

# Study groups

**- make use of your fellow students**

Translation of "Læsegrupper – brug dine medstuderende" 2009

Julie Marie Isager, MA, & Christina Juul Jensen, MA

Educational Centre of Social Sciences

University of Copenhagen

Translated 2010 by Jannie Madelung, MA

This leaflet is aimed at first year students at the Faculty of Social Sciences and other students who are in need of basic advice on study techniques.

The leaflet is distributed free of charge to students and lecturers at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Southern Denmark.

The leaflet may be copied freely provided that the "Educational Centre of Social Sciences, University of Copenhagen" is stated explicitly as the source of reference and that the leaflet is not used for commercial purposes.

# Study groups

- make use of your fellow students

1. Study groups are useful – but challenging .....	3
Why study groups are an advantage .....	3
Common problems .....	5
What the head of studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences have to say about study groups .....	5
2. Forming a well-functioning study group .....	7
The size of the study group .....	7
Preliminary make-up of the study group .....	8
Prepare a sufficient agreement .....	8
Professional settings.....	11
Preparation is necessary .....	11
3. Advise on the structure and content of the meetings .....	13
Ways in which to process a text .....	14
A common problem: the members of the study group are too effective .	17
Evaluation improves the working relationship.....	18
4. Conflicts and how to solve them .....	19
5. The main points of the leaflet .....	20

# 1. Study groups are useful – but challenging

This leaflet deals with study groups – how students meet on a voluntary basis outside teaching hours to work on and discuss academic issues after reading text material on a subject in preparation for class or the exam. A study group is not accountable in terms of the course, e.g. by having to submit a joint assignment. A study group is thought to be a course supplement in which the student chooses to invest his/her time and effort.

Study groups are organised in many different ways, and the level of ambition may vary. This leaflet does not offer a sole “recipe” as to how a study group should be structured, but seeks to pass on experience as to how to profit from being part of a study group. The aim of this leaflet is to provide tips, tricks and advice on how to make a study group as beneficial, constructive and effective as possible.

The leaflet is based on three basic assumptions about study groups:

1. The active participants are the ones that gain expertise.
2. A main assignment for the study group is to study academic issues based on text material.
3. The study group is a professional working relationship based on mutual expectations.

Other types of groups, such as writing groups and project groups, are not dealt with in this leaflet; however, much of the advice provided in this leaflet is also applicable in relation to these types of groups.

## Why study groups are an advantage

The reward of study groups is evident both in your day-to-day studies and in relation to exam results. Below you will find some specific examples of the ways in which you may benefit from participating in a study group:

**Motivation increases**, when you explore your discipline together with peers. You obtain dialogue skills and debating skills that you are unable to obtain otherwise if

you only study on your own. Effective study groups offer a forum for debate in which you are able to share your knowledge and have that knowledge challenged, and it increases your motivation and your learning outcome to express yourself in an academic manner.

**You need to commit and observe deadlines.** If you study alone, it may be difficult to pull yourself together and study/process all academic material prior to the exam, as you are only responsible to yourself. Students who belong to an effective study group tend to be well-prepared in order to be able to engage effectively in debate at an advanced academic level. Thus, the study group motivates you to prepare thoroughly, and you are likely to get more studying done.

**Your interpersonal skills and your independence evolve.** Group work grooms you to show consideration for others and pay attention to their ideas. And being challenged by others often causes you to form your own academic position. Thus, you are, hopefully, able to go beyond relating text material and debate the context of the text material, its strengths and weaknesses as well as academic issues to which they give rise.

**You spot academic issues.** Your fellow students often ponder other aspects than you. To consider the issues they put forward and by trying to provide an answer hereto, you will almost certainly be challenged academically. You may also consult other group members about important academic issues – which is a great way to receive input, while at the same time benefiting from the process of formulating a question - an active way of processing text material that helps to improve your learning skills.

**You benefit from explicit knowledge.** That which may seem evident to you, is not necessarily evident to other members of your study group. Thus, you get to elaborate on knowledge which otherwise would remain unsaid or subconscious and, consequently, useless at exams.

