

Forming Effective Study Groups

Study groups aren't for everyone. However, a majority of nursing students find that participation in a study group, at least at some level, is helpful: you should definitely try one out. Whether to join a study group is a personal decision, and if you do join a study group, how that group functions is also at the discretion of the group members. The group should be flexible and tailored to suit the group's unique needs.

WHY JOIN A STUDY GROUP?

- The group provides comfort and security.
- Members can motivate and learn from each other.
- Talking through material helps with understanding and retention.
- Groups can generate discussions on how to understand and remember different nursing topics.
- You can easily miss or misunderstand information; an effective group can keep its members on the right track.

WHAT MAKES A STUDY GROUP EFFECTIVE?

A study group is most effective when all the members have a common goal which they are working together to reach. The parameters of the study group should be set based on the group goals. The following guidelines can help ensure that your study group is effective:

- Set goals for each meeting.
- Set a regular meeting schedule and stick to it.
- Keep socializing to a minimum.
- Keep the meetings focused.
- Require that each member come to the meetings prepared.

WHICH STUDENTS SHOULD I SEEK AS PARTNERS?

Look for classmates...

- Who are well-prepared for class;
- Who listen well when others talk (and don't dominate discussions);
- Who share your academic goals;
- Who have similar study schedules.

WHAT SORTS OF THINGS SHOULD WE DO IN OUR GROUP MEETINGS?

There are no hard and fast rules about what should take place during a study group meeting, but the following activities are typical:

- Discussing material to review what students have covered in class;
- Discussing upcoming new material to prepare for class;
- Taking practice exams;
- Reviewing and discussing each others practice exam answers;
- Exchanging study tips;
- Helping to keep each other motivated.

STUDY GROUP DON'TS

- Don't allow the meeting to become a social or gossip session.
- Don't use the group to share the workload.
- Don't allow the group to become a substitute for individual learning.
- Don't allow the group to become too large. (Each member needs to contribute.)
- Don't do all your studying in a group setting.
- **DON'T STAY IN A STUDY GROUP THAT IS NOT WORKING FOR YOU!**

How to conduct a study group

Aside from the camaraderie, the fellowship and the fun, study groups elevate your spirit on days when you just don't want to work at your education. Take advantage of group support in personal areas too. Other people might have insight into your problems involving transportation, child care, finances, time scheduling, and a host of other subjects. Use groups as a tool for getting what you want from school.

There are many ways to conduct a study group. Begin with the following suggestions and see what works.

Test each other by asking questions. Each group member can agree to bring four or five test sample questions to each meeting, then you can all take the test made from these questions.

Practice teaching each other. Teaching is a great way to learn something. Turn the material you're studying into a list of topics. Then assign specific topics for each person to teach the group. When you teach something you naturally assume a teacher's attitude – "I know this" – as opposed to a student's attitude – "I still have to learn this." Also, the vocalization involved in teaching further reinforces your memory.

Compare notes. Make sure you all heard the same thing in class and that you all recorded the important information. Ask other students about material in your notes that is confusing to you.

Brainstorm test questions. Set aside five or ten minutes each study session, to consider a variety of potential test questions.

Set an agenda for each meeting. Select activities from this article, or create other activities to do as a group. Set approximate time limits for each agenda item and determine a quitting time. Finally, end each meeting with assignments for each member.

When you've mastered the basics of working in groups, experiment with some of these more complex techniques.

Work in groups of three at a computer to review a course. Choose one person to operate the keyboard. Another person can dictate summaries of lectures and assigned reading. The third person can act as fact checker, consulting textbooks, lecture notes, and class handouts as needed.

Create wall-sized mind maps or concept maps to summarize a textbook or series of lectures. Work on large sheets of butcher paper, or tape together pieces of construction paper. When doing a mind map, assign one "branch" of the mind map to each member of the study group. Use a different colored pen or marker for each branch. To develop concept maps, work as a group to list the key concepts in a course. Write each concept on a 3X5 card. Then tape the cards to a large sheet of paper. Arrange the concepts in a pyramid, with general concepts at the top and more specific concepts near the bottom. Draw lines to connect the cards, adding words that show how the concepts relate to each other.