

# Building Teams



15 minutes (Day 1) + 1 hour (Day 2) + 20 minutes (Day 3)



Community-Building

## OVERVIEW

At its best, teamwork allows students to tackle more challenging problems than they otherwise would and recognise that there are multiple perspectives on an issue. By providing opportunities for students to communicate, connect, and work towards a shared goal, team projects can also foster a sense of belonging and community.

This lesson is designed to prepare students to work in teams. The lesson is carried out over three days. On Day 1, students learn *how* and *why* they will work in teams and fill out a survey indicating their teamwork preferences. Based on the survey results, the teacher creates student teams. Then, on Day 2, students meet their team members and create a team agreement that formalises the expectations of group members and reduces the chances of team conflict. Day 3 should be scheduled mid-way through the semester: it is an opportunity for team members to evaluate how well their team is functioning.

## USEFUL FOR

- Igniting student curiosity about teamwork and the course
- Fostering good relationships among team members
- Reducing the chances of team conflict

## Materials

- [Team preferences questionnaire](#)
- [Checking in on Teamwork worksheet](#)
- Computer access for students (minimum 1 computer per team)

## PROCEDURE

### Day 1

1. **Explain how and why students will work in teams.** Most students have had at least one negative group work experience in their academic careers – ranging from dealing with freeloaders to being excluded by their teammates. To stave off immediate negative reactions from students, you might avoid using the term “group work” and instead use specific language to describe *how* and *why* students will collaborate. For example, you might say, “*You work in teams of six to create new strategies to improve wellness on campus and pitch your*

*ideas to decision-makers. To help everyone succeed, I will check in with each team at every step along the way. I am very excited about this project as you may well come up with ideas that I have never before considered – and I have been working in this field for a long time! That is the power of collaboration.”*

2. **Explain that you will use a “hybrid” method to create student teams.** Students will have an opportunity to identify peers they do (or don’t) want to work with, but the final teams will be made by the teacher. Here are some arguments in you might present when explaining why you will play a role in creating groups:
  - Having to find a team on their own can provoke a lot of anxiety among students who don’t already have friends in the class.
  - A large body of research shows that, if students self-select their teams, they tend to choose others that they know and who are like themselves. This creates homogeneous groups and often limits learning opportunities.
  - It is important to pay attention to gender and racial dynamics within a group. Research on team projects shows that when minoritised students (such as women, Indigenous, and racialised students) are isolated in a group, the dominant group is more likely to ignore their input, interrupt them, and take credit for their ideas. Minoritised students are also more likely to be pigeon-holed into a role consistent with stereotypes (such as women playing the role of note-taker) when they are “soloed” in a group. By putting minoritised students in teams in pairs, the dominant group is more likely to learn how to work in a diverse team.
3. **Invite students to complete a [questionnaire](#) indicating their teamwork preferences.** The purpose of the questionnaire is to help create effective teams for the group project, with a good mix of skills and good group dynamics.

## Day 2

1. **Post a list of teams and invite students to find their teammates.** Acknowledge that seeing the names of their assigned teammates may provoke mixed feelings. You might re-visit some of the reasons why you did not allow students to create their own teams.
2. **Facilitate a community-building activity for students to do with their teams.**
  - **Option 1: [Would you rather](#)** Give each student a set of 5 “would you rather” prompts. Allow students a brief amount of time (~1 minute) to make their selection. Then they should have time to discuss their choices with their teammates.
  - **Option 2: [Words from your names](#)** Working in their groups, students create a document listing all the letters their first names. They then have 5 minutes to write as many words as possible by mixing those letters in any order. The winning team gets a prize.
3. **Help students brainstorm solutions to common teamwork challenges.** Invite students to share challenges they encountered during previous group projects. Note their ideas on the whiteboard, continuing until the saturation point is reached. Then, give students 1 minute to discuss in their groups: “Which of the challenges listed on the board have you experienced in the past?” The goal of this discussion is to help students build a sense of solidarity by identifying shared experiences (e.g. working with an unreliable team member) and goals (e.g. not wanting to be burdened with someone else’s work). Finally, regroup as a class and ask students: “How might the teamwork problems listed on the board could be prevented?” Note their ideas on the

whiteboard. The goal of this discussion is to generate a list of strategies students might use in their own teams.

