

## Study Groups

Wilfrid Laurier University  
Study Skills & Supplemental Instruction Centre

For some, study groups are a necessary part of university, and for others they are an optional resource for strengthening your study sessions. This workshop will introduce you to the how-to's of participating in a study group. Lets begin.

## The Benefits of a Study Group

- ✧ Motivation and encouragement
- ✧ Comfortable environment for asking questions
- ✧ Accountability
- ✧ New insight and perspective
- ✧ Teaching others
- ✧ Enjoyment

While some of us prefer to study on our own, there are actually many benefits to studying with your classmates—providing you do it right. This workshop will help you learn how to create a productive study group. But first, some benefits of studying with others that you may not have considered.

It can often be difficult to find the motivation to study, especially if we don't have an exam looming over our heads. And we all know how dangerous procrastination can be. Having a study group can act as a motivator that gets us into a studying mindset—you know that at a particular time each week you're meeting up with the group to go over material, and this can get you out of the rut of solitary studying. In addition, your group members will be relying on you to come to each study session prepared, and you won't want to let them down. This accountability factor is another important benefit to studying in groups. Your classmates will have different interpretations and understandings of the material

that

you've been learning, and seeing this new insight can often help you to understand a concept more clearly than you would if you only had your own perspective to work with.

Teaching others is one of the best ways to learn and understand new material, and your

study group will allow you this opportunity. As well, you may feel more comfortable in this

smaller group to ask the questions that you may not have felt comfortable asking during

class—study groups are a great way to clarify your understanding.

And finally, study with your friends and classmates can be far more enjoyable than studying

on your own all the time, so these study groups will allow you to inject a social aspect to

your learning.

## Starting a Study Group

- ✧ Talk with your classmates to see if they share the qualities that will help create a strong study group
- ✧ Look for a group of about three to five students
- ✧ Schedule a study block that works for everyone—about an hour to an hour and a half in length 2-3 times a week
- ✧ Pick a leader, or decide how you will rotate leadership

It can seem like a challenging task to begin a study group, especially if you haven't had a chance to get to know too many of your classmates. Take some time to talk to your classmates during breaks or before and after class to find like-minded individuals. When starting a study group, you want to connect with people who seem motivated to do well, are dependable, show up to class on a regular basis, seem to have an understanding of the course material and that you get along with. If your class has a WebCT component, perhaps post a message on the discussion board to see if anyone else is interested in getting a study group started.

Once you've found three to five people to join the study group, try and schedule a regular block of time for the group to meet. If possible, keep the time slot the same, so that you can all start to work the study sessions into your regular routines. A couple of sessions a week lasting about an hour to two hours in length are ideal.

Before you get started, you'll also want to decide if one person will lead the group, and who that will be, or if you'll rotate leadership responsibilities from session to session and give everyone a chance to take charge.

## Leaders

- ◇
- ◇ Keep the group on track.
- ◇ Set an agenda.
- ◇ Include all members.

Every group needs a leader, and study groups are no exception. The role of the leader in these somewhat informal groups is not necessarily to dominate or control, but is, instead, to facilitate and help group members stay on track with workload. A very important piece of this role is leading the group in setting an agenda—which will be discussed in more detail in a moment. In addition, as a leader, it's very important to encourage all of the participants to take part in the proceedings. This doesn't mean forcing any of your peers into sharing ideas — which is easier said than done. Through facilitation, you will create a positive environment that will result in an increase in participation by ensuring that all members have the chance to share their ideas. Often times, group leaders will be established very informally, as some members will be more inclined to take charge. However it can be a good idea to decide to rotate leadership from session to session, allowing each member to lead the group and set the agenda.

## Agendas

- ✧ Should outline what material will be covered in a particular study session.
- ✧ Organizational tool.
- ✧ Allow enough time for all activities.

Having an agenda is essential to any productive study session. This tool will help your group to stay focused. Your agenda should outline the general topics to be covered during your study session, as well as more detailed information such as chapters that reference your material and potential discussion questions to guide your group. Keep in mind the timeframe that your group has agreed to meet for. Ideally, your group should be established early in the term and meet regularly to help ensure that everyone keeps on top of the material. Meeting once a week at a regular time will help all group members to work the study group into a regular study pattern. A meeting of a hour or two in length can be useful, as long as your group can stay on track—the agenda is the way to do this. It's also a good idea to roughly decide how long your group will focus on each portion of your discussion. The agenda is the key to a successful study group, and it is essential that the group stays on track.

