



# 301 Academic Skills Resource: Group Work and Seminars



## Introduction

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Being able to work effectively within a group is essential whilst at university and also in other environments such as employment, sports societies and social clubs.

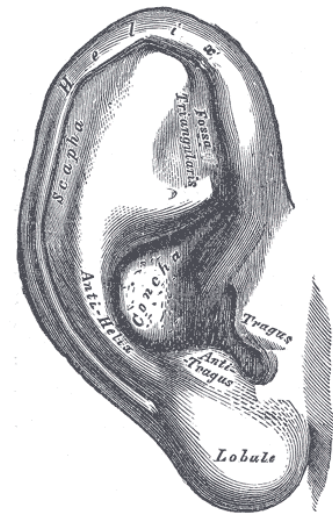
## Active Listening

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There is a world of difference between listening and hearing. While the former involves an intense and focused awareness of the speaker's words, the latter is clouded with distractions, disinterest and minimum receptivity.

Active listening is:

- A conversation model in which one person speaks and the listeners engage themselves completely in what the person is trying to convey.
- The listener, during the course of active listening, avoids any external comments (except a yes or showing positive body language).
- Any negative or difficult emotions are strictly avoided
- Even if the listener has any question, he/she may ask that either at the end of the conversation or may raise hands to politely stop the speaker in between the conversation.



*Buzzle (2013) What is active listening? [online] Available at: <http://www.buzzle.com/articles/what-is-active-listening.html>*

## Group Climate

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The effectiveness of a seminar group depends on the 'social climate' within the group.

- A **defensive climate** can be a response to perceived threat, pressure or lack of clarity around the task.
- An **accepting climate** can be encouraged by openness, empathy and clarity of task within a group.

A positive group climate can be encouraged by setting out and developing some clear ground rules for interactions.

## Group roles

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All members of a group will likely adopt one or more roles. A member may adopt a role because it suits his/her characteristics or because he/she wishes to develop a certain skill such as leadership. Examples include:

<b>Facilitator</b>	Moderates team discussion, keeps the group on task, and distributes work.
<b>Recorder</b>	Takes notes summarizing team discussions and decisions, and keeps all necessary records.
<b>Reporter</b>	Serves as group spokesperson to the class or instructor, summarizing the group's activities and/or conclusions.
<b>Timekeeper</b>	Keeps the group aware of time constraints and deadlines and makes sure meetings start on time.
<b>Devil's Advocate</b>	Raises counter-arguments and (constructive) objections, introduces alternative explanations and solutions.
<b>Harmonizer</b>	Strives to create a harmonious and positive team atmosphere and reach consensus (while allowing a full expression of ideas.)
<b>Prioritizer</b>	Makes sure group focuses on most important issues and does not get caught up in details.
<b>Innovator</b>	Encourages imagination and contributes new and alternative perspectives and ideas.
<b>Liaison</b>	Ensures that systems are in place to ensure that group members can communicate.
<b>Wildcard</b>	Assumes the role of any missing member and fills in wherever needed.

## Dealing with difficult moments

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**Silences:** Silences often seem longer than they really are. This is because we so very rarely experience silence. Silence can be productive, however. Value it, especially if the group needs to discuss something of weight. Don't feel obliged to fill silences with questions or jokes.

**Dead-ends:** If silences suggest stagnation or a stalemate, try a new approach. Think of ways to break the task into smaller parts. Can you turn the problem on its head? Brainstorm ideas; reconvene the meeting for an hour's time; go away individually think, calm down etc.?

**Imbalances in contributions:** Imbalances in groups can result in conflict and resentment. Sometimes the lack of contribution is perceived, as someone's contribution may be less visible than another's (e.g. researching). Sometimes someone may be struggling or out of the loop – did they miss a meeting? Did the notes get sent to them? Sometimes people have

other things going on. Sometimes, people just don't pull their weight. Instead of blame, focus on success. To mitigate against aspects of team problems;

- Use a Team Operating Agreement or Group Rules
- Create space for individual contributions within the group project
- Make sure tasks are broken down and shared equally with clear expectations

**Strong emotions:** Address how the working of the group could be improved. For example, it might be that some people feel their views are ignored. What would make them feel they were being heard? Can a compromise be found? You may need ground rules such as "if one person is aggressive towards another, the rest of the group will intervene."

**Conflict:** Is conflict always a problem? Make sure that conflict is encouraged and welcomed to a point. Differences of opinion can be productive if harnessed effectively. If conflict becomes personal or disruptive then it will need to be addressed. Take time-out from the discussion and return to it later. Democratic approaches can be useful but need to be used cautiously to avoid individuals becoming marginalised. Can a compromise be found?

**REMEMBER:** your tutors will be interested in the product (the assessment), but the process itself is an important part of the learning. When challenges arise, think about them as a learning opportunity - what can you do to ensure there is the best outcome? How can you apply this learning experience?

Adapted from Cottrell, S. (2008) *The Study Skills Handbook*. 3rd Edition.  
Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan (p100)

## Top Tips

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- Set out ground rules – write these down and make sure everyone has a copy
- Arrange a time and location that suits all, and will provide a professional working environment
- Don't leave meetings until the last minute – meet frequently for shorter amounts of time
- Plan (agenda) and record (minute) meetings
- Log your work **individually** and **as a group** to keep track of progress

## Other relevant 301 Academic Skills Workshops

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- Note Taking in Lectures
- Speed Reading
- Reading for Memory

Sign up online here: <http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/301/services/studyskills>

## 301 Study Skills Tutorials

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<http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/301/services/studyskills>

# Preparation and Consolidation

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Making sure that you are prepared for a group meeting AND following up with a plan are useful strategies to make the most of the experience.

- List things you could do **before** to help you get more from the meeting.
- List the things you could do **during** the meeting to make sure it runs smoothly and successfully.
- List the things you could do **after** the meeting to make sure that the outcomes of the meeting are met.

When	What
<b>Before</b>	1.  2.  3.  4.  5.
<b>During</b>	1.  2.  3.  4.  5.
<b>After</b>	1.  2.  3.  4.  5.