

# STRATEGIES FOR WORKING IN TEAMS

Many courses at U of T involve some aspect of teamwork (e.g. group presentations or capstone projects), so openly discussing strategies for collaborative learning with your peers as you begin an assignment can be helpful. Every team is slightly different in terms of its dynamics and goals, so these are just a few suggestions that we encourage you to adapt and personalize for your specific situation.

## First off, why can teamwork be so challenging?

- Many students can share stories of dealing with free riders or people who unexpectedly “ghost” a project. Other students might have dealt with leaders who end up controlling every aspect of the workload (i.e. “dominators”), leaving little space for equal participation. Both types of negative experience can influence confidence and a sense of trust on a new team. Consider talking openly about these concerns with your group members so you can mutually create a culture of collaboration that works for all of you.
- Conflicting schedules, geographical distance from campus, and varying time zones can all make collaboration difficult for students. Before dividing the workload, coordinate with your team so you can find a balance between synchronous discussion (e.g. in-person or virtual meetings) and asynchronous collaboration (e.g. editing documents on a shared drive).
- In a team, you are often being evaluated by your course instructor or TA as a whole group, not as individual students. If you are concerned about this aspect, discuss each team member’s time commitment and expectations for the project together – you might find that you all feel similarly. And if all members cannot contribute equally due to other responsibilities or issues, your team can then adjust the workload as early as possible.

## What are some benefits of teamwork?

- Even though working in teams can require additional coordination from you and your group members, there are many benefits to collaborative learning:
  - When students talk through problems purposefully, rehearse content, and elaborate on their course material, these tasks can support their long-term memory of the subject matter (Rolheiser & Stevahn, 1998).
  - Collaborations can prepare students for future professional environments by refining their communication strategies (Brent et al, 2004).
  - Group work also has positive impacts on student achievement, motivation for learning, intergroup relations, and critical and creative thinking (Baloche & Brody, 2017).
- For a visual sketch note about the benefits of teamwork, check out [“What Do Students Learn When They Engage in Collaborative Projects” by John Spencer \(spencerauthor.com/collaborativeprojects\)](https://www.spencerauthor.com/collaborativeprojects)

Rolheiser, C., & Stevahn, L. (1998). The role of staff developers in promoting effective teacher decision-making. In C.M. Brody & N. Davidson (Eds.), *Professional development for cooperative learning: Issues and approaches*. State University of New York (SUNY) Press.

Brent, R., Felder, R.M., Elhajj, I. & Oakley, B. (2004). Turning student groups into effective teams. *Journal of Student Centered Learning*, 2 (1), 9 - 34.

Baloche, L., & Brody, C. M. (2017). Cooperative learning: exploring challenges, crafting innovations. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, (43)3, 274 - 283.

## Strategy 1

### Before splitting up the work, discuss your communication styles and preferences for team roles.

- When students are placed in a group assignment, they often start by breaking down the workload and assigning tasks. Before beginning this process, consider an initial meeting where you get to know each other and discuss your vision for the project. For example, you could openly discuss what worked well in your past teamwork projects and what didn't.
- Take some time to individually reflect on how you communicate and then share back with your team members. For example, do you learn better by talking through ideas out loud? Do you need moments of silence to digest ideas first? Are you a fast talker who jumps in? Or do you wait for a pause before speaking? Addressing these nuances can help you better appreciate each other's default communication approaches and lessen the chance of misunderstandings.
- What personalities do you have when collaborating? For example, do you enjoy leading meetings? Taking meeting minutes? Do you really dislike setting up calendar invitations? Do you absolutely love engaging with technological platforms such as OneDrive or Google Drive? Strategically assign roles based on strengths and interests, but consider rotating them if your group members have a desire to practice different skillsets as well.
- Check out this article called "[Great Teams Are About Personalities, Not Just Skills](https://hbr.org/2017/01/great-teams-are-about-personalities-not-just-skills)" ([hbr.org/2017/01/great-teams-are-about-personalities-not-just-skills](https://hbr.org/2017/01/great-teams-are-about-personalities-not-just-skills)) in the Harvard Business Review for some ideas to discuss with your group. Which personalities do you identify with? Which ones might be useful for this project?

## Strategy 2

### Agree on collaboration practices that work for everyone in the group

- Often, there can be an emphasis on verbal collaboration in groupwork (e.g. speaking up during meetings; jumping onto a Zoom call; rehearsing presentations). However, there are other ways to participate that are also valid: taking notes; writing ideas in a chat box; or even sometimes by listening.
- Acknowledge different ways to participate by asking team members what their preferences are. For example, some team members might need to work independently and add ideas to a shared document before actively collaborating. In a meeting, some students might value some reflective writing time for a few minutes before verbally contributing.
- Make sure the systems and platforms that you're using work for everyone in the group. For example, are there students in different time zones or geographical areas who might experience technological barriers? Are frequent meetings always better? Can everyone always meet in-person? Chat through the different needs of the group before solidifying an approach.
- It's not always about work! Remember that there is value in setting some time for team-building exercises and recreational activities. Is it possible to meet for coffee on a biweekly basis? Or rewarding yourselves periodically with an online game? Events like these help you learn more about each other and create more group cohesion.

## Strategy 3

### Develop a community agreement together to set goals and reduce future conflicts

- Developing a community agreement - which can also be called a "[group contract](#)" - is an effective way for you and your team members to assign your roles and responsibilities, set deadlines and expectations, and formalize other practices. This document can also outline some back-up plans if things don't go according to schedule or even strategies for how to deal with disagreement in the group.
- What else can be included in a community agreement? Almost anything! You might want to discuss communication practices such as the best platform for asynchronous collaboration (e.g. email or instant messaging). Or you could address how your meetings will be structured (e.g. structured with an agenda or spontaneous with a notetaker).
- Keep in mind that a community agreement doesn't need to be a prescriptive and rigid document. Think of it as a co-designed and responsive tool to help you keep on track for meeting your goals and reflecting your core team's values. If you think it's no longer supporting your team to succeed, consider discussing it again at a team meeting where there can be consensus in making adjustments.
- Talking about potential conflicts or possible future disagreements can be an awkward task. However, proactively having practices in place to resolve these issues can make your overall teamwork experiences much smoother and help you all bounce back from potential challenges more quickly.
- For more suggestions and tips about the benefits of creating community agreements and to download some templates you can adapt for your team, check out this page on [Making Group Contracts](https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/developing-assignments/group-work/making-group-contracts) ([uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/developing-assignments/group-work/making-group-contracts](https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/developing-assignments/group-work/making-group-contracts))