## Divide & Conquer

- ◇ A technique for covering large amounts of material in a short period of time.
- ◇ How to: divide a chapter up into sections and have each group member read one section.
- ◇ Once everyone has completed their reading, go around the group and have each member teach what they learned to the other group members.

Divide and conquer is one learning strategy that can really benefit your group in covering large amounts of material in a relatively short period of time. The technique is simple, lets take the example of covering the material in one chapter. Start out by breaking your chapter up into sections—it may be useful to use the subheadings to help with this task. Each group member should take a section and read it on their own. Once all of the group members have completed their section, have each group member teach what they learned to the rest of the group. You can use the divide and conquer technique to cover discussion questions and to create questions to study with. It is important to note that everyone in your study group is individually responsible for knowing all of the course content. When using the divide and conquer technique it may be useful to encourage all members to first preview the complete chapter and generate questions from the material. For more information about this technique, please review our Active Reading workshop.

## Teaching Others

- ✧ Teaching others is one of the best ways to learn new material.
- ✧ Helps to solidify understanding of a concept.
- ✧ Must actively think about a topic while explaining it, leading to a deeper understanding.
- ✧ Teach study techniques, not just concepts.

One of the best ways to learn new material, or understand a difficult concept, is to teach it to someone else, and study groups are a place where this can happen on a regular basis—the divide and conquer method that we just discussed is one way to encourage this strategy. Teaching others is a great learning strategy because when we explain a concept to another person we're having to think about it in a different way than if we were simply reading about it. Teaching a concept to someone else will force you to think in greater depth than you might if you were only trying to understand it yourself. You'll also notice that when you try to explain something, you are able to see the gaps in your own understanding.

Not only is it helpful to use the technique of teaching your group mates material, it is also very helpful to learn new study techniques in this setting. You will find that we all use slightly different methods when learning new material, and it's very likely that one of your group mates knows a trick or two that you haven't thought of yet—and they would likely

appreciate learning your strategies as well.

## Be on the Lookout:

While studying in a group is beneficial, there is also opportunity for the group to be unsuccessful. Look out for the following:

- ◇ Unprepared group members
- ◇ Getting off track
- ◇ Overly dominant members
- ◇ Using study time as a time to complain

While study groups are a great way to learn, it is also easy for groups to go off track and end up wasting valuable time. Some things to pay attention to in order to ensure that your group doesn't suffer are listed on this slide. It is important that all group members come to each session prepared for the task at hand. Although there may be circumstances which might cause one person to go off track once, your group should not accept a member who consistently comes unprepared and with nothing to offer. The flip side to this is group members who dominate the discussion. For the group to be successful it is essential that all members are participating and feel comfortable. This doesn't happen when one or two members control the discussion. While this will partially be decided by the personalities in your group, it will also be important for all members to discourage this behaviour and encourage all members to participate. It is incredibly easy to get off track when studying with a group—especially when the group gets along really well. It will be up to the leader, and to all of the participating

members to ensure that an agenda is created and that the group sticks to it for the duration of the study session. There can be time to talk about other things once you've completed your tasks for the day.

A common problem with study groups is that without a solid structure they may simply become a time for members to share complaints and concerns about the course—the difficulty of the material and the professor. This is not a productive use of your study time, and like any other type of distraction, it is something to be discouraged.

These problems can be avoided if your group sets out some rules and guidelines regarding group conduct before getting started. As well, don't forget about continually creating and sticking to an agenda and schedule—this will help to keep everyone on track.

## Practice

- ❖ Active reading is a challenging technique that takes some practice.
- ❖ In order to make the most of the information here, it is essential that you continually practice new skills.
- ❖ Changing formed habits is not easy, so don't be discouraged if it seems challenging at first—don't give up!

It is not easy to simply start using new study strategies, and it takes time and practise to develop new habits. At first, new study techniques may seem tedious, and you may feel like the time you're spending that task could be put to better use. Rest assured that it takes time to develop all new habits, and after some time you'll find it becomes easier and less of a burden with each passing week. Don't give up!

## Still Have Questions?

For even more help with improving your time management skills, or for advice on other ways to improve your study habits, visit our website:

[www.wlu.ca/study](http://www.wlu.ca/study)

Call to book an appointment: 519.884.0710 ext. 2220

For more assistance, visit our website, stop by the Study Skills Office, or call to book an appointment—you'll be glad you did!