

Study Groups

A. Introduction

Study groups are small groups of students who meet regularly to work together on specific aspects of learning. This leaflet has been compiled with the help of Canterbury students who have taken part in study groups, and it passes on their experience of what worked well, and what didn't. This is why they thought study groups were good idea:

I really took on too much that year – it was only because the group shared out the reading and note-taking that I managed to keep up.

I got into a state about doing [law] case analysis as it was such a struggle. After we formed a study group I realised everyone felt the same. We worked on a case every session, bouncing ideas off each other and getting used to using legal language, until we were pretty confident.

I just didn't have time to do enough revision on my own, but each member of our group took responsibility for part of the exam and tutored the others. We all passed!

B. Advantages of Study Groups

- Peer support – whether discussing academic problems or having someone to take lecture notes for you if you're ill.
- Sharing resources – expensive texts, library books, input from different tutors, other students' thoughts.
- Active involvement in learning – group discussion helps you get to grips with the subject, remember material, feel more confident using specialized language, stimulates ideas, makes it easier to contribute to tutorials.
- Covering more ground than one person could manage alone.

C. Setting up a Study Group

Finding other members: ask your tutorial group; put a notice on the board in your lecture theatre; advertise in your hall of residence, notice boards or *Canta*. If there is an overwhelming response, people can be divided into groups at a preliminary meeting.

Don't just ask your friends – it turns into a social occasion.

Optimum size: usually three to six members.
Two is hopeless as you end up chatting.

Any more than 6 and some people will feel they can leave it to everyone else to contribute. The larger the group, the more casual people will be about showing up.

Organisation: the first meeting needs to settle practical details, not only the obvious ones like members' names and phone numbers, the meeting place, length and time of meeting, but also the key issues listed below.

Setting a Goal: decide as a group what you hope to achieve. Avoid vague ideals e.g. 'I'd like to know more about psychology' and be specific e.g. 'No one seems to understand the text very well,

so we could take a chapter a week, each prepare a list of what we think the main points are, then use the meeting to go over the material and put together a really good set of notes.'

Leading the group: it's advisable to appoint a group leader for each meeting, not necessarily the same person each time, to start the meeting, keep the discussion on track, sum up at the end, and establish what is to be prepared for the next session.

Acceptable behaviour: establish a policy on members not doing agreed preparation; not showing up; dominating discussion; putting other members down; not listening to other points of view.

We agreed that anyone who missed twice, unless they were genuinely ill, was out. You can't share work properly if some members are slack.

You have to accept that some people are quieter, or do less, than others, so we did a lot in pairs to overcome that.

D. Running the Study Group

You need to agree on some kind of structure for the meeting so that everyone feels something has been achieved. You don't want to spend the time on aimless chit-chat so that it's not worth coming.

Some ideas for structuring the time:

- Members are given a short list of questions to prepare in advance (these could be suggested by the group, or might have been set by the lecturer/tutor. Everyone takes a turn at answering the question before it is opened up to general discussion.
- A reading list is divided among the group for each person to make notes on according to an agreed focus e.g. background for lectures/tutorials, research for essay, exam preparation. Photocopied notes are distributed to the group, and members take turns to go through their notes and answer any questions.
- The meeting begins with a brainstorming session for five or ten minutes e.g. What is the essay question getting at? What could we say about the style of this poem? All suggestions are noted and everyone should feel comfortable about producing apparently silly or far-fetched ideas – often the stimulus for creative or more analytical thinking. Suggestions are then debated.
- Old exam questions are divided according to topic area among, say, three pairs. At the meeting, each pair discusses the work together before reporting to the rest of the group.

E. Evaluation

Review at regular intervals whether the group is achieving its goal; what it might do differently; whether the goal needs to be changed in the short term e.g. preparing for a test, or the long term e.g. developing specific skills.

Get help if you find you are *all* confused or don't understand the subject. Ask your lecturer/tutor or hall of residence tutor and don't let things slide: after all, you *know* you're not the only one having trouble.