

# Working in Groups Online

## Suggested Tips for Success

**Natalie B. Milman**

### FOUR SCENARIOS

**S**cenario 1: Cameron's peer assessment of his teammates noted that one teammate did not contribute much to the team project. He wrote that he was disappointed all semester with the teammate's caliber of work, even though the teammate was "nice." **Instructor Response:** *The instructor reviewed the team's*

*objectives, tasks, and time line—after talking with Cameron, the instructor determined Cameron had different expectations than his teammates. The instructor also recommended more frequent communication among teammates to touch base about their understanding of and progress on their work, goals, objectives, and tasks.*

**S**cenario 2: Ralph wrote in his individual reflective blog that he was very frustrated with his teammates because he felt like he was doing most of the work while they were getting a free ride. **Instructor Response:** *The instructor read all of Ralph's peers' journal entries and learned that his teammates were having difficulties with Ralph. Not only was he unsupportive of his teammates, but he also was very bossy. In response to each teammate's blog entries, the instructor posted questions for them to consider. Also, in the subsequent week's lecture, the instructor asked all groups to reflect on and assess their individual contribution to the group project, as well as how they were interacting with their peers.*

**S**cenario 3: Weeks into the group project, Sally left a voicemail for her instructor asking if she could work on the assigned project independently, instead of with her two other teammates because they could not agree on the next steps to finalize the assignment. **Instructor Response:** *After talking with Sally, it became clear to the*



Natalie B. Milman,  
Associate Professor of Educational  
Technology, The George Washington  
University, 2134 G ST, NW,  
Washington, DC 20052.  
Telephone: (202) 994-1884.  
E-mail: nmilman@gwu.edu

*instructor that Sally was not communicating her need for more information about decisions made and tasks completed by her teammates. The instructor coached her to take a proactive approach with her peers by asking them questions about their progress, decisions, and any concerns she might have.*

**Scenario 4:** Nona knew her high-pressure, full-time work responsibilities would pose challenges working in a team, especially across several different time zones all over the world. However, she was surprised to learn the biggest challenge was their different learning and work styles. She was a planner and liked to complete tasks well ahead of time. However, her two teammates had very different styles of working, which did not mesh with hers—they tended to complete work at the last minute. She was very frustrated and e-mailed her instructor for advice. **Instructor Response:** *Her instructor recommended that Nona discuss her “learning and work style” with her teammates so they could come to a common understanding about how they might work together. She also suggested that Nona share her frustrations with them, as well as her FT workload so they also better understood why she wanted to work ahead of the deadlines. Moreover, the instructor suggested that for future group assignments, when seeking teammates that Nona should share her learning and work style with potential teammates so that there might be a better match between them.*

The scenarios above represent examples of different challenges my students have experienced when working collaboratively and cooperatively on online group assignments, and a brief description of the assistance I offered in helping them solve them. Although the scenarios and solutions are not comprehensive, they shed light on some of the many problems students might encounter when working in online group assignments. They also demonstrate that even adults need to learn, practice, and be reminded of strategies for working in groups; many have these skills,

but may not have employed them in online learning environments, which pose similar yet unique challenges compared to face-to-face group work.

Below are some useful tips for students working in online teams or groups.

## **TIPS FOR WORKING IN GROUPS ONLINE**

1. **Determine your learning style—and share that information with your teammates.** There are many online tools that help you determine your learning style. Complete one and reflect on the style the tool determines you to have. Then, figure out how you can capitalize on your learning style to benefit your group. In some cases, you may even seek teammates with similar learning styles.
2. **Agree to disagree.** Even though most of us strive for harmony and cooperation, it is impossible to agree on every decision made for completing the group assignment. Therefore, keep in mind you will need to agree to disagree with your teammates.
3. **Respect others’ opinions.** Maintaining professionalism and respecting others’ opinions as you work with your peers is of utmost importance. Even if you totally disagree, it is imperative that you respect and tolerate your peers’ opinions.
4. **Be a good listener.** Some of the best teammates are those who truly listen to their peers’ ideas and opinions.
5. **Invest in the group assignment.** Even if the assignment is the idea of one teammate, it is important to understand that each member is invested in the group assignment. Refer to the assignment as “our assignment” and not “your assignment” or “your idea.”
6. **Determine and assign group roles.** Some people are natural leaders whereas others are not. Whatever your learning style and preferred group

- role, determining roles among team members will ensure that important work is completed. Some examples of roles one might take are: leader, summarizer, encourager, reporter, and facilitator.
7. **Develop a plan:** Simply assigning roles and responsibilities is not enough. It is important to have a plan for each teammate's roles, responsibilities, and timeframe for completing all tasks.
  8. **Share contact information:** Be sure to provide contact information to all of the team members so they know how to contact one another.
  9. **Be flexible.** Because life can be complicated, it is important to be flexible and ready to support one another. This may even mean taking on a different role, tasks, or responsibility.
  10. **Ask questions.** Often we assume that others know why we did something or can read between the lines. However, that is not always the case. Asking questions helps clarify any concerns, as well as assumptions.
  11. **Trust your teammates.** Have faith that your teammates will complete their work well. While they may not complete tasks as you would, understand that they will need to do it "their way."
  12. **Communicate frequently, effectively, and professionally.** Frequent, efficient, and professional communication will help any group function smoothly, even if it entails sending a group e-mail to touch base about progress on the group assignment, questions one might have, or using some other mode of communication (e.g., chat, phone call, Skype, web conference, etc.). Also, let your teammates know if anything will affect your ability to complete a task on time. Even if they get upset about it, at least you will have informed them.
  13. **Document and summarize your agreements, tasks, time lines, and next steps.** The best groups not only document and summarize what they have agreed to do, but they also summarize the tasks each member will complete and by when, as well as next steps. Often it helps if a member summarizes what group members have agreed to do to ensure that all members are in accord.
  14. **Be prepared to compromise.** Although you may agree to disagree, at some point you will likely have to come to some compromise when making decisions.
  15. **Contact your instructor for support and advice.** If you find that your team is not functioning well, or as best as it could be—even after doing all of the above steps, then get advice and support from your instructor. Chances are that your instructor will be able to give you good advice to try out to help you and your team work cooperatively.