**Your oration becomes clearer.** You are forced to learn to formulate yourself, so others are able to understand you. This is crucial, when you are to display your academic competencies to for example lecturers and external examiners.

## Common problems

The well-functioning, effective and rewarding study group is often impeded by cooperation problems which may cause the study group to end up being dissolved. The remainder of this leaflet will try to show the path to establishing a sound working relationship; however, let's start with some of the reasons why study groups may dissolve:

- You find that it is more efficient to just study alone.
- It is difficult to set dates to meet.
- In the longer run, the members of the study group assign a lower priority to the meetings.
- The members of the study group fail to match expectations. Consequently, members may become frustrated as their individual expectations are not met.
- The study group's meetings lack command, organisation and focus, because in reality the meetings are conducted as a hen party rather than an academic meeting.
- The members of the study group do not acknowledge valid academic arguments of other members, and, consequently, varied debates are replaced by trench digging.
- Some talk too much while others can not get a word in edgeways – and no one puts a stop to it.

## What the head of studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences have to say about study groups

"The advantage of participating in a study group is that when more eyes and brains combine, points of particular interest are often identified. Moreover, the student receives far more feedback and gains access to a creative process during which several students inspire each other and refine their way of thinking."

"Study groups are an indispensable study tool. It is my impression that students who do not participate in a study group are weak students. When weak students contact me, I tend to become even more concerned when I learn that they do not participate

in a study group. Few students are able to complete their studies without participating in a study group.”

“There is no doubt that it should be considered a must to participate in a study group. Study groups are an advantage to students, as they may support each other and test their knowledge on each other. Only when you start to formulate knowledge will your knowledge fall into place and become useful and refined. Furthermore, study groups offer social integration, which is an important aspect of a demanding study, where it may seem that everybody else is wiser than oneself.”

“Study groups dissolve when the academic levels of the members of the study group are too far apart. Academically weak students may get the impression that they are far weaker than they actually are and the academically strong students may get the wrong impression that study groups are a waste of time.”

“Many study groups dissolve because it is hard to set a date to meet. Hence, challenges have to do with coordination and practicalities. It may have to do with the fact that the students give low priority to studying in a study group – and that is a shame. It is a very short-sighted plan to only read all text material and not put it into use by debating the content in a study group. So, even if it may seem a time waster right then and there, you should go ahead and participate in a study group anyway, because in the longer run, you will surely reap the benefits of your participation”

## 2. Forming a well-functioning study group

Study groups are mainly formed in one of two ways. Either students compose a study group on their own initiative or someone at the educational institution, e.g. the student advisory service or a lecturer, composes one or more study groups on the basis of either predefined or random criteria.

There are pros and cons for both types of study group. If the students choose a study group individually, the study groups that are formed are inclined to consist of students who are already friends, and some students may end up not being part of any study group. Friends tend to have problems with establishing a professional working relationship – it simply becomes too relaxed.

The working relationship tends to be more professional and every student gets to be part of a study group when the study group is composed by a third party. However, it may prove difficult to study together with strangers, and it may also prove difficult to set dates for meetings.

Regardless of how study groups are formed, you will encounter issues that must be dealt with, if the working relationship is to be beneficial, constructive and effective.

Some study groups do not go the distance, and there is no easy way for students from dissolved study groups to find new cooperative partners. If, however, you involuntarily are not part of a study group, it may be easier to find other students to work with, if you are able to state your expectations for the working relationship clearly. Focused cooperative partners are often sought-after.

### The size of the study group

Study groups consisting of 4-5 students are usually appropriate in size.

Study groups consisting of only 2-3 students are vulnerable units – illness and other unforeseen events may easily cause the study group to dissolve.

If the study group consists of 4-5 students, more opinions, argumentation, examples and constructive objections will be aired. And you will not have to cancel a meeting, because one or even two members of the study group are prevented from participating.

