Writing, even though it is a solitary activity, often involves working with others. As a matter of fact, businesses and teachers often expect writers to work together to generate ideas and revise each other’s work. Besides producing a higher quality piece of writing because of this collaboration, an unexpected benefit of working with a peer group is the bond that forms between individuals who belong to a cohesive group.

The very first task when creating a peer group is to exchange email addresses. Next, compare schedules to find a time when all members can meet in a chat room or to set deadlines for each task that needs done. Remember, your peer group is counting on you, and it is your responsibility to meet all deadlines and complete all of your assigned tasks.

Peer groups will not be effective if each person does not know his or her particular role and responsibilities, so it is important for the group to develop procedures and standards of behavior. Remember that your group members may be in different time zones and have different work schedules, so you must work through any possible problems associated with these variations. Students become very discouraged when their email messages are ignored by their group members or answered at a much later time. It is particularly frustrating for students who are attempting to communicate with an unresponsive partner. A lack of communication can lead to a lack of interest in finishing the group assignment or even in the course that the work is assigned. Peer group contracts can help make group work successful by requiring each member to take responsibility for his or her own role in planning, directing, and managing the work that needs to be done. The contract should:

- Specify the primary method of and frequency of communication,
- Identify the role of each group member,
- Troubleshoot problems,
- Make contingency plans for emergencies, and
- Report progress to the instructor.

Groups should also agree to frequent, open communication among members so that everyone feels free to offer input and constructive criticism. Members must agree to momentarily put aside their egos and personal interests for the sake of the group’s collective goal.
The following is a template for a peer group contract. Modify it as needed for each group's specific tasks.

### Peer Group Contract

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Username</th>
<th>Aim Name</th>
<th>Email Address</th>
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**Communication:** What primary method of communication we will use:

- AIM _____
- Chat Room_____
- Email _____
- Fax_____

**Schedule (Date and Time) for this Communication:**

_________________________

**Group Leader:**

_________________________

The group leader’s responsibilities are ___________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________.

**Tasks to be Accomplished**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tasks to be Accomplished</th>
<th>Deadline</th>
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**Emergencies:** If a member becomes ill or has another emergency that prevents work from getting done on time, that member will ___________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________.

To make up for that missing person’s work, the other group members will _________

______________________________________________________________________________.

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As a member of a group exchanging papers for peer review, you have two basic tasks. The first is to gracefully receive the advice of others, and the second is to constructively offer advice to others.

Receiving Advice

It is humbling and sometimes painful to be told that your paper needs a major revision. Remember that critical comments coming from a responsible source are directed at your work, not at you as a person. As much as possible, disengage your ego and respond to the criticism not with hurt feelings but with the spirit of learning and improving. Keep in mind that the goal is to produce as clear and concise a final draft as possible. Remember also that you are not bound in any way to act upon the advice your group. After listening to their advice and clarifying any confusion you might feel, you can choose to accept their advice and make the specified changes, modify their advice, or simply ignore it. Ultimately, it is your paper and your grade, so you must decide what to write and revise.

The following are some guidelines for receiving advice from your group:

- Identify potential problem areas and ask for specific help with them.
- Try not to get defensive. Understand that the reader is offering honest help, not personal criticism.
- Provide a true draft, not a jumble of brainstorming ideas or planning notes. Your group cannot respond in a truly helpful manner without a draft.
- Take notes, wording the advice in a manner that works for you so that you will know exactly what to do later when you sit down to revise.

Giving Advice

Knowing how painful it can be to receive criticism, be mindful of the writer’s ego when offering advice. Be respectful and word your peer review carefully to avoid hurt feelings. Start with positive feedback and then move into suggestions for improvement. Remember also that the writer may have a different writing style from your own, so resist the temptation to turn the paper into one that you would write yourself.

The following are some guidelines for giving advice to your group:

- Begin with the positive.
- Ask the writer how you can help. What specific areas should you look at?
- Deal with big questions first, like the thesis statement and organization. Does the essay fulfill the assignment’s main task? (Is it informative? Critical? Persuasive?) Resist the temptation to focus only on spelling and punctuation.
- Be specific. Vague phrases like “This is good” are not helpful. Explain why and how it is good, such as “I like the way you emphasized your main point with that example.” When suggesting improvements, indicate particular words, phrases, or sentences and state specifically what you think needs changing and why. Include comments that point directly to sections of the essay.
- Be honest. You are not helping the writer if you avoid mentioning a problem.
- Word criticism carefully by focusing on what you are thinking when you read a passage. For example, say “I don’t understand exactly what you mean by...” rather than “This makes no sense,” or “My mind tended to wander at the beginning” rather than “Your introduction is boring.” Such sensitive wording
is less threatening than a direct criticism.

- Follow the golden rule of responding to others’ work as you would want them to respond to yours.
- Do not try to be the teacher. Your job in a peer group is not to evaluate or grade the work as a teacher would, but rather to respond to it.

The following are some questions you might find helpful as you read another person’s paper:

- What specifically do you like about the paper? What specifically needs work?
- What do you find especially interesting?
- Where is the paper particularly clear about what it is trying to say?
- Where are you confused?
- Is there any passage that seems to get away from the main point of the paper?
- Where does the paper move smoothly from point to point? Where does it make an abrupt shift?
- Is the thesis statement clear and complete?
- Is the order of the paragraphs effective?
- Does the paper come to a satisfying conclusion?

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How to Handle an Unresponsive Peer Group Member

You may be frustrated if someone in your peer group is not holding up his or her end of the bargain. You have tried emailing and maybe even calling. What should you do next? The first place to turn is your contract. How did your group decide to handle this kind of situation? Follow those guidelines. The second thing to do, if reviewing your contract does not resolve the situation, is to contact your instructor and explain what the situation is, the contact your group made, and the resolution you seek. As always, be professional, courteous, and specific.

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