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8 Tips for Getting the Most out of Study Groups

by [Kristina Petersen, Ph.D.](#) on September 20, 2012

Editor's Note: *The following post is the second in a two-part series by Dr. Petersen on how to improve your study habits. You can also read the first part, [5 Ways to Ace Medical School Exams by Maximizing Study Time](#).*



Have you ever thought you understood something—until you had to explain it to someone else?

You're taking Endo, and someone asks you to enumerate the various mechanisms associated with type 2 diabetes. You get as far as remembering the insulin receptor and then draw a blank. . . . What were the actual mechanisms? You remember there was something about the beta islet cell. . . . Was there an ATP-gated channel . . . or . . . ? Grrrrr. You thought you knew this!

On the flip side, if you feel you never had a firm grasp on those various mechanisms in the first place, you know how reassuring it can be when someone can clearly explain them to you. That's where your classmates come in.

Studying with other people helps you **personalize and interact with material**. This is much more difficult to do independently.

Studying in a group gives you the opportunity to **figure out what you don't know—and what you do know**. This allows you to **TARGET** your remaining study time on topics you are not so familiar with, thereby making your studying more efficient and saving you time in the long run.

For some, especially medical students and other grad-school students, studying in groups may be a foreign concept. Some fear the group dynamic might be too competitive or that the style of group study will clash with individual study preferences.

From my experience, there is an optimal way to organize and interact with a study group. And that's the focus of this post.

Creating an Effective Study Group

1. Don't make the group too big; a group of **three or four students** is the ideal size.
2. Designate a **moderator** to keep you on schedule. The moderator role can rotate from one meeting to the next.
3. **Decide the topics you are going to discuss BEFORE** meeting. All members should commit to preparing that material **PRIOR** to meeting. Don't take on too much material for one session.
4. Schedule a **SPECIFIC time period** for your study group (e.g., 1.5 hours) before meeting; it is the moderator's responsibility to keep to that time. This will prevent the session from dragging on—and you feeling your valuable study time has been wasted.
5. Each student should thoroughly **PREPARE and identify key points and areas of confusion** within the material to be covered in the group.
6. **Discuss and quiz each other** on the material. Treat this like an oral exam. Come into the group well prepared but be ready to identify areas that you do not understand.
7. **Teach others** material you understand, and **learn from others** who understand material better than you do. When you teach someone else material, you have to know it in much more depth, and you will find it solidifies your knowledge. You may even surprise yourself with how much you know.
8. Try to **make studying enjoyable** in whatever way you can. Since you will spend a lot of time studying, you need to keep things interesting. Consider crowning a session "guru" every time you meet. This is the person who has been able to ace key material and explain it well to others during the session. You might even exchange gag gifts.

So, how do you as an individual get the most out of the group? Each student should go in with **three goals**:

1. **Emerge from the group with a list of what you DON'T KNOW YET** (material you need to spend more time learning). This is **GOLDEN** information. Once you know where your weak areas lie, you can spend more time studying these topics. After the study group meets, you should develop an action plan and schedule enough time to study these topics.
2. **Determine what you already know well**. Often these will be the topics you will help teach others. It's important to identify objectively what you know well so you can spend your time wisely on topics that you don't know. Of course, you will *review all the material* before the exam, so don't worry that you won't be prepared.
3. **Personalize and interact with the material**. This is much more difficult to do independently, and is best done by interacting with others. What do I mean by "personalizing" the material? You are much more likely to assimilate information (make it part of your memory) when you make it your own. If you simply read the pages in a textbook over and over, you are not so likely to learn as if you take your own notes (personalizing), review your notes (personalizing), quiz yourself on the information (interacting), have others quiz you on the material (interacting), and teach or learn from others (personalizing and interacting).

Adding study groups to your studying arsenal can deliver outsized results—not only in better test scores but also, and perhaps more importantly, in the ability to retain information and apply it in the real world.



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How to Organize and Conduct Effective Study Groups

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- *How many?* 3-6 students (If more are interested, form two groups and get together occasionally to share information and prepare for exams.)
- *Who?* Don't base study partners on friendship; look for people who stay alert in class, take notes, ask questions, and respond to the teacher's questions.
- *Where?* Hold study group sessions in a place free of distractions with room to spread materials out.
- *How long?* Study groups should meet for *no more* than 2-3 hours at a time.
- *When?* If possible, try to meet on the same day(s) and time(s) each week. Treating the study session like you would a class helps you keep to a schedule and ensures that everyone will attend.

Getting the Most Out of a Study Group Session

- *Set rules and guidelines from the start.* At your first meeting, make sure everyone has agreed on expectations, and then establish rules and guidelines (e.g. Will slackers be kicked out of the group?).
- *State objectives or goals.* Knowing what you want to achieve at each session helps the group manage time and stay focused. At the end of each meeting, make a plan for the next session and allocate times for each task. Make sure you have an ending time. Stick to your plan.
- *Be prepared.* Before a session, be sure to finish your assigned reading, review notes, prepare any group assignments, and list topics/questions you want to review.
- *Communicate openly.* Don't be shy about asking for your peers' feedback: "Am I rambling too much?" or "Did I present your point of view correctly?" If reviewing reveals points of disagreement or confusion that you cannot resolve as a group, record questions to ask your professor or TA.
- *Stay on topic.* For each session, assign someone to steer group members back on topic if they drift.

