

## How to Learn More Effectively from Studying with Partners and Study Groups

Working in a study group or with a study partner can be a productive way to learn course material, prepare for exams and work on assignments. But studying with others is not productive when groups get off track, get distracted and use ineffective study strategies. In these cases, several heads are worse than one. In fact, a few bad experiences can turn you off permanently to group study. This is unfortunate because studying with others can be a highly effective and even powerful learning experience. Here are some recommendations to help you reap the benefits of studying with other students.

You are likely to learn more in study groups if you:

- Organize for learning. Work out the logistics to create a time for efficient, focused study, e.g., who is going to meet, when, where, how long, etc. Avoid long, marathon sessions. Try to schedule shorter sessions, e.g., one hour. If you do longer sessions, take scheduled breaks.
- Agree on ground rules. Arrive on time, come prepared, try to stay on track, contribute as best you can, etc.
- Agree on a goal for the study group session. Before you get together decide what you want to accomplish. Try to be specific. Rather than a general goal such as “review for the test” try to identify the topics and/or questions you plan to focus on.
- Prepare for the study session. Preparation can mean different things depending on your goal, e.g., bring your questions about the topics; prepare to explain one or more of the concepts to study partners, work problems ahead of time, think of a few test questions to ask the group, etc.

Learning activities that support your learning in study groups:

- Determine what’s likely to be on the test. As a group, make a list of content areas, concepts, or details that everyone in the group agrees they’ll need to know for the exam. Use the list to guide your review.
- Generate potential exam questions or problems. Divide up the content and have each group member prepare a few possible test questions or problems. Create questions in the format used by the instructor, e.g., questions that ask you to analyze, evaluate, compare and contrast, use evidence from the readings, etc. Use these to test one another’s knowledge and understanding. Pool and share all the questions so group members have a complete practice test to study on their own. Practice testing is an especially effective way to learn new information (see [Self-Testing Tip Sheet](#)).
- Explain answers to one another. Another effective learning strategy is explaining new information to yourself or others. By trying to explain new information, you expand your own understanding of the topic (see [Self-Explanation Tip Sheet](#)). When the group differs on answers or topics, it is an opportunity to discuss, clarify and develop your understanding of the concepts.
- Schedule study sessions well before the exam dates so you can re-study the material and also avoid cramming for the exam at the last minute. Spacing out study over multiple sessions leads to better retention of the information (see [Spaced Practice Tip Sheet](#))

## Study Group Checklist

For convenience you can use this checklist as you study with other students. Of course, you do not need to do everything on this list. If your study group is not as productive as you would like, you might use this list to identify some features to make your study group more effective.

Organize for efficient learning. These are basic logistics.

- Convener – If groups meet regularly it is helpful to designate a convener, a group member willing to send messages about:
  - who is going to meet – e.g., a specific group of individuals; informal, open invitation
  - when and how long – meeting time and length of session
  - where – meeting location

Ground rules. These are agreed upon rules about how to participate and may include:

- Arrive on time
- Come prepared
- Try to stay on task
- Contribute as best you can
- Support one another
- Other:

Goals. Before meeting decide on goals for the session. Try to be specific, so group members know what to prepare and what to expect from the study group session. If studying for an exam, try to list the topics and/or questions you need to focus on.

- Specific goal(s)

Prepare for the session. What you need to prepare will depend on the goal(s) of the session. Determine what each group member should do and/or bring to the session, e.g., questions about the topics, be ready to explain specific topics to others, work problems before session so group can compare answers, bring several practice questions to test the group.

- Describe preparation for study session:

Key Learning Activities.

- Test one another. Describe how you will do practice testing during the session, e.g., use a practice test from the instructor, make up your own questions, etc.
- Work on instructor's practice questions
- Work on group members' practice questions
- Repeat testing, i.e., answer questions several times during several different study sessions
- Other:

Explain to one another.

- Take turns explaining material to one another
- Ask questions and try to clarify material.
- Try to explain things you don't understand and ask group for feedback

Work on the hardest material, problems and questions.

- Don't avoid or overlook the most difficult material.

Incorporate spaced practice. A good rule of thumb, supported by research, is to answer a question correctly 9 times, three times in each of three separate study sessions. If it is not feasible for your group to review previous material, you can do so individually on your own.

- Review material from previous sessions, i.e., repeat practice questions, explain concepts from previous sessions.

Seek outside help.

- Ask the instructor, course tutors, or other classmates for help if the group can't answer questions.

Plan the next study group session.

- Use the last 5 minutes of a study group session to plan the next session.