone gets a piece of the action and you spend plenty of time quizzing yourselves on the parts you didn't complete.

Do and talk process

Take turns showing others how to do different problems. At the end of each problem, talk about how it's different than other problems or similar to other problems. Identify key areas where you might make a mistake. Call attention to the concepts involved or the formulas used. Ask yourselves how this might look on an exam.



GOAL: TO PREPARE FOR EXAMS AND TESTS BY MEETING UP TO REVIEW AND PRACTICE TOGETHER.

Testing yourself is more effective as a study strategy than continued review of the material. It's important to put away the information and see if you're able to recall it from memory when asked a question. When preparing for an exam (in a group or by yourself):

- **Test your ability to recall the information.** Don't rely on whether it looks familiar or not – actually try to remember without looking. That means putting your books and notes away as you answer questions. Make it a test-like scenario!
- **Mix up the topics.** Tests don't always come with all of the similar questions lumped together – mix up questions from different chapters or subject to test yourself in a realistic way.
- **Take note of what you already know really well and what you still need to work on.** That will give you the ability to budget your time appropriately as you get closer to the test.



Quiz each other on material

Take turns asking the group a question (from the book, lecture, or notes). When asking the question, don't offer what the question is about or what section it's from (you wouldn't have that info on the exam). Give a pause and let everyone think about or work on an answer. Be sure to take turns with who answers the question first and leave room for discussion of alternate answers.

Write practice-test questions

Split your group into two (or if you're a group of two, do this individually) and create a set of test questions. Once you've finished this, exchange tests with the other group (or each other). Take your unfamiliar tests, and then discuss your answers. Investigate your notes and learning materials* if/when you disagree about an answer. You can even practice multiple choice questions this way – come up with a question and then work as a group to develop 4-5 possible multiple choice answers (multiple choice questions are often where common mistakes happen). If the practice exam is essay or short-answer, read your answers aloud and discuss what worked or pass them off to one another and practice scoring them.

Walk through a practice test you've already taken

Work on practice exams independently and then come together to talk through your approach or where you got stuck. Talk through the answers you got, the mistakes you made (embrace them as learning moments) and other questions or topics that might be included on the exam.

Don't forget:

1. If the exam allows a notecard or note sheet, talk together about what you'd put on it and why.
2. Talk about *how* you study. Compare approaches, ask questions, and see if you hear any new ideas.



Finally, before the group meeting:

Agree on what you'll do to prepare so everyone comes with a common expectation. Examples:

- No prep needed, just come with whatever you've already done
- Everyone writes out a number of practice problems to assemble into a practice test
- Divide up chapters/sections of materials and make a study guide (decide on an approach in advance – what will be on it and in what format?)

After you have a midterm, plan to get together and talk through the results.

Questions to cover:

- Which questions did you get wrong?
- What were the other answers?
- What will you focus on before the next exam?

* Learning materials = lecture material, PPT, textbook, lab notes, videos, homework, etc.

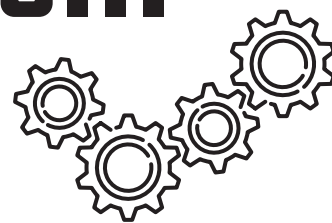


Great Study Groups...

...end the session with next steps

When you've reached your stopping point:

- Identify where you left off so you can continue at the next session or on your own
- Talk about what worked well as a group and what you might improve on for next time.
- Identify when you'll meet next and what the purpose of that session will be.



...troubleshoot when the group work doesn't feel great

If you've been having great study sessions but then there's a session where it feels like nothing gets done, or if you have an initial session that makes you wonder if you should keep going, consider these questions to troubleshoot and move forward smartly and effectively:

Q: What do we do if there's an imbalance in the group? (One or two individuals are answering all the questions or participating more than everyone else).

A: If it's you . . . try to hold back. If it's not your turn to answer, practice in your head or write down your approach and wait to discuss it. If it's someone else, suggest a process: "Let's each take turns answering a problem so everyone gets a chance."

Q: What happens when we get stuck as a group on a concept or material?

A: Same thing as when you get stuck by yourself. Look through your resources: textbook, lecture notes, online search for information, etc. If you're still stuck, try talking through what you each know. Hearing other people describe in their own words might make something click. Finally, make a plan for who will contact the TA or instructor for more information, or agree to meet to go to office hours together.

Q: What if I seem to know a lot more than the rest of my group?

A: They benefit from your knowledge! We know that teaching others is a great way to solidify information in our own minds. But be cautious not to dominate the group – still aim for an equal balance of participation. If this gets too frustrating for you, seek out another study group.

Q: What if my group seems to know a lot more than me?

A: They too benefit from your presence. You ask good questions, it's helpful to hear about how you think about problems, don't worry about it! Make sure you still speak up and participate – that's when the learning really makes a difference. And, if you find it's too frustrating for you, seek out another study group.

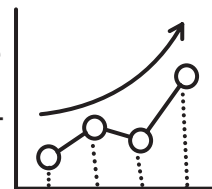
Q: What do I do when the group keeps getting distracted or is unproductive?

A: Try a gentle nudge: "Can we pick back up with ___ topic/problem?" If it continues, you can acknowledge the pattern, "it seems like we're spending a lot of time off topic, I'd like to make sure we [reiterate the goal for the session] before we leave." If that's not successful, look for anyone else in the group who wants to focus to the degree that you do and consider starting a new group.

...make their group work even better

Working collaboratively with others towards a common goal is a key skill for every career and job. Take the opportunity to work on your interpersonal skills through group projects and study groups.

- **Don't interrupt people** – let each person finish their thought. Talking through an idea is an important part of learning. Even if where they start out isn't correct, there is a lot to learn from talking it through and realizing that.
- **Offer supportive comments.** Congratulate each other on your hard work. Make the team environment a positive one.
- **Motivate and challenge each other.** One of the great things about teams is you can help each other stay motivated. "One more problem before we stop for the night? Yes, please!"
- **Look up from your notes and book.** Use eye contact and active listening to show your engagement.



SOURCES

A lot of research went into the development of this material. If you'd like to view our sources, and to read more about all of this information, please visit <http://success.oregonstate.edu/study-group-source-list> for a full list and links.

Want to talk more about your study group and how it can work even better? Bring everyone to **Waldo 125** and talk with one of our **ASC Strategists!** Or make an **Academic Coaching** appointment for yourself to think aloud with the coach and return to your group with fresh ideas.

