The Power of Study Groups

Two Heads Are Better Than One

Have you ever noticed that when you explain something you've learned in class to a friend, you begin to understand it better yourself? This happens because when you explain or teach an idea, you need to actively think it through. And by thinking more deeply about what you've learned and then explaining it to someone else, you begin to understand it better.

Studying with others in a small group is helpful to everyone because, as in the example above, you

- Think out loud.
- Share ideas.
- Learn from one another.

As the old saying goes, "Two heads are better than one." While studying alone may work well for things such as memorizing facts, sometimes you'll need to understand complicated ideas. And rather than memorize facts, you'll be required to apply facts to solving problems. Effective study groups involve hashing out lesson materials together—explaining concepts, arguing about them, figuring out why one person's answer differs from another's—and in the process, you learn more than you ever would have studying by yourself.

The Benefits of Study Groups

Group study offers other advantages, in addition to gaining a deeper understanding of class material. These include the following:

- **Note-taking reinforcement:**
  Took horrible notes in French last week? No worries! A member of your study group can share his.

- **Sharing talents:**
  Each person brings different strengths to a study group, such as organizational skills, the ability to stick to a task, a talent for memorization, and so on.

- **Covering more ground:**
  Three study group members may be able to solve a calculus problem that none would have solved alone.

- **Support system:**
  Members of a study group often have common goals, such as good grades. The work each person in a group does affects the other members, which results in making the group members supportive of one another.

- **Socializing:**
  It's more fun to study with others. And because it's more fun, you spend more time studying!

Guidelines for Getting a Group Together

How do you put a study group together? How many members should the group have? For how long should you meet? For answers to these questions and more, check out the following study group guidelines:

- **How many?**
  Create a group of four to six people. In a larger group, it's easy for someone to get left out, and smaller groups can too easily get off track.

- **Who?**
  Pick classmates who seem to share your interest in doing well in class. Look for people who stay alert in class, take notes, ask questions, and respond to the teacher's questions. John Mitchell, who has researched group work at Central Michigan University, suggests including in your study group "someone who understands the material better than you and someone who understands less." Doing so will provide you with someone who can explain concepts to you and someone to whom you can explain the material.
• **Where?**
  Hold study group sessions in a place that is free of distractions and that has room to spread out books, and notes.

• **How long?**
  Study groups should meet for no more than two to three hours at a time. Having a time limit will help the group focus. If you know you only have an hour, you're more likely to stay on task.

• **When?**
  If possible, try to meet on the same day and time each week. Treating the study session as you would other activities helps you to keep to a schedule and ensures that everyone will attend.

### Getting the Most Out of a Study Group Session

The greatest benefit of studying with a group of classmates is the support you receive from one another. Here are some tips to help your group get the most out of each study session:

• **State objectives or goals.**
  Knowing what you want to achieve at each session helps the group stay focused and manage time. At the start of each meeting, a designated session leader should state what the goals are. For example, the session leader might announce, "Today we'll review chapter 7 and discuss the theorems introduced in class on Wednesday."

• **Be prepared.**
  Before a session, be sure to finish your assigned reading, review notes, and list topics you want to go over. By being well prepared, your group can make the most of your time together by questioning one another on the assigned material.

• **Take turns teaching.**
  When you instruct the group, you not only help the other group members, but also reinforce your own knowledge.

• **Stay on topic.**
  For each session, assign one member to be the taskmaster. This person's job is to steer the group members back to the topic if they begin to drift. Also, schedule five-minute breaks into your study sessions after every half hour or so of work. This allows all the group members to get off-topic chatting out of their systems.

By supplementing your individual study with a study group, you can reinforce what you've learned, deepen your understanding of complex concepts, and maybe even make a few new friends. Whoever said learning can't be fun?

(Source: collegeboard.com)