**Tips for Dealing with Free Riders**

Free riders—those who don’t do their fair share of work in a group—frustrate students, especially when they get the same grade as everyone else in the group. A lot of students don’t realize there are ways groups can deal with free riders—ways that make it less likely that the rest of the group will have to pick up the slack. The purpose of this handout is to help those in your group correctly identify who’s free riding and provide a range of options for responding to that behavior.

Is it the teacher’s responsibility to take care of the free rider problem? Yes, teachers should design group projects so that there are consequences for members who don’t deliver. And although groups can complain to teachers (more on this to come), now is the time to start developing the skills needed to handle free riders. Group work in college won’t be the only time you’ll encounter members who take advantage of the group, and after college there won’t be a teacher around to fix the problem.

**Some typical free rider actions**

Free rider behaviors vary with individuals, so expect unique combinations and maybe some behaviors not listed here.

* Doesn’t do a fair share of the work and expects other to pick up the slack
* Shows little or no interest in the group task
* Looks and acts inattentive
* Seldom or never participates in group discussions
* Doesn’t pay attention to what’s going on during group meetings
* Carries on side conversations when the group is trying to work
* Comes to group meetings unprepared or poorly prepared
* Submits poor-quality work
* Misses deadlines
* Misses group meetings
* Does not respond to messages from the group
* Expects the same group grade as everyone else

**Some typical actions of group members who lack confidence**

Group members who lack confidence and are nervous about participating may look apathetic, like they don’t care and aren’t committed to the group. But looks can be deceiving, and it’s important for your group to figure out who’s free riding and who’s simply in need of some encouragement and support. Provide that, and a lot of low-confidence members become hard-working contributors.

* Never participates in group discussion or does so reluctantly
* Rarely offers opinions or makes suggestions
* Defers to others in the group; accepts group decisions without comment
* Does not volunteer for tasks
* Tends to be quiet; does not socialize with others in the group
* Appears nervous, especially when called upon to do something for the group

**What your groups can do about the free rider problem**

* **Discuss free rider behavior openly and when your group starts its work.** Who’s experienced it, and what does it look like? Focus on specific behaviors—actions associated with free riding. What happens when there’s a free rider in the group? How does the group respond? How do individuals respond? Develop some plans: What should the group do if free riding becomes a problem? These are preventative actions. You want to tackle the problem before it happens by conveying to everyone that free riding will not be ignored in this group.
* **Don’t underestimate the power of peer pressure.** Most free riders still have some interest in what their colleagues think of them. It feels pretty uncomfortable to be the only one in the group not doing what everyone else is doing.
* **Find out early on if there’s a free rider problem.** Don’t wait until there’s an important deadline and then discover that a member doesn’t deliver what your group needs. Have the group set some of its own deadlines, maybe ones that aren’t terribly important—for instance, “Everyone is expected to come to the next meeting with three suggestions for getting the project started,” or “Everyone is to post when they can meet to an online calendar before the next meeting.”
* **Respond to free rider actions when they first appear.** Don’t wait around to see whether the problem gets serious. Free riders frequently start with excuses: car trouble, illness in the family, extra hours at work, confusion over what was supposed to be done. What you don’t want to do is endorse the excuse. When someone arrives late and offers an excuse, don’t say, “Not a problem. We were just getting started.” That’s the polite response, but it also communicates that it’s okay to be late. Better to respond, “Glad you made it. We’re talking about X, and we need everybody’s good ideas about it.”
* **Don’t get into sorting out the legitimacy of excuses.** You can’t spend time trying to find out whether there was car trouble, illness, extra work, or confusion. But you can depend on the fact that productive members don’t repeatedly arrive with an excuse and without what’s due.
* **Confront the member directly.** If there have been only one or two instances of not coming through for the group and maybe some legitimate excuses, give the free rider a chance to get back on track. If the group is still committed to trying to turn the situation around, you may want to have one member (rather than the whole group) confront the free rider. Generally, describing what the free rider is doing and offering group support works better than making a lot of negative and judgmental statements. “You’ve missed the last two meetings, and we didn’t get any research references from you. If we’re going to do well on this project, we need everyone contributing. What can we do to support your participation in the group?”
* **Consider partnering on some group tasks.** Rather than assigning each individual a separate task, let partners work jointly on tasks. See whether a strong, productive group member will partner with the free rider. A partner can model productive behaviors. Remember, there’s a chance that what looks like free riding might be fear or a lack of confidence.
* **Use peer feedback mechanisms.** Ask the teacher to provide a peer rating form. Have each member evaluate their contributions to the group and then assess the contributions of other group members. Make these assessments anonymous and ask the teacher to tabulate the results, share them with individuals, and offer the group as a whole some feedback. Use peer feedback early on in the project with the goal of improving individual and group performance. If the form asks for comments, let them focus on the future—what the member needs to do to help the group achieve its goals.
* **If the free riding** **behaviors persist, start documenting them.** Note the dates of missed meetings and missed deadlines. Make copies of poor-quality work. Also keep a record of the group’s response. Save texts and emails trying to contact the missing member. Describe what the group did to cover for work the free rider did not complete. Attach this documentation to peer evaluations completed at the end of the project or otherwise share them with the teacher. You can say someone took advantage of the group, but if you can prove it, that’s way more persuasive.

And here are a couple of *don’t*s.

* **Don’t** immediately start covering for the free rider, doing what they’ve been asked to do. That reinforces the bad behavior and makes it highly unlikely that the free rider will ever come through for the group. In the end, the group may have to cover, but that’s a final, not a first, solution. Use the actions above first to see whether you can get the member to start contributing. Most free riders are repeat offenders. They’ve done it in other groups and gotten away with it. Do what you can to make this a group where free riding comes with consequences. Again, the group’s approach to dealing with the free rider should be positive, constructive, and professional.
* **Don’t** immediately start complaining to the teacher. That’s a last resort, not a first response. Trying to deal with a free rider provides experiences that will be relevant later. Free riding isn’t a behavior unique to college students. It’s a problem regularly encountered in all kinds of groups—yes, even professional groups and in groups free riders should care about, like families. But what isn’t professional is running to the boss when the group has a problem. Most bosses expect groups to handle their own problems.