More than five students in a study group often result in lengthy meetings, too many points of view and, ultimately, you tend to lose track of things. Discipline and planning are imperative if you are to keep a study group of more than five students going while still reaping the same benefits as a study group composed of five or fewer students would.

## Preliminary make-up of the study group

In the early stages of the working relationship, we recommend that you find out if there is a sound basis for a working relationship:

- Do you want to study together?
- Are you able to find meeting dates that suit you all?
- Can you find a suitable venue?
- Do you agree on the frequency of meetings?
- Do you agree on the duration of the meetings?
- Are you prepared to steadily attend and be prepared for the meetings?
- Are your expectations of the study group's social time together compatible?

## Prepare a sufficient agreement

Upon determining the basic arrangements, we advise you to prepare an agreement – i.e. clarify any additional expectations to and conceptions of the future working relationship that the members of the study group may have. It is important to listen to each others' expectations, but it is even more important to clarify how the expectations and ambitions of the respective group members may become compatible.



The agreement helps to ensure that you profit academically from this working relationship and that no one is disappointed en route, which again helps to prevent conflicts. It is important to determine that aims and needs of the study group are consistent with the respective members' wishes, aims and needs. If you are unable to come to an agreement, maybe you should consider finding other cooperative partners.

Below table is meant to help you prepare a sufficient agreement:

1. Read the statements and assess which claims you find illustrate the main requirements that will make the study group a success. Mark with a circle how strongly you individually agree with each statement: 1 signals that you agree while 5 signals that you disagree.
2. Discuss each claim with the other potential group members and try to establish a joint position, which is marked with a cross.
3. In which respect has the group's decisions caused you to abandon your own point(s) of view? Summarize the differences between your own point(s) of view and that/those of the study group. Is the result acceptable to both you and the study group?
4. Based on group discussions, you prepare an agreement covering the decisions made by the study group.

Statement/assessment	1	2	3	4	5
1. It is important to draw up rules relating to meeting times, preparatory work, cancellation of meetings etc.					
2. The study group decides by simple majority if/when a piece of text has been discussed to an appropriate extent.					
3. The study group should find time to relax with a cup of coffee, and take the time to discuss other matters that are not related to the study.					
4. Everybody should make roughly equal contributions to the study group.					
5. Individuals who speak a lot ought to quiet down.					
6. An agenda should be prepared for each meeting.					
7. You yourself decide how prepared you are for each meeting.					
8. It is important to thoroughly summarize the texts before commencing the discussion thereof.					
9. The study group must be presided over by a chairperson.					
10. All meetings should be concluded by carrying out an evaluation and reflection as to whether the study group has achieved what it set out to do in the course of the meeting.					

When the agreement is finalized, the members of the study group have agreed to enter into a binding working relationship, as described in the agreement. Consequently, each member of the study group is accountable to the study group, its members and the objective(s) of the study group.

Experience shows that failure to comply with such agreements is a frequent cause of conflict within study groups. And even though written agreements help to prevent such incidents, it is important for the study group to decide what to do if one or more members of the study group fail to comply with the study groups joint decisions. Speak openly about it, so all of the group members are familiar with expectations, ambitions and consequences for failing to comply with the recognised rules of the study group.

## Professional settings

Consider where to meet. Study groups often meet privately in the home of one of the members of the study group. It may give rise to a sense of being a guest and cause a shift in focus away from academic issues, and it may appear difficult to pose critical questions. To disagree may seem rude. And it is a shame if a member of the study group must spend time vacuuming instead of preparing for the meeting. Noise in cafés may disrupt concentration and it may easily become too cosy. You should rather meet in a group room at the University or at a library, where you will be able to study in peace.

## Preparation is necessary

The more you prepare, the better the chances are that you will benefit considerably from the meetings. Unprepared members of the study group waste everybody's time by lowering the level of the discussion, and it therefore affects everybody and not just the member(s) that came unprepared for the meeting. The nature of the preparatory work is determined when drawing up the agreement for the study group.

