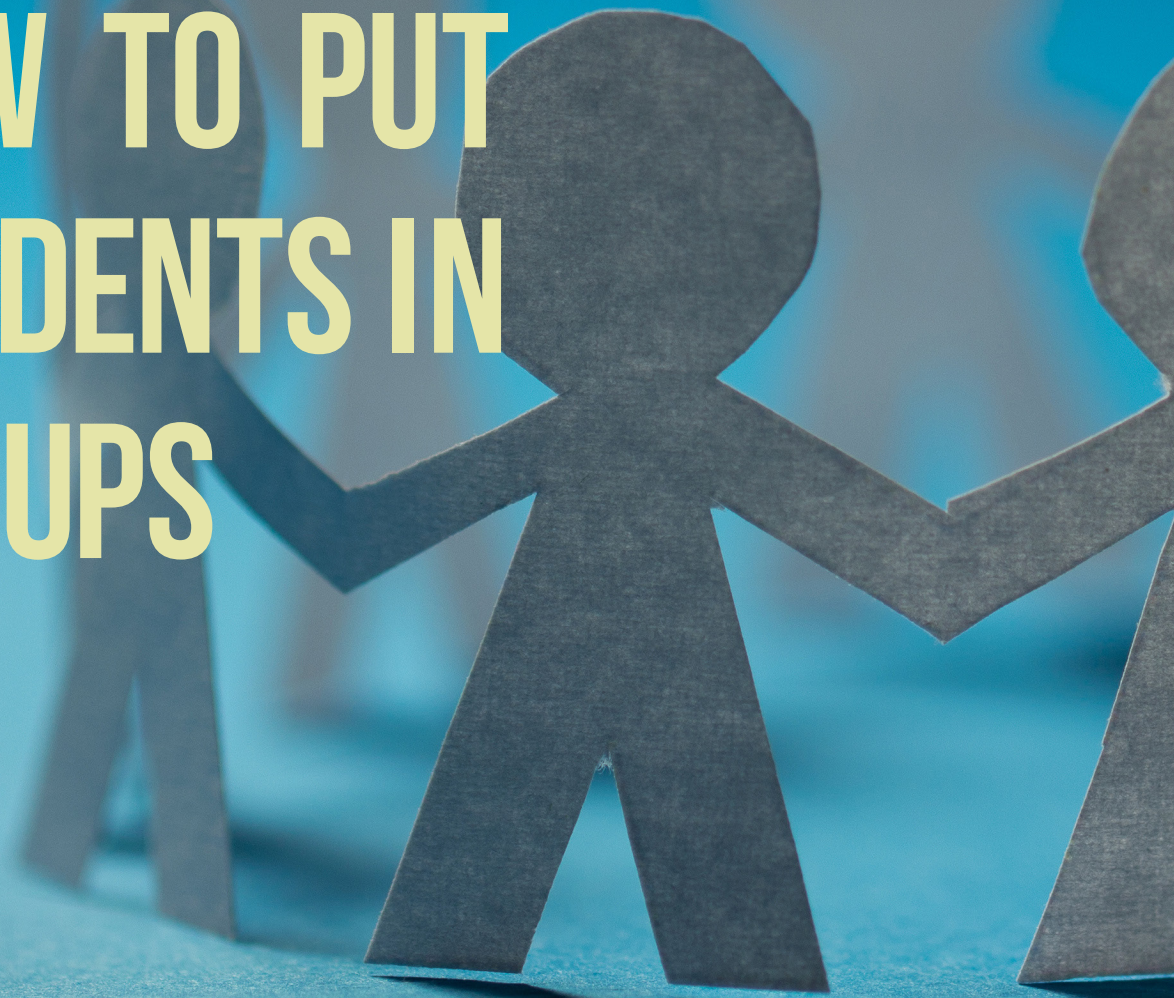


**GROUP WORK
GREATNESS:**

**HOW TO PUT
STUDENTS IN
GROUPS**



INTRODUCTION

In the course of a single lesson, you might put your students in quick pairs or small groups, two or three times. Over the term, you might put your students in teams for a longer group projects. Sometimes you have two completely different group projects in one term. You might even establish long-term study groups. Each situation of creating groups requires different criteria.