4. **Instruct each team to create a 1-2 page team agreement that formalises the expectations of group members and reduces the chances of team conflict.** Encourage students to consider the issues and solutions noted on the whiteboard but emphasize that they should also draw on their own experiences with team projects. The team agreement should include:
  - **Names** - Names and contact information for each team member
  - **Communication platform** – Which platform will you use to communicate with your team outside of class? Email? Group chat? Other?
  - **Meeting times** – When and where will you hold out-of-class meetings? (This section may not be necessary if students will be given class time to work on the project).
  - **Needs of group members** – What do you need to feel well in your group?
  - **Challenges** – List 4-5 challenges your team might face.
  - **Proactive measures** – For each potential challenge, identify what group members can do to avoid the problem in the first place?
  - **Reactive measures** – How will you respond if you run into this problem? What consequences should the rule-breaker face? How will we respond if a team member is not abiding by the team’s ground rules?
5. **Circulate from group to group as students work.** You might ask questions challenging students to deepen their thinking (e.g. “what, specifically, will you do to make sure everyone has a chance to speak?”) and/or share strategies other teams have identified (e.g. “In the past, I have seen teams use a 3-strike system deal with team members who are not abiding by the team’s ground rules.”) The goal here is to communicate that you are there to support each student and each team, so that everyone finishes the semester energized by the teamwork experience.
6. **Debrief the activity by asking students to consider “On a scale of 1 – 10, how useful was the process of creating a team agreement?”** Invite 2 – 3 students to share the number they chose and explain why. Then, build on students’ ideas by clarifying the purpose of the team agreements and how they will be used. Here are some points you may wish to emphasize:
  - Thanks to the work you’ve done today, you’ve already reduced the chance of team conflict. You’ve taken time to get to know your teammates, which is a key step in building trusting and caring relationships.
  - If and when problems do arise in your team, I am here to support you. My first question will be “what does your team agreement say about how to address this problem?”
  - One of the most common problems in groups is a team member who fails to show up at team meetings and/or does not complete their fair share of the work. In my experience, this usually happens because a student is struggling (e.g. balancing school and work, mental health problems, etc.). By alerting me to a problem early on, you are being kind to yourself: you are protecting yourself from having to shoulder extra work. You are also being kind to your teammate: if I know there is a problem, I can check in with the student and connect them with campus resources such as tutoring, food, mental health counseling, career advice, and more.

## Day 3

1. **Midway through the semester, invite students to reflect on how well their team is working.** Give each student a copy of their team agreement, and invite them to fill out the [Checking in on Teamwork worksheet](#).
2. **Invite students to share their responses with their team members.** Encourage students to pay attention to areas of consensus and disagreement. For example, do all team members agree that communication is consistently respectful?
3. **Debrief by reminding students that you are there to help.**

## EVALUATION

Have students hand in their team contract at the end of Day 2. This assignment is intended as a formative assessment and teachers may choose to grade it based on completion. Be sure to save a copy of each contract so you can use it for the mid-semester check-in and refer to it in the event of a team conflict.

## EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND BELONGING

- Allowing teams to remain consistent for a longer period (e.g. an entire semester) is a powerful way of fostering a sense of community in the classroom. Students have told us that their team experiences have helped them overcome anxiety, develop the confidence to speak up in class, and develop new friendships that extend beyond the class.
- The teamwork preferences survey includes sensitive questions, including questions about students' identity and a question inviting students to name any peer(s) they would prefer not to work with. Tell students that all questions in the survey are optional and explain that there is no need to justify why they would prefer not to work with a certain classmate. Emphasize that students' responses will be confidential: responses will not be shared with any other student in the class.
- Students may ask if you can provide a sample team agreement. A quick internet search will reveal many examples of team contracts for college and university projects. Though students may find these sample agreements on their own, we recommend that teachers do not provide sample contracts to students. If given a sample agreement, students may be tempted to treat the team agreement as an exercise in paraphrasing rather than an opportunity to build relationships with their teammates and problem-solve together.

## USEFUL RESOURCES

- [Introductory Activities](#) from Equity Unbound
- [Teaching at its Best: A Research-Based Resource for College Instructors](#), by Todd Zakrasek and Linda Nilson.
- [Group work in science, engineering, and mathematics: Consequences of ignoring gender and race](#) by Sue V. Rosser
- [Impact of team formation method on student performance, attitudes, and behaviors](#) by Martiqua Post, Anthony Barrett, Marlyse Williams and Lauren Scharff