One model for preparation may be to read all text material and, at the meeting, volunteer to present the text material and the issues with which it deals. If you want to challenge yourself, you obviously volunteer to present difficult text material – the effort will pay off in the shape of greater insight.

We often hear from students that study groups split the text material between them so that only one student reads each text and presents it to the study group. This is obviously an effective way of conducting the meetings, because you get to cover a larger amount of text material. However, the disadvantage is that the members of the study group inherit each others academic misconceptions and skewed readings of the text material. Furthermore, it is more difficult to remember the text material at the exam if you have not read it yourself. Hence, dividing the text material among each other does not contribute to effective learning, and we recommend that everybody in the study group read all text material. For more information, we suggest you read the section on study groups that are too effective.

It is important to remember that reading methods vary greatly. The term reading covers thorough registration of all details and nuances as well as skimming the text with a quick view to capturing some of the main points. Choose the reading method that leads the quickest way to accomplishing your purpose: to be well-prepared for the assignment that you have decided to complete in the course of the next meeting in the study group. Read more about reading methods in the leaflet of the Educational Centre of Social Sciences titled “Study Skills – For International Students”.

One compromise could be to refrain from reading all the text material equally intensively. Every member of the study group skims all text material, but is also assigned the main responsibility for reading specific parts of the text material more thoroughly and preparing for next meeting for example by:

- writing a summary of the text material;
- composing an introduction to a debate
- writing down the main points of the text and note in which way these may be useful;
- comparing the text material to other text material included in the curriculum.

The responsibility of reading text material thoroughly should obviously be shared equally by the members of the group.

### 3. Advise on the structure and content of the meetings

Depending on the aim of your study group, the structure may be more or less rigorous. The more result-oriented you are towards a specific exam, the more rigorous an approach we advise you to adopt toward the meetings. Less result-oriented study groups may better relate exploratorily to the text material, the academic issues and the respective members' interests.

It becomes easier to establish a smooth working relationship, if you agree on how to conduct the meetings. Below you will find some suggested ways of conducting efficient meetings in a study group:

- Choose a chairperson – and take turns as chairperson. The chairperson keeps an eye on time and the agenda.
- Adopt an agenda to keep it clear what to achieve within the time allotted for the meeting. This creates focus and helps to ensure that any irrelevant matters do not interfere. When you draw up an agenda, you should consider basic matters such as:
  - **What** should we study now?
  - **Why** do we choose to study this?
  - **How** do we go about it most effectively?
- It is a good idea to return to the subject(s) of the previous meeting: have you realized something, have issues arisen? This may also offer the members of the group a possibility to say something about what they, respectively, found interesting or the most difficult.
- Process the text material with a view to both the global and the local perspective. Outline main points, but make sure to find the concrete examples in the text. Ask each other questions, emphasize and discuss ambiguities. Always bring the text material to the meetings and make notes as you go! In this way you practise both the academic content and the procedure of oral exams. You can find more information on various ways of processing text material in the next section of this leaflet.
- Evaluate the meetings: How do you feel the work in the study group is coming along? Should something be done differently?

- Get an overview of the text material for the upcoming meeting by browsing through it together. Then you have already started preparing for the next meeting, which makes it easier to plan.
- Establish the extent and nature of your preparatory work and what needs to be prepared. Establish who is responsible for what.

## Ways in which to process a text

There are many ways to process text material from various angles. It may be an advantage adopting different ways of processing the text material, because by doing so, you practise various academic approaches that the degree programme will demand of its student to adopt at one time or the other. Some approaches will seem more evident than others depending on the text material, and the study group may choose an approach to the text material based on which skills the study group finds need acute attention. Below you will find some examples of how to process text material:

**Read the text material to summarise it.** This is a basic method of processing text material by which main points are identified. Typically, this will be the main focus of the study group that is finding it difficult to decipher the text material – i.e. if the subject is difficult, in case of esoteric subjects or complicated speech. Consider the following:

- With which subject(s) does the text deal?
- What are the point(s) of the text?

