When Groups First Meet
To function and to successfully complete the group work project, groups will need to negotiate:

- group purpose
- ground rules or group contracts
- individual members' roles
- individuals' responsibilities
- guidelines for group meetings.

Help students clarify their group purpose
Before students can begin to plan, they will need to develop a shared understanding of what's required by clarifying and defining their group task. Checklists are a useful tool for developing the scope of their project and clarify how group tasks will proceed. An initial checklist, or questions for group discussion, might include the following (adapted from Gibbs, *Learning in Teams*, p. 7):

- What is the purpose of the task or project?
- What are we expected to produce?
- How will the task or project be assessed? What are the marking criteria?
- What are the main components of the task?
- What are the deadlines?
- Are there guidelines?

Help students establish ground rules or group contracts
Written guidelines or ground rules for working in groups help students manage group processes and maintain workable relationships. You can:

- provide students with a set of written guidelines or ground rules
- ask student groups to establish their own ground rules
- negotiate a set of ground rules with students (or ask them to add to a list you've created).

Ground rules might cover the following matters, for example:

- All ideas and contributions in the group will be valued.
- The work will be divided evenly among the group.
- Group members will take turn chairing group meetings.
- Members who cannot attend meetings will provide notice in advance.
- Notes will be taken during meetings and circulated by email.
- Ground rules will be reviewed several times throughout the project.
- Problems will be addressed in the group as they arise.
- Sexist and racist comments are not permitted.
- Tasks should be completed by the agreed dates.
If you decide to let students develop their own ground rules, provide them with some guidance. For example, have them discuss and decide on:

- the communication processes they will use (e.g. how often they will meet, how they will manage group emails and group documents)
- what their group values are (e.g. honesty, good listening skills, meeting deadlines)
- how they will avoid issues such as members arriving late to meetings, members not completing work in time.

If you would like to make ground rules more official, ask students to sign a written version of their group’s ground rules in the form of a group contract. This helps students make a commitment to the ground rules. Group contracts are particularly useful for long-term projects where students are expected to complete some of the work outside class time.

It may be useful for students to review their ground rules or group contract regularly. In some cases, students might revise their group contract to accommodate changes to their project, or unexpected developments.

**Help students establish group roles**

Before assigning specific roles, it might be useful to identify each student's particular strengths and experience. You might want to incorporate suggestions about how to establish group roles into your guidelines for group work.

Specific roles (e.g. group leader or coordinator, chair or facilitator, note-taker, time-keeper) can be assigned. Alternatively, students may opt to volunteer for a role. Either way, students should be very clear about their role within the group before they begin their project.

**Help students define their responsibilities**

As well as establishing group roles, students need to define their responsibilities within the group. You might provide students with a simple template, such as the job list below. This process will help students assign group members to particular tasks, to make sure that the work is divided evenly among group members, and to develop a timeline.

(see next page)
Encourage students to be as specific as possible in defining the jobs involved in their project. The job list may need to be reviewed and modified as their project progresses.

**Help students set guidelines for group meetings**

Provide students with a set of guidelines for preparing and conducting group meetings.

A set of guidelines for meetings might include the following headings:

- Preparing for a meeting
- Conducting the meeting
- Seating arrangements for effective meetings
- Roles and responsibilities of group members
- Creating an agenda
- Recording the meeting
- Paying attention to the interaction of group members
- Preparing and disseminating minutes
- Completing action items between meetings

The following handout outlines the components of a typical meeting agenda. This can help students create their own agendas and learn how to conduct effective meetings.
Agendas

What is a meeting agenda?

The meeting agenda is a roadmap for the meeting. It tells participants where they're headed to help them stay on track. One of the main purposes of a meeting agenda is to give a sense of purpose and direction to the meeting. Typical components of a meeting agenda include:

- **Notes of the last meeting** A list of who was present and missing, and a record of what was discussed and decided, and who was responsible for taking action in relation to the decisions made. These notes remind everybody what happened, and allow everybody to check that the notes were taken accurately.
- **Matters arising from the last meeting** What happened as a result of the decisions taken, what progress has been made on action
- **Items for discussion** These have usually been agreed beforehand, and form the core of the meeting. They might include:
  - a review of team roles
  - updates on work completed to date
  - initial discussion of how to analyse data.
- **Any other business (AOB)** Additional matters that have arisen as a result of the discussions, or which have been raised since the agenda was circulated
- **Time and place of the next meeting** Include details of the next meeting and a statement of what the meeting will be for.


Challenges of group meetings

Students can find group meetings frustrating for many reasons. Factors that make group meetings outside class time difficult for students include:

- travel time and cost from diverse locations
- part-time or full-time work commitments
- parental and family responsibilities
- student disabilities.

Allow some class time for group meetings so that such factors don't become issues. Class-time group meetings will also give you the opportunity to monitor your students' progress.