

## Organising your individual study and/or group projects

If you've got as far as doing postgrad work, you're probably really good at organising yourself, whether you learned those skills on a job, or wrangling children, or managing a previous course of study (or all of those at once!). For postgrad study, there are just a few particular things to be aware of, which may not have been part of your earlier experience.

### Planning on the scale of a semester

Most of us use diaries to keep track of what we have to do and when. But if you're mapping out your work for a whole semester, you'll probably find a poster-sized planner is useful to allow you to see all your tasks at once. You can make your own planner showing what is due in each week of semester. (See below for a possible model; and if you use this, you'll notice that you'll have to add subjects down the left-hand column as needed, and also the weeks after semester break that are not shown here for reasons of space.)

### Semester Planner

WEEK SUBJECT	1 1-7 Mar	2 8-14 Mar	3 15-21 Mar	4 21-28 Mar	5 29 Mar-4 Apr	6 5-11 Apr	SEMESTER BREAK
Politics				(Mum's 50 <sup>th</sup> b'day Sun)	Country brief (10%)		
Sociology			Research Skills Exer- cise Tue (15%)			Article Review Thu (20%)	

### The rest of the iceberg

It's good to be aware that the bulk of your study time is not going to be the classes you have to attend, but the preparation, research, and assignments associated with those classes. Sometimes the meetings for your course are scheduled to make it easier for you to combine study with work – they may happen in the evening, or weekends, or in a “block” mode. However, fitting in all those other tasks is left up to you, and it's best if you can plan to spread them out so that you're not trying to do a week's study all at once. Make a “to do” list of tasks (e.g., read one article; search for literature on [topic]; watch documentary; review notes; first draft; revise draft; meet with study group; etc.) and try to find spaces in your day or your week when it is possible to get these done. A **grid** can be a useful tool for this.

It is important to be realistic. Don't set impossible goals for yourself. You'll be more likely to stick to your timetable if you take into account

- the limitations of your attention span (nobody can read all day with close attention. Not just you. Nobody.)
- the importance of food, fresh air, sleep, and the people you love.

One consideration, for students who visit the campus infrequently, is to organize that time to include whatever combination of things you need to be on campus to accomplish: not just class attendance, but socializing with fellow students, visiting your supervisor, collecting sources from the library, sorting out administrative queries or paperwork, etc. For all kinds of meetings, remember that it's essential to be on time. For one thing, it's an (essential) courtesy to the other people involved; but also, the most important things typically happen in the first few minutes – announcements, explanation of tasks, introduction to the most important concepts for that class, etc.

Finally, be aware that planning is not just a matter of allocating time, but also of getting a grip on how your course is planned to develop over time. You'll do yourself a huge favour if you read the whole subject learning guide for each subject in the first few days. At the beginning of the guide, note the aims of the subject, and the learning objectives you are expected to achieve. Then read the questions and tasks that unfold week by week, so you can see:

- Where the subject introduces its main concepts, and how it builds on them over time
- How the readings and other learning activities are designed to engage you with different aspects of those concepts, and give you practice in applying them

### **Organising to work with a group**

This, too, is something you may be very good at already. However, if you or anybody in your study group is not used to working as a team, it may be helpful to share with them some routines that are commonly used.

**Planning.** This involves identifying roles, identifying subtasks, and agreeing on procedures.

You may need

- a chairperson to take the group through each meeting's work;
- a record-keeper to take notes each time and circulate them afterwards;
- a time-keeper to ensure that each part of the work, and each member of the group, gets enough time (but not too much);
- and perhaps a project manager to keep track of each member's progress on the sub-task s/he is responsible for.

Identifying sub-tasks. These may include:

- gathering various kinds of information (reading? statistics? images? interviews? observations?);
- designing "tools" such as questionnaires, categories for analysing information, or formats for presenting your results
- different roles or contributions to the end product for assessment (writing? editing? proofreading? illustrating? speaking?)

## Deciding on procedures

- How often to meet
- Where to meet (in person? electronically? some combination?)
- How to manage plans (an agenda for each meeting?), records (minutes or dot points?), and responsibilities. Good examples of an agenda and a set of minutes can be found at la trobe University's Achieve@Uni section on 'Managing Teamwork': <http://latrobe.libguides.com/learning-at-uni/managing-teamwork> .
- A simple format that handles everything could be:

Date	Item	Whose Responsibility	Done	To do

**Distributing sub-tasks.** When team work goes well, it's because everyone knows what needs to be done, and what they are responsible for. You may want to consider:

- What skills/knowledge each member brings to the task
- What skills/knowledge each would like to develop
- What constraints each member has (time; distance from uni; cultural constraints on certain activities; language; disability). Nobody should do less because of a particular constraint; but you should find ways of enabling each member to do the best they can.
- What could be usefully done in pairs (someone with expertise in some aspect of the task partnered with somebody inexperienced, so skills are shared)
- Fairness. Some sub-tasks need to be done earlier in the process, some later. Some are bigger than others.

**Overcoming difficulties.** These may be of various kinds:

- Problems with communications (make a contact list for all members to use, and make sure it's clear who has to communicate what, with whom, by when)
- Problems with keeping to the timetable you've planned (if somebody is in difficulty, find out why, and how the rest of you can help; but make sure the person who falls behind contributes fairly in return)
- Problems with technology (see what the group can do before asking the tutor's advice)
- Problems with personalities. If you feel that a member of your group is too dominant, or too passive, or too lazy, or plain incompetent, you need to find a way to deal with that. At the same time, bear in mind that everyone is different – if somebody is naturally shy or quiet, they may be great at research or writing , and may not need to do much speaking. Also, it's important to be aware of cultural differences, as people's willingness to be critical, outspoken, outgoing, etc, can depend on cultural values and preferences which should be respected. Finally, be aware that if English is not somebody's first language, they may need a little while

to form what they want to say, and discussion should allow for that. It's often too simple to attribute different ways of interacting to personality, when so many things shape who we are and how we work together.

**Jointly constructing and delivering work for assessment.** There are many ways to do this, depending on the tasks, how you have shared them out, and what skills your members bring to the work. You will need to decide whether to

- sit down together and draft a joint presentation, or
- compile individuals' contributions into one file or document, or
- entrust the final write-up, PPT, or whatever to one member of the group, who is therefore asked to do less of the earlier work

### **Reflecting on group work**

This may be a component of your submission for assessment. If so, the purpose is to get you to think about what you have learned (for better or for worse!) about working in a group. What went well, and why? What didn't go well, and why not? What could you have done differently, for a better result? What would you be sure to do whenever you are called upon to work in a group, based on this experience?

### **Useful links:**

- Harvard University: <http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/wigintro.html>
- Carleton College: <http://serc.carleton.edu/introgeo/cooperative/roles.html>