

Discussion Skills for Tutorials & Seminars



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Asking questions and joining in discussions are important skills for university study. In many subjects, you will receive marks for tutorial participation and this mark reflects how active you have been in tutorial discussions.

Why have discussions at University?

- To understand a subject or topic area more deeply.
- To explore ideas and exchange information.
- To expand and clarify your knowledge.
- To improve your ability to think critically.
- To improve your language skills.
- To increase your confidence in speaking.
- A discussion can change your attitudes and ideas.
- A discussion can help a group make a particular decision or come to a conclusion.
- A discussion gives you the chance to hear the thoughts and ideas of other students.

Strategies for Improving Discussion Skills

If you find it difficult to speak or ask questions in tutorials and seminars, try the following strategies.

Observe

Attend as many seminars and tutorials as possible and notice what other students do. Ask yourself:

- How do other students enter into the discussion?
- How do they ask questions?
- How do they disagree with or support the topic?
- How do other students make critical comments?
- What special phrases do they use to show politeness even when they are voicing disagreement?
- How do they signal to ask a question or make a point?

Learn to Listen

Listening is an essential skill and an important element of any discussion. Effective listeners don't just hear what is being said, they think about it and actively process it.

- Be an active listener and don't let your attention drift. Stay attentive and focus on what is being said.
- Identify the main ideas being discussed.
- Evaluate what is being said. Think about how it relates to the main idea/ theme of the tutorial discussion.
- Listen with an open mind and be receptive to new ideas and points of view. Think about how they fit in with what you have already learnt.
- Test your understanding. Mentally paraphrase what other speakers say.
- Ask yourself questions as you listen. Take notes during class about things to which you could respond.

Prepare

You can't contribute to a discussion unless you are well-prepared. Attend lectures and make sure you complete any assigned readings or tutorial assignments. If you don't understand the material or don't feel confident about your ideas, speak to your tutor or lecturer outside of class.

Practise

Practise discussing course topics and materials outside class. Start in an informal setting with another student or with a small group. Begin by asking questions of fellow students. Ask them about the course material. Ask for their opinions. Ask for information or ask for advice. Practice listening and responding to what they say. Try out any discipline-specific vocabulary or concepts. Becoming accustomed to expressing your views outside class will help you develop skills you can take into the more formal environment of a tutorial group.

Participate

Set yourself goals and aim to increase your contribution each week. An easy way to participate is to add to the existing discussion. Try to speak at least once in each discussion. Start by making small contributions:

- agree with what someone has said or;
- ask them to expand on their point (ask for an example or for more information)
- prepare a question to ask beforehand.

You can then work up to:

- answering a question put to the group
- providing an example for a point under discussion
- disagreeing with a point.

Tutorial Participation: Voicing an opinion and arguing a point effectively

Voicing an Opinion in a Seminar

Participating in a tutorial discussion can be a little intimidating, especially if you want to disagree with a point of view and are not sure how to, or of which language structures to use. Voicing your opinion and using effective arguing techniques are valuable skills.

You may have a great idea, but you need to communicate it effectively and support it. The three essential parts to a point of view are:

1. A valid opinion (a believable point of view)

- I believe that ...
- I think that ...
- From what I understand ...
- As I understand it ...

2. A reason why

- This is due to ...
- Because ...
- What I mean by this is ...

3. Evidence

(relevant and up-to-date examples, statistics, explanations and/ or expert opinions). If you have actual data, examples or expert opinions on hand, refer to the source.

What is an argument?

To argue in an academic context is to present an opinion through the process of reasoning, supported by evidence. An argument seeks to persuade through rational and critical judgement. In academic writing an argument is sometimes called a claim or a thesis statement, which is also supported with evidence.

How do we argue at university?

The everyday meaning of the term argument suggests a fight: an aggressive conflict or confrontation between adversaries, where one tries to dominate the other in order to 'win'. At university this kind of arguing is not appropriate.

The aim of academic argument is to explore a question, a proposition or an area of knowledge and achieve reasoned mutual understanding. It is not important who 'wins'—what matters most is the quality of the argument itself. When you engage in academic argument in your tutorial discussions, you are developing your ideas, advancing and clarifying your knowledge and learning to think critically.