This ebook from [Alphabet Publishing](#) is in two parts.

First, there is a discussion of how to put students into longer-term groups, including thoughts on criteria to consider. Do you want your groups to be homogeneous or more diverse? What kind of dynamic do you want in your groups? Are there any factors that tend to lead to better student success?

Second, there is a list of some tried-and-true, quick-and-easy ways to put students in groups at random. These are great techniques to use in class when you need students to come together quickly for an activity, like discussing a question or helping each other comprehend a listening task.

The content of this ebook comes from books from our authors, Walton Burns and Patrice Palmer. You'll find links to their books at the end of this ebook.

Thanks for downloading this book and keep in touch to let us know how it helped you. You can get in touch at info@alphabetpublishingbooks.com.

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN PUTTING STUDENTS IN GROUPS

In general, students prefer to form their own groups. This works well when students know each other well, are motivated and studious, or when the groups are going to be short-lived.

However, in many classes, students come from a variety of programs, classes, or backgrounds. Therefore they may not know anyone else in the class. In these cases, if you let students form their own groups, someone is likely to be left out.

There are a variety of other reasons why you might want to engineer student groups. In team-building exercises, it's useful to put together groups with different skill sets. For discussion exercises, it's nice to include a diverse range of backgrounds and personalities. In other cases, you need teams that share a particular characteristic. I've found that sometimes putting the quiet students in one group can increase participation, for example. I'll even admit to sometimes putting friends together in a group, on purpose, despite every instinct in my body because groups that get along well can often work together well.

Unfortunately, I can't predict what your needs for your activity or project will be and I don't know your students or classroom as well as you do. I can't tell you how to put together the perfect group for activity. But here's a list of things to take into consideration when building groups.

GENDER

Men and women often have different opinions on the same topic. However, in some cases, men in a mixed gender group may try to dominate the discussion and the task. However, a group of all men may spend more time deciding who the leader is than getting the work done.

LANGUAGE

If the group shares the same L1 or another language besides English, they can rely on that language to communicate. If the group has different L1s, then they will be forced to speak in English. Both are desirable for different tasks. One danger to look out for is groups that are unbalanced with a large majority. For example, if you have four Spanish speakers and one Arabic speaker in a group, the Spanish speakers may revert to Spanish quite a bit, leaving the Arabic speaker on their own.

CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Groups that come from the same cultural background are likely to approach tasks in similar ways. Diverse groups are likely to come to the table with diverse approaches. There are advantages to both dynamics, of course. In a discussion, it's often useful to have students with different backgrounds and assumptions about the world and values. It's more likely that they will disagree and be forced to express and defend their opinions.

On the other hand, drawing too much attention to the social group of the participants can detract from cooperative learning. A key teamwork skill is learning to treat your fellow students as individual people, not a member of a social category. Of course, economic, racial, and social identity are real factors in your classroom and can play an important role. So, when selecting groups with diverse social, ethnic, and economic backgrounds, try not to draw the students' attention to that.

COMPETENCE OR LEVEL

In some cases, your students may have different levels of language ability. You may teach a mixed level class. You may be doing a class session that is open to the whole school or even the public. Even if your class is supposed to be at the same level, they may have different competences in the language needed for this activity. So be careful when you are thinking about the "level" of your students. It's better to consider their skills for the task ahead than their overall ability.

Should you form groups of students at an equal level or mixed ability groups? When forming groups of students all

SHOULD YOU PUT FRIENDS IN THE SAME GROUP?

Your first instinct might be that this is a terrible idea. Conventional wisdom says if you let friends work together, they will get distracted and end up talking about other things. I've even heard teachers claim friends will cover for each other if one isn't doing the work.

However, there are indications that groups of friends can actually work more effectively together. Friends want each other to succeed so a group of friends is more likely to work hard for the benefit of the group.