Summarisation forms a necessary basis for all academic performance, but may with advantage be improved by one or more other methods for processing text material, because it actualises and contextualises the text material.

**Read the text to analyse its argumentation.** This reading method builds on the understanding of the text material, but shifts the focus from the subject(s) of the text to the line of reasoning of its claims. Consider the following:

Which assertions (reasons) does the text material put forward to back its claims (statements)?

- On which authority (premises) is (are) the association between claim and assertion based?
- Which conditions are the claims subject to?
- Are the assertions juxtaposed or subordinate to each other?

The ability to see through the argumentation is considered an important analytical skill that forms the basis for critique of the reasoning of text material. Furthermore, argumentative analysis provides you with an in-depth impression of the way in which credible academic text material is composed and communicated to be drawn on when you compose your own assignments. The study of the text's argumentation may with advantage be followed by an assessment of the quality of the argumentation.

**Read the text in historical context.** Reading text material in historical context causes you to conduct your own contemporary assessment of the text. This reading method helps clarify that the academic issues of the subject changes concurrently with academic development. The points of the text may appear to be banal and uninteresting contemporarily speaking; however, the text may have been considered to be quite provocative in its time. Consider the following:

- During which historical age was the text written, and what significance does it have for the text?
- What was the academic consensus of the time?
- How did the contemporaries and the posterity of the text consider the text?

This type of text evaluation is useful if the purpose is to survey the development of scientific disciplines over the years.

**Read the text and find examples.** This approach is applicable both when reading theoretical text material, studies or e.g. non-academic articles. When reading theoretical text material, the task consists in uncovering concrete, realistic, empirical examples, and, contrary, if the text material is empirical, the task is to determine which theoretical concepts are relevant. Consider the following:

- In which specific situations are the content, concepts and arguments of the text applicable?
- Which examples suggest and which examples speak against the claims of the text material?
- Which new aspects does the text material offer?

This way of processing the text material practices the link between theory and empirical knowledge, which is an expertise that is in demand both at the University and in the outside world.

**Read the text adopting a critical approach.** Appreciating the text material's project, points and argumentation renders it relevant to discuss how you, as professionals, assess the text material. This allows you to determine if the text material is a crucial and important source and make comments on its content. Among other things, consider the following:

- Are you convinced by the argumentation of the text material? Why/why not?
- Does the text material contribute to new knowledge?
- Which aspects have been omitted?
- Who would find the text material provocative, and what would opponents thereof say?

Assessment of text material is one of the most distinguished academic virtues.

**Read the text to be able to apply the model.** Some disciplines make use of technical and mathematical text material such as collections of formulas and statistical models. Such text material requires that you complete exercises if you are to be able to put it into use and remember it in earnest. Besides memorising the text material, you must do calculations and use and explain the formulas and models. Consider the following:

- What do the respective symbols mean?
- In which situations would you be able to put the model into use?
- When can the model not be adopted?

Actual calculations using more or less random numbers, chart drawings and other types of processing may be relevant and rewarding to the study group. It is important to be able to use the discipline's models, which in some academic disciplines amounts to the academic craft, but it is also an academic strength to be able to approach the models and their usability from a critical and balanced point of view. With this last type of text processing you exercise critique of the academic method.



## A common problem: the members of the study group are too effective

Work in study groups must be effective in the sense that you should profit academically from attending the meetings. But some study groups become *too* effective – they stop questioning each others arguments and assessments and move on too quickly or refrain from indicating disagreement. Consequently, consider the following: what do we do, when the study group disagrees on academic points?

- Some discuss the matter until they reach agreement;
- Some say “you’re probably right”
- Some agree to consult their lecturer on the matter
- Some skip the point

Discussion and disagreement are advantages as long as they are academically based, because you get to process the material thoroughly, gain new insights and, consequently, profit largely thereof. Disagreement lures out the good arguments. Maybe you convince each other en route, but it is not necessary to reach agreement. It is rare that only one approach to an academic issue is the right one. Instead of assessing whether you agree with each others claims, you may profit from turning your attention toward the assertions that support the claim and assess their relevance and effectiveness.

