Effective Participation in Group Discussions

1. Preparation: analyze the tutorial questions
   - Complete the readings and search for additional information if needed.
   - Reflect on the key arguments of the readings and brainstorm the topic: divide it into subtopics or think through related issues.
   - Write outlines or draw mind-maps (diagrams that illustrate the relationship among different concepts) to help formulate your arguments.

2. Use functional language to voice an opinion
   - To express a point of view: I believe (think) that .../As I understand .../From what I understand .../I consent with the idea that ...
   - To explain a reason: This is due to .../What I mean by this is .../Key to understanding this phenomenon is .../A critical (crucial) point is that ...
   - To provide evidence: This can be seen by .../(Author’s name) states (suggests) that .../Statistics from (a source) indicate that .../According to (an authoritative source) ...

   (This section is adapted from “Discussion Skills for Tutorials & Seminars”, the University of New South Wales.)

3. Engage in a discussion by giving feedback/response to what others said
   - Do not just state your prepared ideas; engage in a discussion!
   - Use the “Sandwich Approach” to show disagreement/refute other people’s ideas
     Step I: Acknowledge strengths (e.g. I can see your point—however, I can barely agree with the idea that...)/That is a good point, but .../I see what you are getting at, but .../It is largely true that..., whereas ...)
     Step II: Explain your critique, identify the weaknesses of other people’s argument (e.g. That is not always the case because .../That is not necessarily true because .../This idea is not supported by evidence .../I thought the author meant that .../ A crucial assumption (condition) is that ...)
     Step III: Conclude with your argument and suggested ways of improvement (e.g. From what I have read .../The statistics seem to indicate that .../I think what (Author’s name) may actually be suggesting is ...)
   - Be specific (especially when you try to persuade others): illustrate your statement by examples or evidences.
   - Be realistic: give feasible suggestions on other participants’ argument, rather than focusing on things beyond their control.
   - Remember that the comment is only your personal opinion, and you are the one to face any critique or counterargument. Avoid statements such as “most people believe that…”
(For more resources on being an effective participant in discussions, please see the Center for Teaching Excellence, University of Waterloo.)

4. Lead a discussion
   • Begin with an introduction of the participants and clear statements of the topic and purpose of the discussion. Make a brief review of the major concepts/terminologies/theories when necessary.
   • Prepare probing questions to stimulate discussion. The questions should be relevant and comprehensible to the participants.
   • Ensure that every participant has approximately equal opportunity to speak. Invite contribution from students who have not spoken out.
   • Focus on the topic and points raised by others.
   • Try to pull the discussion back to its original topic when there is a tendency of straying from the topic.
   • When confusion/misunderstanding is likely to arise, summon the speaker to clarify his/her points. Confirm your understanding of an argument by rephrasing other people’s statements.
   • Summarize the discussion/draw conclusions after a round of discussion and exchange before moving to the next section.

5. Etiquette of discussion
   • Avoid impolite language.
   • Control emotions when presenting your opinions. Be aware of the connotations of your words, and your body language.
   • Avoid interrupting the speaker or talking with other students when a participant is speaking. Do not dominate the discussion.
   • When expressing disagreement, concentrate on the topic in question and avoid personal attack.

Tips on Oral Presentation

1. Organize the presentation
   (1) Introduction
      • State your objectives clearly at the beginning.
      • Introduce the topic in the form of a question/puzzle can arouse interest in the presentation.
      • Present a brief outline of what you are going to talk about.
      • Highlight what is interesting/ important about the topic.
   (2) Present your main ideas/contents in a structured manner
      • Topical: move from idea to idea, theme to theme
      • Chronological: time sequences
      • Classification: discrete categories
● Problem-Solution: present a problem with one or more solutions to it
● Cause-Effect: provide explanations to a problem
(The above types are adapted from The McGraw Center for Teaching & Learning, Princeton University.)

(3) Conclusion
● Alert the audience that the presentation is coming to an end.
● The conclusion should be concise and informative, summarizing the main arguments/findings.
● Leave ideas/concepts for further discussions.
(These suggestions are adapted from the On-line Writing Lab, Rice University.)

2. Improve the effectiveness of communication
(1) Style
● Adopt a conversational style: “short sentences, concrete language, speech that suggests to your audience that you are really talking to them”.
● Body language: use gestures/ body movements to signal major transitions between subsections.
● Pause before moving to a different point.
● Employ a combination of narratives and data.
● Allocate the time for each subsection appropriately. This can be achieved through rehearsal—which is not the same as reciting the script.
● Make sure you have enough time to go through the key points. Do not include too much information which you cannot cover in your allocated time period.
(Source: the On-line Writing Lab, Rice University; “Oral Presentations: Tips, Significance, Design, Guidelines & Presentation”, Stanford University.)

(2) Visual aid (e.g. PowerPoint slide show)
● Make the slides neat: use font sizes that can be easily read, avoid overly colorful PPT templates, leave some empty space on the slides.
● When you are explaining a graph or a chart, let the slide remain on the screen for some time to allow the audience fully digest the information conveyed by it.
● Prepare backup slides.
(Source: Glover, Jan. “Presentation Basics”, Yale University.)

3. Interactions with the audience
● Pay attention to their prior knowledge relating to the presentation.
● Be aware of their political/religious orientations, and cultural backgrounds.
● Adjust your style of presentation with reference to your relation with the audience (whether they know you well, whether you are of the same rank within an organization …)

4. Q&A sessions
● Thank the speaker for his/her question first.
Repeat the question(s) to ensure that you understand it (them) and take notes if there are many sub-questions.

“Use the last questions to summarize your main points or reinforce your main idea.”

(Source: the above advice is adapted from the McGraw Center for Teaching & Learning, Princeton University.)

Useful Links


Presentation Skills. Newcastle University: [http://lorien.ncl.ac.uk/ming/Dept/Tips/present/present.htm](http://lorien.ncl.ac.uk/ming/Dept/Tips/present/present.htm)


References


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