



Does Group Study Really Work?

The **jigsaw method** is a group-study strategy in which a large body of material is divided among several students. Each member studies an assigned portion, prepares a clear summary and then teaches that material to the entire group. It is most useful in courses with extensive reading or numerous subjects to review—such as law, history, literature, business and the social sciences—provided that every member ultimately reviews and learns all the material.

The consensus is qualified. Group study can improve learning, but merely dividing the reading and exchanging summaries is unreliable. The method works best when the division of labor is followed by discussion, questioning, correction and individual study.

Why Group Study Can Work

A well-run study group offers several genuine advantages.

Teaching promotes learning. Preparing to explain a case, doctrine or chapter forces the assigned student to organize the material. Explaining it without simply reading from notes also involves retrieval practice, one of the most reliable ways to strengthen memory.

Other students expose gaps in understanding. You may think you understand a rule until someone asks for an exception, a counterexample or an explanation in plain English. Questions reveal weaknesses that private rereading can conceal.

Students bring different interpretations. One person may recognize the governing rule, another may notice a factual distinction and another may remember how the professor framed the issue. This is especially valuable in law, history, literature and other subjects where interpretation matters.

The group can reduce the initial workload. Dividing a large body of material makes the first pass less intimidating and gives each student a manageable area of responsibility.

Discussion can improve motivation. A regular meeting creates deadlines and makes it harder to postpone all the studying until the examination approaches.

Where “Divide and Conquer” Goes Wrong

The greatest weakness is that students may confuse access to a summary with personal knowledge. If Maria briefs contracts, David briefs torts and James briefs criminal law, the group may possess the complete collection of information while no individual possesses it.

That arrangement can work for a professional team whose members remain available to one another. It is much less dependable when each student must take an examination alone.

A summary can also contain errors, omit an exception or reflect one student’s misunderstanding. The better the presentation sounds, the more likely the other students may be to accept it without checking. In law courses, a brief that reduces a case to one clean rule may miss the procedural posture, limiting facts, dissent or qualification that makes the case important.

There is also the familiar problem of unequal effort. One student prepares carefully, another improvises and a third contributes very little. Conversation may drift into socializing, while confident members dominate and quieter students become passive listeners.

What the Research Says About Parsing the Material

Research on the jigsaw method is mixed. A 2023 systematic review of 69 studies found considerable variation in its effects on achievement, motivation and social relationships. Some implementations helped, while others produced little advantage. The results depended heavily on the subject matter, the students and the way the activity was organized.

That finding makes sense. Dividing material is an organizational device, not a learning method by itself. The learning occurs when students retrieve, explain, question, correct and apply the material.

Parsing the workload is most useful for:

- Conducting an initial survey of a large subject
- Locating and organizing sources
- Preparing first-draft case briefs or chapter summaries
- Identifying important rules, terms and questions
- Creating a shared outline that everyone will later review

- Bringing different examples and practice problems to the group

It is least useful when students treat another person's summary as a substitute for reading, thinking or practicing.

A Better Group-Study Method

A productive group might use the following structure:

- 1 **Divide the initial preparation.** Give each member a clearly defined topic, chapter or group of cases.
- 2 **Use a common format.** For a law-school case, every brief might contain the facts, issue, governing rule, reasoning, holding, important exceptions and connection to the course outline.
- 3 **Distribute the material before the meeting.** Members should have enough time to read the summaries and mark questions rather than hearing everything for the first time during the presentation.
- 4 **Teach the material in your own words.** Each student should explain the assigned material without reading the summary verbatim. Doing so turns the presentation into an exercise in retrieval, organization and understanding rather than a recital.
- 5 **Require questions and challenges.** Other members should ask for examples, exceptions and comparisons. "How is this case different from the one we discussed last week?" is more valuable than "Could you repeat the rule?"
- 6 **Verify important points.** Check uncertain conclusions against the assigned reading, the professor's materials or another authoritative source.
- 7 **Combine the sections into a shared outline.** Everyone should review and understand the entire product.
- 8 **Finish with individual retrieval.** Each member should close the outline and answer practice questions covering all sections—not merely the section that person prepared.
- 9 **Revisit the material later.** A second meeting should emphasize mixed questions, hypotheticals and weak areas rather than repeating the original presentations.

Group Study Should Follow Individual Preparation

The most dependable formula is:

Prepare alone → explain together → test alone

Private preparation gives each student enough knowledge to contribute. Group explanation helps organize and correct that knowledge. Individual self-testing reveals whether the student can retrieve and apply it without assistance.

A group that meets before anyone has studied often becomes a substitute lecture led by whichever member happens to be best prepared. A group that meets after everyone has mastered everything may offer little beyond companionship. The useful middle ground is for members to arrive with assigned expertise and enough general preparation to question one another intelligently.

The Bottom Line

Group study is valuable when it produces active explanation, retrieval, questioning and feedback. Dividing the material can make a large assignment manageable, but it should divide the **preparation**, not the final responsibility for learning.

A student may rely on classmates to help assemble the pieces. Before the examination, however, every student must be able to put the entire puzzle together alone.