If the discussion comes to an end after five minutes, it may be profitable to revive it by posing some questions for discussion that you have prepared in advance at home or by completing an assignment: play devil’s advocate.

### **To promote discussions in the study group play devil’s advocate**

One or more members of the study group plays devil’s advocate and try to reveal all objections or ambiguities. The technique is used to disclose academic flaws or shortcomings in the argumentation. The exercise is meant to make the other members of the study group establish the benefits of the text material: What may the text actually be used for? Students are often more apt at criticism than at focusing on the strengths of text material. Remember to switch roles sometimes in order that everyone gets to practise taking the critical as well as the constructive approach towards the text material.

Method:

1. Divide the study group into two smaller groups: one that tries to “defend” the arguments of the text material and one that “attacks” the arguments.
2. The group defending the arguments presents the points of the text material backing them best they can
3. The group playing devil’s advocate presents its objections and substantiates these.
4. When the pros and cons are exhausted, the two groups dissolve and try to find a compromise between the two positions.

## Evaluation improves the working relationship

An efficient way to optimise the working relationship and limit the number of conflicts is to evaluate on a continuing basis. It is essential to take stock of the working relationship – how is it coming along, should you modify any working procedures or the like? If you are satisfied with the working relationship and benefit from it, then say it aloud. Satisfaction with the working relationship produces good atmosphere. The point of departure of the evaluation is obviously the agreement that you have drawn up and your respective perceptions of the study group’s work.

It is often desirable to give every member of the study group an opportunity to air their positive and negative experiences with the work in the study group. However, you may also choose to evaluate only a few topics within the scope of the working relationship. Below you will find some suggested methods for standard evaluation:

1. Everyone describes their experiences in connection with the work in the study group and how it affects them.
2. Everyone points out one specific positive aspect of the working relationship.
3. Everyone expresses specific wishes as to how the working relationship may be improved.
4. Everyone expresses how they will contribute to improve the working relationship.

## 4. Conflicts and how to solve them

To be part of a study group will, for most students, make demands on interpersonal skills and conflict may arise. Conflicts will often be hidden and usually cause a bad atmosphere. The result may be that the members of the group remain silent, stay away from meetings or work less dedicated and effectively. It may be hard to share knowledge if you have a conflict-ridden working relationship. You neither can nor should solve all conflicts, especially not if the conflicts have grown in magnitude. Consequently, you should seek to nip any conflicts in the bud in order that you may return to enjoying a profitable working relationship.

Remember to accept that you do not work and think in the same way, and try to take this into consideration when you are discussing academic issues. There is no requirement that you should agree on world views or political views as long as you respect the agreement of the study group.

The point of departure for conflict resolution is to ensure that the basic framework for your working relationship is brought up to date and is satisfactory.

- Matching of expectations – is your agreement sufficient?
- Conflicts often arise due to banal issues: are you attending and preparing for the meetings as agreed?
- Remember that you have the academic discipline in common. You communicate as professionals and do not necessarily need to be friends. Practise treating each other as professionals. Have you grown too close?
- The benefit: should your discussions be more interesting. You can for example try the exercise "Playing devil's advocate".

If you are unable to solve your conflicts in this manner, you may consider asking your student advisory service for assistance.

## **5. The main points of the leaflet**

1. There are lots of good reasons for studying together with your fellow students.
2. You benefit the most from studying together if you focus on academic matters.
3. The most efficient and robust study groups consist of 4-5 members.
4. The effective study group starts the working relationship by drawing up an agreement that is revised on an ongoing basis and respected.
5. It is an advantage to meet in neutral settings and prepare an agenda.
6. Preparation is essential for the standard of the discussions.
7. Text material may be processed in many different ways.
8. Academic difference is legitimate and rewarding.
9. Conflicts can be avoided by entering into an agreement and evaluating the working relationship on an on-going basis.

**Enjoy the discussions!**