

Group Work That Really Works

A group essay writing activity pushes every student to contribute—and it can lead to real growth in writing ability.

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Group work is a mode of learning I've struggled with for much of my teaching career. The concept of students working together to learn is valuable for many reasons, but creating a group activity where all students are engaged in the collective work can be challenging. Recently, I tried a group essay writing activity that not only involved every student in the task but also created conditions for rich student discussion that resulted in some real growth in their writing skills.

A Group Essay How-To

1. On the day before the group essay, each student first writes an essay on their own. I've moved more and more over the years toward having the students write their first draft of most of the writing we do in class. This eliminates many of the distractions that can intrude on student writing and ensures that I'm there to support them. If students need additional time to finish their paper after class, I'll usually accommodate them.

2. I read the essays myself, writing some quick feedback on a separate sheet of paper—usually just a rubric score, one thing the student did well, and one thing they could do to improve their essay. I use the individual scores and feedback for [conferencing with students](#) later that week, when we'll discuss their reflections on their writing and ways to improve. I also assess the essays as a group for areas that seem to call for more instruction for the whole class.

3. I teach a mini-lesson on one or two of those areas of need I've identified for the class as a whole (e.g., thesis statements, finding and integrating evidence, transitions, etc.).

4. And then, the group essay. After handing back the individual essays—with no marks on them—and organizing students into groups of four or five, I give them instructions for group work.

First, students take turns sharing their thesis statements with the group. They discuss the relative merits of each and come to consensus on a group thesis statement. They write this in large letters on one regular sheet of paper that I've given them.

Next, students decide on supporting points for the thesis. They need to have a number of supporting points equal to the number of the people in the group because each student is responsible for individually writing a body paragraph for one of the supporting points, using evidence and commentary to connect their supporting point back to the thesis. They each write their own body paragraph on another sheet of paper.

Once students have finished writing their supporting body paragraphs, they come back together as a group and puzzle the essay together, adding transitions to connect the body paragraphs and writing a concluding paragraph on a final sheet of paper.

Although this composing step worked well on paper, I'm looking forward to having the students try it out on shared Google docs, as that would make the editing process easier—particularly when the students come together to combine their paragraphs into a cohesive whole.

5. Finally, the groups get up in front of the class and read their essay aloud. After each group reads, we take a few minutes to discuss the strengths of the essay and ask any questions we might have about it.

Why Group Essays Work

The success of this activity stems from the shared responsibility of writing the essay. As I walked around the room while the groups were working, the focus and richness of the discussions showed me just how much impact this activity would have when it came to developing students' understanding of the elements of an effective essay. Almost every single student was engaged, and those who became distracted were quickly brought back to focus by a group that was relying on their contribution.

Having the students read their essay aloud in front of the class provided some valuable results. The entire class benefited not only from hearing what students had done with the thesis and support but also from the feedback given by me and their classmates. And I was provided with a great formative assessment opportunity and took notes for further mini-lessons my classes might need. In the very next essay we wrote in class, I noticed significant growth in the skills students had worked on in their groups.

One more not-so-small detail: Students loved the group essays. The complaints I sometimes hear about group work—that one person ended up doing all the work, that one or more people weren't contributing, that it was hard to figure out who was supposed to do what—were rare. All students were essential, the roles and tasks were clearly defined, and the time constraint of needing to get all the writing and discussion done in one class period added an urgency to the task, so that very little time was wasted. (It is possible to break the group activity into two class periods if necessary.)

Students agreed that this was an activity that actually helped them understand how to improve their writing, and they asked if they could do it again for their next essay.

I'm looking forward to trying some variations on the group essay—perhaps having students write the essay together before trying on their own, or having them create mini-lessons for the writing needs they see in the classroom.

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