

Contributing to seminars and tutorials

This study guide offers practical strategies for participating in seminars and tutorials encouraging you to make the most of the opportunities for discussion and debate.

Other useful guides from Student Learning Development: *Planning a powerful presentation, Successful group projects.*

Introduction

Seminars and tutorials are a vital part of most academic courses and give you an opportunity to discuss topics and issues with other students, teaching assistants and members of academic staff. This sort of critical debate and argument is very useful in developing your grasp and understanding of your subject. Benefits associated with seminars and tutorials include opportunities to:

- apply knowledge from your lectures and background reading;
- solve problems in a team to maximise your creativity;
- test your understanding and develop new insights;
- learn from other people's approaches and ideas;
- clarify any concepts that you might not have understood.

The success of a good seminar is not only based on its content (the subject knowledge explored) but also upon the way in which the seminar group works together. Students are often invited to take a lead role in the preparation of the seminar, chairing the discussion, solving problems or making a presentation to start the session. Learning through small group discussion will thus help you develop essential skills for later life, including opportunities to:

- practise expressing yourself;
- practise and develop your group skills (e.g. listening to and supporting others);
- prepare and deliver oral presentations.

This guide offers many practical strategies for successful group discussions, helping you to improve your own performance and play a full role within the group. For information about preparing a seminar paper or presentation, refer to another guide in this series: *Planning an effective presentation.*

Step One - Preparation

It is important to come to each seminar or tutorial group prepared to take a full part in discussion. If you have a basic understanding of the topic you will be better able to participate in discussion and understand the material being explored.

- Begin by identifying the main issues to be discussed. This information should be in your module handbook(s) or be available from your course tutor.
- Carry out background reading/research to develop your understanding and interest.
- Make notes as you read, focusing your thoughts on the forthcoming topic.
- Keep track of useful examples or quotations as these will provide important evidence for discussion.

- Develop both a broad understanding of the subject matter as well as a list of things that you're having difficulty with. These latter can form the basis for questions or contributions to the discussion.
- Make a list of points that you'd like to make or problems you'd like to find solutions to. Keep open minded though, as they might not all be relevant.

Remember, the key to successful discussion is for everyone to be fully engaged not for everyone to have fully developed ideas. A questioning approach to your preparation opens your mind and creates fertile ground for discussion and debate.

Step Two - Engaging in discussion

It isn't always easy to contribute to discussions, even if you have prepared thoroughly. Many students worry that they may have got something 'wrong' in their preparatory work and that everyone else has the 'right' answer. This is rarely the case. To help overcome nerves and anxiety, it is worth remembering the following points:

- don't wait until you arrive at the 'big idea': say something simple and often to help build discussion;
- share responsibility with the group: don't dominate or leave others to do all of the talking;
- be positive and respectful of other people's ideas.

With these principles in mind, try using the following strategies to help build your contributions to group discussions. They start with low stress approaches and build to full involvement.

1

Verbal/non-verbal acknowledgements

Show that you're a good listener by paying close attention to what is being said. Acknowledge other people's contributions by saying "yes" or nodding your head. Speakers find such signals reassuring as they show their ideas are being listened to and valued. These listening strategies will also keep you active and involved, giving a good starting point for more substantial contributions.

2

Agreements

Agreeing with a point someone has made can take your contributions to the next stage. Statements like "That's a good idea" or "I'd not thought of that" offer non-threatening speaking strategies. You can then build this to more complex levels of agreement, stating where and why you agree, for example: "Yes, it's important to realise that Kushner has been read out of context."

3

Observation

Try commenting on the discussion, showing other group members that you're aware of what's going on and are playing an active role in listening and shaping the argument. This can be particularly useful when trying to avoid distractions and keeping the discussion on course: "Haven't we moved away from the point that Manjit was making about ...?"

4

Presenting alternative views

Offering alternative points of view indicates a high level of involvement and can be a very effective way of helping to develop your own ideas and the ideas of others. Don't be afraid to disagree with someone, simply make sure that you do so in a constructive way. First express your disagreement by showing you understand the point that was being made and then explain why you disagree. If you are unsure as to why you disagree, try doing so with a question: "But doesn't that contradict with...?"

5

Involvement

This level shows very strong levels of engagement. In addition to all of the above strategies, the involved student will also try to make new points, leading the discussion into new ground: "I think we need to look more closely at the impact of...". The involved student will also try to bring other people into the discussion, inviting comment or drawing upon someone with relevant experience.

Using Openers

It can be difficult to begin making a contribution to the discussion, particularly when other group members are already contributing fully. Using a simple opening statement will get you started and draw people's attention to the fact that you want to speak. Examples include: "I think...", "I disagree,...", "That's a good point...", "Can I say that...?"

