



# Communication in Small Groups

## What is a small group?

A **small group** is a small number of people (usually between 3 and 20) that interact with each other face to face to achieve a common goal. Because small groups have a common goal, they are interdependent.

## What are different types of small group interactions?

- **Oral report:** a speech presenting findings, conclusions, and decisions of a small group. This can typically be presented by one member of the group who summarizes what the group did and found out.
- **Symposium:** a public presentation in which several people present prepared speeches on different aspects of the same topic. If a professor asks you to research different aspects of a topic and to each present some material on that topic, then you are being asked to present in symposium form.
- **Panel Discussion:** a structured conversation on a given topic among several people in front of an audience. This type of presentation will be quite spontaneous, so catching the main theme of a question or comment and in designing a clear, relevant response is important to guarantee your effectiveness.

## What is an effective way to make group decisions?

As you prepare for your small group presentations, a rational method of group decision-making or problem solving will be useful. **John Dewey's Reflective Thinking Method** is a well-known and effective

series of steps that logically lead you to a well thought out decision or conclusion. The steps are:

### **1. Define the Problem:**

This means identifying what the problem is. It may seem obvious and unnecessary, but it is surprising how people can differ in their views of what the problem even is.

*Example: For a small group presentation, what is it that we need to do? What are the criteria that will be used to evaluate us?*

### **2. Analyze the Problem:**

Analyzing the problem involves taking the problem and dividing it into smaller parts and looking at it from various angles.

*Example: In order to meet those criteria, what specific ingredients do we need to include? Do we need to use specific visual aids? Do we have to have an introduction/body/conclusion?*

### **3. Establish Criteria:**

Discuss what criteria you as a group are expected to meet, as well as your own specific group members' expectations.

*Example: Do you want it to be visually pleasing as well as mentally stimulating? Or are your group members focused on doing research and sharing that knowledge with the audience?*

### **4. Select Several Potential Alternative Solutions:**

Discuss among your group members the various ways that you can achieve the criteria that you are given or the criteria that your group has set for the problem. Don't feel compelled to narrow down to only one alternative, but rather discuss and note several potential alternatives.

### **5. Select the Best Alternative:**

Among the various alternatives that your group has produced, which would be the best one to implement? Some ideas are great “on paper,” but realistically would be difficult to implement. Your group should discuss, get feedback from all members, and hopefully come to a consensus about which is the best alternative. Voting is one way of deciding on the best alternative, but not the optimal method, as the “minority” could feel uncommitted to the conclusion that the majority agrees with.

## **6. (Optional) Implementing and Assessing the Selected Solution**

This enables the process to be repeated until the ideal solution may be found in the future.

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If you want more information, check out the following  
UMW Speaking Center Handouts:

**Group Projects and Presentations**  
**Group Communication Roles**