- This can be seen by ...
- For instance ...
- For example ...
- An example can be seen ...
- (Author's name) states that ...
- (Author's name) suggests...
- Statistics from (give a source) indicate ...

Arguing a Point: How to disagree effectively

Disagreeing can be problematic as people often speak before they think things through. It is also important to disagree politely. You may be trying to disprove another speaker's point, but

1. Acknowledge their point

- I can see your point--however ...
- That's a good point, but ...
- I see what you're getting at, but ...

2. Then explain why you disagree

- That's not always the case because ...
- That's not necessarily true because ...
- This idea isn't supported by statistics/ evidence ...
- I thought the author meant that ...

3. Offer your opinion complete with reason and support

- From what I've read ...
- The statistics seem to indicate that ...
- I think what Smith may actually be suggesting is ...
- Other studies by Smith show that ...

Now, be prepared for counter-argument and further discussion!

Remember, confidence is the key. If you do your tutorial preparation and think things through, you can speak with confidence and believe that your contribution will be valid.

Discussion Etiquette (or minding your manners)

In order to successfully negotiate tutorial discussion, courtesy is important. The following are a few ground rules for good conduct.

Do

- Respect the contribution of other speakers. Speak pleasantly and with courtesy to all members of the group.
- Listen well to the ideas of other speakers; you will learn something.
- Agree with and acknowledge what you find interesting.
- Remember that a discussion is not a fight. Learn to disagree politely.
- Respect that others have differing views and are not necessarily wrong.
- Think about your contribution before you speak. How best can you answer the question/ contribute to the topic?
- Try to stick to the discussion topic. Don't introduce irrelevant information. If the discussion does digress, bring it back on topic by saying something like 'Just a final point about the last topic before we move on' or 'that's an interesting point, can we come back to that later?'
- Be aware of your body language when you are speaking. Keep it open and friendly. Avoid gestures that appear aggressive.
- Try to speak clearly. Don't whisper; even if you're feeling uncertain about your ideas or language.

Don't

- Don't take offence if another speaker disagrees with you. Putting forward differing points of view is an important part of any discussion . Others may disagree with your ideas, and they are entitled to do so.
- Never try to intimidate or insult another speaker or ridicule the contribution of others. Don't use comments like 'that's stupid' or 'you're wrong'.
- Take care to use a moderate tone of voice. If you sound angry or aggressive others will not want to listen to you.
- Be aware of your body language. Gestures like finger-pointing can appear aggressive.
- If you are a confident speaker, try not to dominate the discussion. Pause to allow quieter students a chance to contribute.
- Avoid drawing too much on personal experience or anecdote. Although some tutors encourage students to reflect on their own experience, remember not to generalise too much.
- Don't interrupt or talk over another speaker. Let them finish their point before you start. Listening to others earns you the right to be heard.

Leading a Discussion

You may be in a seminar group that requires you to lead a group discussion, or lead a discussion after an oral presentation. You can lead a discussion by:

- Introducing yourself and stating the purpose of the discussion
- asking questions to stimulate the discussion
- making sure no one dominates the discussion by inviting and encouraging contributions from all students
- ensuring only one member of the group speaks at a time
- ensuring the discussion remains relevant and doesn't drift off topic
- summarising or rephrasing a speaker's point
- summarising the discussion

Group Discussions

Chairing a Group Discussion

When chairing a discussion group you must communicate in a positive way to assist the speakers in accomplishing their objective. There are at least four leadership skills you can use to influence other people positively and help your group achieve its purpose. These skills include:

- introducing the topic and purpose of the discussion
- introducing yourself and the other speakers
- making sure all members have approximately the same time to speak
- thanking group members for their contribution
- being objective in summarising the group's discussion and achievements.

Further Reading

Ballard, B & Clanchy, J 1984, *Study Abroad*, Longman, Longman, Melbourne.

Hollett et al 1989, *In at the Deep End*, Oxford University Press.

Maddox, H 1967, *How to Study*, 2nd ed., Pan Books, London.

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