

# RESOURCE GUIDE for Small Group Learning

This guide is created to help students create an effective space for learning and peer support in a remote environment while providing a positive social experience. It is designed on the assumption that small groups have approximately four to six members to provide for a variety of perspectives, while also minimizing logistical barriers such as finding meeting times around multiple busy student schedules. The guide is broken out into five distinct sections, each of which outlines important information to consider when learning in groups. We recommend that each member of the learning group familiarize themselves with this guide independently before you meet, as well as collectively during your first meeting. Should you find your group encountering challenges or roadblocks along the way, refer back to this guide to help navigate those situations. The final section of this guide provides additional resources to consider engaging with that will enrich your and your group's learning.

# Part 1: Getting to Know Each Other

Take a few minutes at the start of each meeting to build a sense of belonging for all group members.

## Learn each other's names (accurately pronounced) and pronouns, and commit to using them.

Be aware that what your peers choose to be called may differ from the name that appears on your group sign-up/roster. The Zoom "rename" feature (when you click on "Participants") can be used to indicate a name to be called.

## Build rapport by making time in study sessions to learn about and support each other.

As an orientation strategy for the group, talk about why you all sought out this group learning opportunity. Share ideas for what has been working for you so far in the remote teaching and learning environment and exchange strategies that have helped you overcome challenging moments and situations.

When you use icebreakers, be careful to avoid generalizations and assumptions about physical ability, family structure, social identities, citizenship status, or economic means (for example, asking about spring break vacation destinations implies that everyone can afford those). Some examples of icebreaker activities that foster community and positivity are:

- Something that made you happy today/this week
- A success (big or small) you've had today/this week
- Something you love about yourself
- One thing you're good at
- Something you're proud of
- What is your secret talent?
- What is a hobby you have that people may not know about?

As the semester progresses, this social time in your study session becomes a valuable opportunity to check in with each other, talk about high and low points in the week, and be a support to each other.

# Part 2: Guidelines for Interaction

It is important to set guidelines for group interaction at the **onset** of the group learning experience. These guidelines will help you establish norms that contribute to a positive, meaningful, and productive experience for all. Group members are encouraged to establish additional guidelines that you deem necessary to enhance the experience for all. Key times to revisit these guidelines are when new members join the group and when any member notices that the group may be straying away from these expectations.

1

This learning group is our space for collaborative learning, discussion, and problem solving. Together, we will consider all potential factors and issues that influence a problem, scenario or case study.

2

We are active participants in our own learning and understand that learning is partly dependent upon engagement of all group members. To make the most of our time together, we will attend lectures, discussion, office hours, etc., review relevant material before coming to the learning group, and make note of our questions and topics/concepts on which we are unclear.

3

We share responsibility for including all voices in the conversation. If we tend to have a lot to say, we will make sure to leave sufficient space to hear from others. If we tend to stay quiet, we will challenge ourselves to contribute so others can learn from us.

4

We will listen to each other respectfully and attentively. We will not interrupt, attempt to multitask, or have side conversations (in real life or in the chat) while our learning group is in session and our peers are speaking.

5

We will speak to each other with care. If we learn that something we've said was experienced as disrespectful or marginalizing, we will listen carefully and try to understand that perspective. We will strive to learn how to do better in the future.

6

We will be open to exploring new ideas and possibilities, and to changing our perspectives based on what we learn from each other. We will think critically about factors that have shaped our perspectives and seriously consider different points of view. Similarly, if we are unsure about another's approach to tackling a problem or assignment, we will ask and listen respectfully about how and why the approach could work.

7

We understand that we are bound to make mistakes, as anyone does with complex tasks or learning new skills. We will strive to see our mistakes and others' as valuable elements of the learning process. As we make room for mistakes and growth, we must also prioritize accountability and make amends when our words and actions have caused harm to our peers.

8

We will be careful about assumptions and generalizations we make based only on our own experience. These might include assumptions about comfort with technology, economic means, responses to current events, etc.

9

We will discuss and establish a predictable and accessible way of communicating with each other and sharing and storing any learning group related materials. We will ensure that these decisions are built on input and consensus from all in the group.