Groups that get along well are more likely to exhibit teamwork skills such as turn-taking, listening, consensus-building and conflict resolution. What's more, students are more likely to risk failure in front of friends than strangers they do not know, as counter intuitive as that might sound.

Consider creating groups where at least two of the students get along well and see how it goes in your classroom.

at one level, there's always a danger that the more advanced groups will finish first. Groups of lower-level students may require more attention from you. However, it is also possible to differentiate the tasks so that students at more advanced levels are doing more complex tasks. Interestingly, a recent study shows that grouping students by ability does not lead to any appreciable benefit.

Engineered well, groups of mixed levels can lead to students helping each other. My experience is that students in mixed groups may also get frustrated. More advanced students get tired of having to explain things to other students. Lower-level students may get easily lost, and if the task is not engineered well, they may find they can switch off and let the other students complete the task without them.

QUIET VS. LOUD

As every teacher knows, one loud student can dominate a discussion over four quiet students. On the other hand, a quieter student can explode (or implode) if they are

unable to get a word in for a long time. So there needs to be a balance. Sometimes, a group of all loud students and a group of all quiet students ends up being more interactive than a heterogeneous group.

GROUPING LEARNERS BY ABILITY

According to a 2014 study of research reports, grouping students by ability had very little positive impact on learning according to one report.

Another report indicated that creating homogeneous groups did, in theory, help teachers target content better. However, teachers were also observed over-generalizing about ability groups, going too fast with "advanced" groups and too slow with "lower level" groups.

While only 2 research reports were cited in the study, it does give reason to pause before assuming mixed ability groups are the best way to group students together.

Source: Coe, Rob, Cesare Aloisi, Steve Higgins, and Lee Elliot Major. "What makes great teaching? Review of the underpinning research." (2014).

LEADER VS. FOLLOWER

A student who likes to take the lead can take over a group quickly. Now, this can actually bring out the best in students who prefer to follow others. That might seem counter-intuitive but some students don't feel interacting in a vacuum. They like to have someone take charge. It actually opens them up.

In fact, I've found it's the leader-types who can shut down if they are not in charge. A group of all leaders can fail to get much done as each member spends more energy vying for the leadership than actually work.

That being said, you have to monitor groups that are dominated by one person to make sure that they are in fact leading and facilitating, and not taking over and suppressing others.

PROGRAM

If you are teaching students who come from various programs or classes, you might want to consider that as well. It often makes sense to group students who come from the same program or study-background. They probably know each other a bit and can get a long. They also likely have similar expectations and work habits and a shared understanding of the subject. However, you may end up with a few students who are left out. Grouping students from different programs ensures a mix of ideas and perspectives based on different post-secondary programs.

COMMON INTERESTS

If you're aware that some students share a common interest, you might want to put them together and have them connect their common interest to the task. This is particularly helpful

These are some factors to consider. There are likely others, including individual characteristics of your students. And you know your students best. You also know what you want to accomplish.

ACTION RESEARCH

Grouping is an interesting area for action research, especially if you work with the same group of students over time. You can gain some very helpful insights into what works best in your classroom and perhaps turn it into a presentation or article.

As you put students in different groups, keep track of the factors you used for those groups. And note how well the groups do in their tasks. Don't be afraid to experiment and figure out what exactly works best for your class.

FORMING GROUPS AT RANDOM

In some cases, you may prefer to form random groups. For a quick activity such as a Think-Pair-Share, the composition of the group might not matter. Here are a few tried-and-trusted ways to form random groups.

1. **Count off** This is one of the fastest ways to get students into groups. You've probably done it before. Give each student a number from 1 to however many groups you want (for four groups, number from 1 to 4, for example). Students with number 1 are one group. Students with number 2 are a different group and so on. It makes for random groups, but you can also assert some control by counting off all the female students first, then the male students for example.
2. **Use a pack of playing cards** Pass out cards and group students based on having similar or different suits, black or red cards, cards in a specific order, the same numbers, or any other values you assign to the deck. Again, this works if you have less than 52 students in your class. In some of my college communications classes, I have had far more than 52 students.