What Do You Actually Do When You're Together?

- Assign people to teach and lead a discussion on each topic in your agenda. Make assignments at the end of each meeting for the next meeting so that each person can prepare questions and

think about the best way to address the topic.

- Have everyone create questions that test comprehension, application and memory of the material. Take turns asking, answering, and explaining *why* the correct answer is correct. (Collect questions at each session; then, take the cumulative practice exam you've created to prepare for the real exam.)
- Role-play: You can act like a parent explaining the ideas to a child. Or how about becoming your professor and deducing what questions will be on the exam? Here's another interesting exercise you can use in your study groups: the "Final Exam" procedure by Win Wenger of the Renaissance Project.
- Studies show that connecting knowledge to kinetic activity (characterized by movement), rhythm and music significantly helps retention. Create songs, movement, chants, etc. that will help your group remember key information/terms.
- Periodically evaluate your performance as a group (the Teamwork Rubric provides some worthwhile criteria you can use to evaluate your group), then work to fix areas where you are weak.

Learn more about why study groups matter: Study Groups—The Secret to Success »

Notes

1. Material adapted from Anastasia Pryanikova, "How to Form an Effective Study Group," Lawsagna: neuroscience-fueled tips for productivity, creativity and influence; The College Board, "The Power of Study Groups," The College Board; Latino Scholars Network, "How to Form a Study Group," Hispanic Scholarship Fund.

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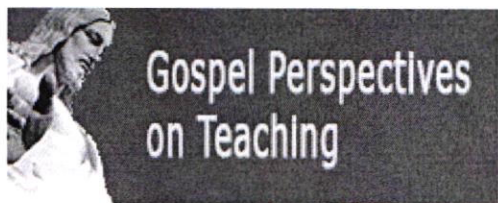
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How to Form a Successful Study Group: Tips and Strategies.

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1. Forming the group:

- An effective study group ideally has of **3-4 members** (no more than 5 max).
- Your group should meet *at least* once a week and you should decide how long you want your sessions to be.
- All members should make a serious **commitment** to show up and to do the required preparation prior to any group meeting. If you show up unprepared it *will* impact how effective that session is for the whole group, not to mention what *you* could get out of those sessions.
- You should choose a group '**leader/facilitator**' (this could be one person or members could take turns). This person would be responsible for keeping the group on track and on task within each session so that no one gets frustrated with pace or with time being wasted on other things not relevant to mastering the course material. This person should also send out a reminder email on weekly time/location info, plus any session info that's relevant.

2. Preparing for sessions:

- You need to decide as a group what you would like to **cover** in a session. This could be handled via email (initiated by the group facilitator) a few days before your next meeting or it could be discussed at the end of each meeting. If you are meeting weekly, you will probably be discussing and working on the preceding week's material and homework (where relevant) in your next session.
- It's easy to want to focus on homework problems, in other words, *application* type sessions, but you'll be ignoring a key component involved in truly understanding your material – identifying and understanding the **concepts** underlying homework and/or exam questions. This is a great opportunity to tackle as a group! Here are some suggestions:
 - Divide the two or three lectures that you have per week among the group members. Each 'subgroup' then summarizes the key concepts covered in their chosen lecture and creates a one page summary for each group member.
 - You can choose to review these concepts at the start of each group session as a whole, or each 'subgroups' can teach/present the concepts covered in their lecture to the group for subsequent review and discussion.
- You probably won't have time to cover all the assigned homework problems, so it would be helpful to decide as a group how many and which of the homework problems you want address. Each group member should then attempt to work through the problems on their own prior to your next group session (or at least have a familiarity with these problems).

3. Session structure:

- It is helpful to come up with some kind of **structure** to your sessions to help you keep on track as a group, and to make your time more effective in covering as much material as possible. Here are some suggestions:
 - Decide on how long your sessions are going to be, e.g., 2 hours each Tuesday night.
 - In the first ½ hour you could review and discuss the preceding week's concepts. This allows members a chance to voice any confusion, issues or problems they are having with the material, and allows you to share knowledge as a group (often the best way to truly know that you *know* something is when you get the opportunity to teach/explain it to someone else).
 - The rest of the time you could work on problems/questions. Before starting, decide in which order you want to address the problems or questions.
 - You can take turns 'presenting' the problems (some members may have been able to solve/answer the problem/questions and some members may have gotten stuck) and as a group you can address any issues which came up when members had worked on the material individually.
 - If you are in a course in which homework problems are not assigned, but you are trying to get some practice applying concepts addressed in class, turn to your textbook. The problems/questions presented in the back of your textbook chapters are a great resource! Read through them and decide as a group which ones you want to tackle in your next session.
 - You also can look for practice problems on the web (which you can run by your TA or professor for relevancy), ask your professor about practice problems/questions and even come up with your own problems to present to the group.
 - You should use the last 10 minutes to do a quick review/summary of the session and wrap up by identifying any tasks or responsibilities needing to be addressed prior to the next session.

Study tip: think about including the following things when answering questions:

- ✓ Verify that you know what all the terms in the question mean.
- ✓ Verify that you actually understand what the question is asking for.
- ✓ Write out in words what you did to solve the problem.
- ✓ Write down what concepts are being tested in the question.
- ✓ Try to manipulate the problem in some way that challenges your understanding of the concepts you listed (you'll come up with new approaches to the problem or even new questions).