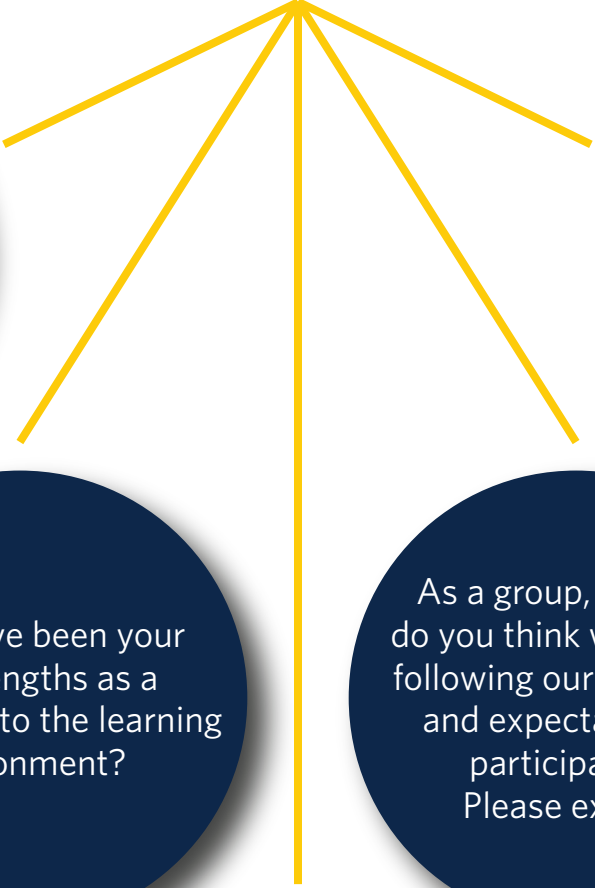
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We will strive to create a space for group members to provide feedback on their experience of the learning environment and share ideas for improving it.

# Part 3: Self-Assessment of Student Participation

Ongoing reflection about one's participation in the learning group is important to build and sustain a learning space that is inclusive and productive for all. This self-assessment is useful at the start of the semester, mid-way through the semester, and at any point when tension or frustrations begin to surface in the group. This tool will also help you gather your thoughts before sharing feedback amongst group members about suggestions for how your group could continue to work better.

**Consider the following questions as you reflect on your learning group participation and experience:**



As an individual, how well do you think you've followed the guidelines and expectations for participation?

Is there anything you would suggest changing or adding to these guidelines and expectations to help our group function more effectively?

What have been your key strengths as a contributor to the learning environment?

As a group, how well do you think we've been following our guidelines and expectations for participation? Please explain.

Are there any changes you would want to make or goals you'd like to set for your own participation for the remainder of the semester?

# Part 4: How to Spend Time Effectively

## Logistics

- 1** Establish a meeting schedule that works for all members of the group. Be sure to consider how frequently the group would like to meet and what days/times work well for all group members. Consistency is key, finding a schedule that works well for everyone creates stability in the group.
- 2** Determine how you will handle absences among group members. Inevitably emergencies arise. If a member needs to miss a group, discuss in advance if the group is comfortable sharing materials from the missed session.
- 3** Establish communication norms. While groups initially get connected through email, that may or may not be the ideal means of communication among group members. Identify known means of communication (email, GroupMe, Slack, etc.) to determine what works best for all.
- 4** For virtual group learning, identify the preferred virtual meeting platform and establish which group member will be responsible for scheduling the group. It is recommended that group meetings be set as recurring (to create consistency) and that all members of the meeting have host privileges (so that all have the ability to make adjustments in case of emergency).
- 5** As a reminder, when your group is “stuck”, uncertain about a concept, or there isn’t consensus on the solution to a problem, please be sure to visit your GSI or instructor office hours to clear up any doubts and confusion.

## During the Learning Session

The list below provides a structure for organizing your meeting time. Following this structure will allow the group to focus attention efficiently. For groups that are meeting for longer durations, this cycle can be repeated as long as a different goal (centered on a different concept) is set for each Intense Study Session (See “Intense Study Session” image on the next page for more details). It is not recommended to do more than two Intense Study Sessions in one sitting. Remember, your learning group is one piece of the larger study cycle so members ought to be studying independently outside of group time as well.