PULL NAMES FROM A HAT

WANT A WAY TO GROUP STUDENTS AND A HANDY WAY TO CALL ON THEM LATER?

Write students' names on craft sticks or pieces of paper, shake them up in a cup, and pick at random the number of names you want in a group. Then shake it up again, and pick out the names for the next group.

Keep the pieces of paper or craft sticks with student names handy. When you ask the class a question, you can pull one out at random and call on that student. It's a fun way to call out an individual student without it seeming personal.

3. **Alphabetical grouping** Group students based on the order of their names or your class list. Pick the first four students by alphabet, then the next four. Or form pairs by picking the first and last student, then the second and second-to-last student, and so on.

4. British Dinner Party This is a great technique when you want students to work with two or three different students throughout the lesson. Have students turn to the person to their left for their first pair. Then have them turn to their right for their next pair. If you like and the seating arrangement allows for it, they can also talk to the person in front and behind them. I named this after the convention in British dinner parties that you talk to the person to your left for the first half of dinner and the person on your right during the second half.

5. Animal Noises: Prepare bits of paper with names of animals on them. If you want to put students in pairs, repeat each animal twice. If you want groups of three, repeat each animal name three times, and so on. Hand the papers out to students mixed up.

Students have to make the noise of the animal on their paper and then find the others making the same noise.

YOU HAVE GROUPS. NOW WHAT?

Regardless of how you form the groups, it's a good idea to give students time to get acquainted in their group. You may want to assign an icebreaker for this stage. For group projects where the assignment will last several classes, be sure to note the roster of each group.

Students like to give their groups names so consider this as well. You may want to facilitate the sense of belonging by letting them draw an emblem or devise a motto or find a picture online that represents them.

Make sure that before students leave the class that every student is part of a group. You may need to facilitate this especially if students are shy or uncomfortable approaching each other.

Finally, if you do decide to assign groups: Be sure to inform students that the assignments are fixed. Allowing for one or two changes will defeat the purpose.

6. Sentence Halves Write a series of sentences that target a grammar point or vocabulary set you are covering. They can also relate to the theme of the lesson. Cut them in half at some logical point—perhaps to highlight a grammar point you are covering. Give each student one half. Students have to find the person or persons with the other half of their sentence.

7. Q and A Match A variation of the above. Write a series of questions and answers to those questions on separate slips of paper. The questions may target a grammar point or a set of vocabulary or even the theme of the lesson. Hand out either a question or answer to each student who then has to find the person whose paper matches theirs.

8. Synonym Pair Up: Write a word for each group, and a number of synonyms of each word, for the number of people in each group. Students have to find the people with the synonyms of

their word. This is a great way to review vocabulary. Instead of a synonym it could also be a definition or even an antonym.

9. Line Up A fun game in its own right. Ask students to line up according to some principle. Lining up by height or age is fairly easy. Lining up by preference for coffee or tea, or by love of broccoli can be more challenging. Once students are lined up you could count them off, or have the students at the extremes group up and the students in the middle group up.

10. Desk Arrangement If you know you'll be doing group work that day, set up the desks in separate groups. Then whoever sits together is a group. Of course, there's a good chance these groups will contain friends.

11. Use an app There are a lot of apps that can randomly place students in groups. These apps often have multiple functions including taking attendance and tracking participation.

So those are a few ideas for you. And any one of them could be adapted or modified. I hope this ebook has helped you think about both teacher-arranged and random groupings. Good luck and let us know what you think. Feel free to get in touch at info@alphabetpublishingbooks.com.

You can also share ideas and help other teachers at the [Successful Group Work Facebook Group](#).

This ebook, *Getting Students into Groups: What to Think About and How to Do it*, contains content that was adapted from *Successful Group Work: 13 Activities to Teach Teamwork Skills* by Patrice Palmer and *Classroom Community Builders: Activities for the First Day & Beyond* by Walton Burns.

Both are available at: <http://www.alphabetpublishingbooks.com>

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