

CPSC 351 — Working in Groups in This Course

Why is This Important?

Like communication, presentation, time management and other organizational skills, the ability to work effectively as part of a group is a “soft skill” that students will depend on in future courses and their careers — including careers in software development.

Thus, if you can learn to work more effectively as part of a group, through your experience in this course, then this will not only help you to do better in this course — it will, potentially, leave you better prepared for future tasks for reasons that do not have anything to do with “the mathematical foundations of computer science”, at all.

How Will Things Normally Proceed?

Assignment groups in this course by the instructor using D2L's facilities for this. Ideally, students' experiences in assignment groups are positive — and result in effective learning — with students' knowing a few more students (and, maybe, making some friends) in the process. Normally, all students in an assignment group receive the same feedback and assignment mark. It is, generally, not necessary to grant extensions for assignment work — because groups are able to complete the assigned work in time.

Unfortunately, experiences are not always this positive. ***This document is intended to help you to avoid unpleasant surprises, so that your experiences when working in assignment groups are positive.***

Please note that ***participation in assigned groups is required.*** Students will not have the option to work by themselves or to form *different* groups for assignment work. A new set of assignment groups created for each assignment — so you will not be working with the same group members all term long.

Something To Do Right Away

The course web site includes additional documents concerning effective group work — including the “slide deck” about team contracts, as well as a sample team contract that some groups complete, when they begin work, in order to avoid problems. The web site also includes a link to an “ITP Metrics” web site, with lots more material (including material about “conflict management” that might be useful.) ***If you want to get started as soon as you can, then you should read and think about this material, right away.***

Something To Do When Your Assignment Group is Formed

The information for each assignment will include a date when the instructor will use D2L’s facilities to create assignment groups and notify students that this has happened. Please ***look for course email about this when it is due to arrive*** and use D2L’s facilities to ***contact the other members of your group by email*** as soon as you possibly can — in order to establish contact and to schedule a first group meeting.

- At least one group member should contact the course instructor — copying all group members — ***within 48 hours after groups have been created.*** A news item will be posted on the course web site when assignment groups have been formed.

Your email to the instructor should confirm that the first group meeting has been scheduled for some time in ***the first five working days after groups were created.*** The email should also say whether the meeting will be in-person, held over Zoom, or will be conducted in some other way. It should identify a group member who will lead the first meeting or briefly describe how that person will be chosen by the time the meeting starts. Finally, it should either confirm that all group members have been participating so far, or say who has been participating, and who has not.

- Please arrange for one member of your group to send a ***short*** email to the instructor after your first group meeting. Ideally, this email will confirm that you have a plan for the completion of the first assignment component. If your group has questions about the assignment or the group work in it, then these questions might be included in this email — or you might advise the instructor that additional questions are on the way (letting the instructor know *when* and *how* that will happen). A comment on group members’ participation might be helpful — especially if one or more group members did not attend.

More about the First Group Meeting

During the first meeting, your group should check whether you all understand the assignment requirements. If these are not clear to everyone then you should decide whether you need to ask the instructor for clarification and you should decide when, and how, you will do this.

You should also make arrangements for completion of the first component of the assignment, during this first meeting. ***Ideally, all group members should participate in this part*** because it concerns how the rest of the assignment will be completed. You should develop a plan that will allow all group members to present information or questions about this in time for a draft for a solution, for this component, to be available for inspection ***at least two days before this is due*** — so that you have time to improve this material, as needed and so that you can be ready for someone, in the group, to submit this before it is due.

Things To Do Later

Make sure that at least one group members *knows how to submit* an assignment using D2L, at least a day or two the first component is due. Your group should have selected the group member who will do this.

You should plan to have your submission ready at least a day before it is due, in case of surprises. Thus, a reasonably complete draft of this *short* submission should be ready at least a day, or two, before that — so that you can circulate in within your group, have group members comment on it and, if necessary, meet again.

You should be ready to submit this (and you should do so) at least two ***hours*** before the time when it is due — students sometimes report that D2L can be slow, and unresponsive, immediately before an assignment is due — and you will not be given another chance to submit this material.

The information for each assignment will also include a date when feedback for the first component of the assignment is available. At least one group member should contact the course instructor — copying all group members — ***within 48 hours after feedback has been provided***. Once again, this email should confirm that a group meeting for the discussion of the feedback, and the second assignment component, has been scheduled. The content of the email should resemble the content of the email to the instructor that confirmed the first meeting, as described above.

No further email to the instructor is needed unless you need clarification about something about the assignment or you need the instructor's help.

Advice About How To Be Successful

Always begin work as soon as is possible so that you have time to deal with surprises.

Allow time for work to be presented to, discussed by, and — possibly, adjusted by — everyone in your assignment group. Remember that your submission should look like *one* document, instead of several unrelated (or, even, contradictory) documents.

Never assign a task to only one group member — who might not be available when needed. *At least two group members* (and ideally more) should be able to supply and explain any material that is needed to complete any part of an assignment.

Remember that the other members of your group are also students who also have other responsibilities and might be under stress that you don't know about. Try to treat them as you would like them to treat you.

If You Don't Reply to Email or Miss a Meeting...

If you fail to reply to group email, miss a meeting or let down the rest of your group in some other way, please understand that the rest of the group will have proceeded without you. It will be your responsibility to catch up — and not their responsibility to redo work, or adjust schedules, to accommodate you.

Please be prepared to explain what happened, if other members of the group have been inconvenienced. You may need to explain this to the instructor too.

What To Do If There are Problems

Please contact the instructor by email — as soon as you can — if there has been miscommunication, absences, or other problems within your group that you have been unable to resolve on your own. You *should* try to solve problems yourselves before asking for help — but you should also ask for help as soon as you can if it seems like help is needed.

Please expect, though, that you *will* generally be expected to complete group work without group membership being changed: Help, that is provided, will be intended to make this easier instead of giving you something else to do, instead.

You should also expect that the instructor will have checked (by looking at email records, and so on) to see whether your group made a reasonable effort to complete work in a timely way, before deciding what help should be supplied.