If the discussion is going really well, you might need to repeat your opening statement, even drawing attention to the fact that a particular point is being overlooked: "Hold on; haven't we ignored...."

Coping with Conflict

In some instances, discussions can become so lively that they lead to strong disagreement between group members. It is important to remember that discussion in an academic environment should remain objective and impersonal: ideas should be challenged, never people. If you feel your own anger levels rising, take a deep breath and stop talking for a while. If you see other people getting angry try to play an active role in the group, intervening with some of the above strategies. Observation or agreement (as described on page 2) can be very effective ways of drawing attention to disagreement before it gets out of hand, for example: "We appear to be saying the same thing here".

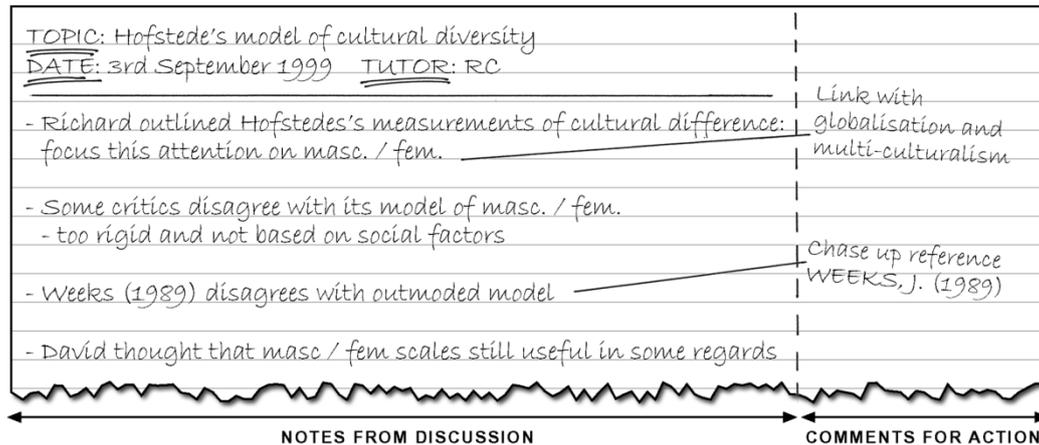
Step Three - Taking notes in discussion groups

It can be challenging to take notes and remain involved in the discussion at the same time. Sometimes you might not take any notes at all, relying on your follow-up work (see Step Four below) to capture any important ideas and references. If you do want to take notes, try to limit the amount that you write. Focus on significant points, questions or references so that these can be followed up at a later date. Successful note making strategies include:

- using a diagrammatical form of notes to map out the discussion with arrows linking ideas to show progression and relationships;
- keeping a record of who said what so that you can follow up any queries later in more detail;
- using key words and notation such as question marks (?) and exclamation marks (!) to prioritise information quickly for later follow-up work;
- dividing your page into two columns, using the left hand column to record actual comments from the discussion and using the right hand column to record your own ideas and responses (see Figure One over the page).

As you are only making brief notes, you will need to make sure that you follow these up whilst the session is still fresh in your mind. For more information about note making techniques in general,

see the companion study guide, *Effective note-making*.



Step Four - Follow-up work

One of the key things you will need to do after a seminar or tutorial is to go back to your notes and flesh them out in more detail. Remember that this shouldn't take the form of a lengthy transcript. Instead, try sketching out the ideas that you found most interesting and/or challenging, taking them further by developing your own thoughts and responses. If you have found the discussion to be particularly stimulating you might even wish to amend notes from other parts of your course (e.g. lectures or private study), including any new ideas and concepts accordingly.

At this stage, it will be important to make sure that you have clearly differentiated between your own ideas and those of others (authors, your tutor, fellow students). This will help you avoid plagiarism by acknowledging other people's work appropriately. For further information on this topic, see the companion study guide, **Avoiding plagiarism**.

The follow-up stage is also a good time to set priority areas for further reading and investigation. Choose a reference to follow up in the library or highlight an argument that you'd like to validate by checking back through your lecture notes. Develop your understanding of the topic further by tackling questions from a course text or past exam papers. You may want to identify individuals from the discussion group whose ideas you would like to discuss in more detail. Make the most of the discussion by using the session as a starting point for your own investigations and interests.

Conclusion

Seminars and tutorials provide important opportunities to stimulate your thinking and deepen your understanding. By engaging in debate and critical argument with others, or by working together to solve problems, you are developing your intellectual and critical skills as well as your group work skills. Such opportunities encourage you to apply, test and consolidate your own learning, helping you to become more familiar and confident with a particular subject area. Preparation beforehand, active participation during the session and effective follow-up work will help make the most of these learning opportunities.

This study guide is one of a series produced by Student Learning Development at the University of Leicester. As part of our services we provide a range of resources for students wishing to develop their academic and transferable skills.

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