- 1 Establish your goals for the study session.** This involves deciding on what content to focus on for this particular session.
- 2 Determine what activities will best align with the study session goals.** Some active learning strategies to consider are completing practice problems, creating a concept map, organizing content using matrices, or any other activity that requires you to critically engage with the material. [This list of strategies offers how-to guidance for active learning in both remote and in-person learning environments.](#)
- 3 Work through the content together.** This is the part that will take the majority of your session time. Do the work you set out to do, discuss points of confusion, allow yourself to make mistakes - and learn from them.
- 4 Take a break.** While you are in the active learning mode, your brain is engaged in connecting with the content you are reviewing. This can trick you into thinking you’ve mastered content simply because you were “in the zone”. Taking a mental break from the material is critical to give your brain a moment to forget, so that you can accomplish the next step accurately.
- 5 Assess your learning.** Go back to what you set out to accomplish at the beginning of the session and determine if you’ve accomplished your study goal. This can take the form of a practice quiz, talking through the steps to solve a problem, or any other method that is appropriate for the material. The key here is to rely on your brain, not your notes, as a resource. Then take note of any remaining topics/points of confusion to work on independently before your next group session.

## Intense Study Sessions

- |          |                         |            |  |
|----------|-------------------------|------------|--|
| <b>1</b> | <b>Set a Goal</b>       | 1-2 min.   | Decide what you want to accomplish in your study session   |
| <b>2</b> | <b>Study with Focus</b> | 20-50 min. | <b>Interact with the material:</b> organize, concept map, summarize, process, fill-in notes, reflect, do practice problems, etc. |
| <b>3</b> | <b>Reward Yourself</b>  | 10-15 min. | <b>Take a break:</b> text a friend, check social media, play a short game, get a snack, etc.                                     |
| <b>4</b> | <b>Review</b>           | 5 min.     | Go over what you just studied to check your understanding  |

## The Study Cycle

For study groups to be most effective, all members of the group need to be preparing independently as well. The Study Cycle provides a process for independent study to guide active learning before, during, and after lectures (or other formats of content dissemination). Note that the “Study” step is outlined in greater detail above in the “Intense Study Sessions” section.



**PREVIEW before class** – Skim the chapter, note headings and boldface words, review summaries and chapter objectives, and come up with questions you’d like the lecture to answer for you.

**ATTEND (and participate in) class** – Answer and ask questions and take meaningful notes.

**REVIEW after class** – As soon after class as possible, read notes, fill in gaps, and note any questions.

**STUDY** – Repetition is the key. Ask questions such as ‘why’, ‘how’, and ‘what if’.  
 Intense Study Sessions – 3-5 short study sessions per day  
 Weekend Review – Read notes and material from the week to make connections

**ASSESS your Learning** – Periodically perform reality checks  
 Am I using study methods that are effective?  
 Do I understand the material enough to teach it to others?

# Part 5: Interested in learning more? Check out these resources:

## Book References

- Brown, P.C. (2014). Make it stick: The science of successful learning. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Duckworth, A. (2016). Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Harper Collins Publishers. Ltd.
- McGuire, S.Y. & McGuire, S. (2018). Teach yourself how to learn: Strategies you can use to ace any course at any level. Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing, LLC.

## Online Resources

### [Adapting Active Learning strategies to an online learning environment](#)

As written, this resource is intended for instructors who will facilitate these activities for their students. However, we encourage you to review these active learning strategies as several of them can be adapted for use in your group, and will enhance your engagement with the course material.

### [Adjusting Your Study Habits During COVID](#)

While this resource was developed with adapting to the changing needs during the pandemic, the principles (particularly topics 5-7) apply to individual and group study.

### [Science Success Series](#)

Register to attend group workshops sponsored by the Science Learning Center, Women in Science and Engineering Program, and Newnan Advising Center.

### [Carol A. Tate Teaching and Learning Center](#)

Check on the Online Learning Series for a collection of videos with helpful suggestions. Of particular interest for group study is the "[Collaborating with Classmates Online](#)" video.