

COOPERATIVE LEARNING GUIDE FOR GROUPS AND SMALL TEAMS

Recent research in education indicates that instruction is more effective when students work in cooperative learning groups (of three or four students) rather than in situations where competition and individualistic learning are emphasized. Numerous assignments in *Business Communication Essentials*, Third Canadian Edition, are designed for small teams. These activities help students learn how to share ideas and information, appreciate the contributions of others, engage in constructive criticism, learn to accept criticism from others, collaborate to solve problems, and share responsibility for completing a task. By working in a cooperative learning group, students experience a process similar to those taking place on the job as well as in life's day-to-day interactions.

WORKING WITH COOPERATIVE LEARNING GROUPS

The cooperative learning group is based on the belief that all group members are capable of understanding, learning, and performing the activities needed to complete a task. Typically, a cooperative learning group is composed of three or four randomly selected students who work together to complete an assigned task. The most effective groups are heterogeneous in background, skill level, physical capability, and gender. Moreover, they have no assigned leader (leadership emerges naturally as group members alternate performing leadership tasks when appropriate).

A variety of skills are necessary for cooperative learning groups to be successful. Students will be familiar with most of these skills from other contexts. However, be sure to remind them of the requirements they must fulfill for the group's work to be useful. Not all students will use every skill all the time. But by becoming aware of the appropriate skills and applying them when required, all students can become equal partners in making the group successful. Prior to assigning group work, give students the following list of tips:

- Use the names of your fellow group members.
- Encourage others in your group to talk and participate.
- Acknowledge the contributions of others and express your appreciation (“Ellen and Sam did the research on marketing in Spain,” “Thanks, good idea,” etc.).
- Use eye contact when talking with your fellow group members.
- Share feelings with your group using *I* messages (“I feel that we’re not making progress,” “I like working with this group,” “I feel like some members are not contributing equally”).
- Disagree in an agreeable way; that is, try to say something positive before saying anything negative (“I see your point about including that information, but I’m not sure it needs to be so detailed.”).
- Reduce tension among group members, perhaps by initiating a conversation or discussion when a problem arises.
- Practice active listening: For example, allow group members to complete a thought before interrupting with comments, and acknowledge that you have heard what another group member said (“I hear that you think . . .”).

- Check others' understanding of the work.
- Give information and opinions.
- Stay on-task: Help your group get back to work, and follow directions for completing your group's task.
- Seek information and opinions from others in your group as well as from outside resources.

While students are working in cooperative learning groups, the instructor becomes facilitator and mediator. When students are working in groups during class, the instructor rotates among the groups to check progress, make sure they are on-task, help solve problems by offering a variety of solutions, help end disagreements by guiding students in a discussion of their differences, and ensure that all students are participating in the various responsibilities of completing the task. If groups are working outside class, the instructor can arrange a brief meeting with each group to check progress.¹

WORKING IN DYADS

A dyad is a two-student form of the cooperative learning group. Dyads are useful for giving information and for stating and clarifying opinions, feelings, and attitudes. By participating in dyads, students have an opportunity to learn and practice the art of active listening and to express their thoughts.

Dyads can be used as a method of stimulating thought prior to class discussion, helping students formulate or define opinions both before and after a discussion, and initiating the work of a cooperative learning group. Implementing the process is fairly easy.

1. Divide students into random pairs, and give them a topic or question to discuss.
2. Give each partner a specified amount of time to speak about the topic or question. Initially, students may be comfortable talking to a partner for only one or two minutes. But as students relax with the process, that time can be extended to five minutes or longer.
3. Inform students that while one member of the dyad is speaking, the partner is responsible for listening without interruption, comment, or judgment. If the person speaking has nothing to say or is unable to talk for the specified time, the partner may opt either to say nothing or to prompt the speaker by asking a related question or by saying something related to the topic.
4. When the specified time for talking is over, the partners switch roles—listener becomes speaker and speaker becomes listener.
5. Emphasize the importance of confidentiality. A member of the dyad must not share what a partner says unless that partner gives permission.
6. Following the discussion in dyads, the class can proceed with a large-group discussion either about the topic or about the cooperative learning groups. In this follow-up discussion, give each member of the class an opportunity to share his or her feelings, attitudes, or opinions about the topic and the process.

WORKING WITH THE JIGSAW PROCESS

A variation of the cooperative learning process is the jigsaw, which is useful in helping students understand and process information that is assigned for reading. Textbook chapters and lengthy articles are examples of the type of material that can be jigsawed. By reading a section of the text or an article and discussing it with other students who have read the same section, a student becomes an “expert” on that section and then shares that expertise with the students in an assigned group who have not read the material. The skills necessary for cooperative learning groups are applicable to the jigsaw process. Here are the procedures for implementing the jigsaw process.

1. Divide the assigned chapter or article into easily digestible sections. This separation can be done by subtopic, but the reading should probably not be divided into more than six sections.
2. Divide the class into groups. The number of students in each group must equal the number of sections in the assigned chapter or article. If there are extra students, assign them to groups already having a full complement rather than forming any groups with fewer students than sections of reading.
3. Assign each student in a group one section of the article or chapter so that all the sections will be read by at least one member of each group. (If extra students are in the group, more than one person will be reading some of the sections.)
4. Allow students a specified time (10 to 15 minutes) to read their material and take notes.
5. After all students have read their assigned sections, they form “expert groups,” meeting with other students who have read the same material and discussing what they have read. While meeting in expert groups, students have an opportunity to gain a broader perspective and to become more knowledgeable about the material they have read. Expert groups can last 10 to 15 minutes.
6. After meeting with expert groups, students break up into their original groups and teach the other members about the sections they have read. Sharing in the original group should be done in the sequence of the original chapter or article. Five minutes per section should be ample time for students to share the information they have read, answer any questions, and discuss the section with group members.
7. If desired, a class discussion of the entire chapter or article can summarize the small-group discussions or emphasize particular issues.

NOTE

1. Selected portions of this material were adapted from Dee Dishon and Pat Wilson O’Leary, *A Guidebook for Cooperative Learning* (Holmes Beach, Florida: Learning Publications, 1984), 57.