

Working in groups

Getting the most out of seminars

Seminars, group discussions where a tutor or lecturer plans the theme and requires the students to attend, are excellent learning opportunities. In seminars it is normally the lecturer's job to make clear the goals of the discussion, to sort out practicalities like seating and introductions, to 'steer' the discussion and to draw the discussion to a close.

It is important to realise, however, that the responsibility for the success of a seminar lies mainly with the students, who need to be **prepared** and who need to **participate**. Each student in the group needs to take on these responsibilities. Remember that the discussion is yours and has been set up for your benefit. Try not to waste the opportunity.



Preparation

You will usually be asked to do some preparatory work, often reading, for a seminar. It is obviously very important that you get this done: if you don't, you will not only be less able to contribute to the discussion, but you will not benefit so much from the other students' discussion.

If for some reason you have not been able to do the preparation for a seminar, do not avoid attending it. You will still benefit from going. An honest apology for a lack of preparation is clearly more polite than an attempt to duck your responsibilities.

When reading the preparatory material, make a note of key points and especially of any questions that occur to you. Take these notes to the seminar. Mark any key sections so that you can refer to them quickly during the seminar if you need to.

If possible, extend your preparation by studying other sources on the topic. Some students like to hold a 'pre-discussion' to clarify their thinking, especially before a particularly important seminar.

Participating in discussion

The discussion that happens in seminars can really boost your learning, but only if you understand and fulfil your role, which is of course to take part. The following five 'rules' will help you and your fellow students get the most out of discussion:

- 1 When you speak, make sure you speak to everyone in the group. This means making eye contact with the other students and not just with the lecturer.

- 2 Speak slowly and clearly. If you find it difficult to say exactly what you mean, get into the habit of noting down questions during the discussion. Do remember, though, that because this is a discussion others can ask you to clarify your point: it does not have to be perfect first time.
- 3 Listen actively. This means that you interact with the person who is speaking. You can do this by looking at the person and perhaps smiling or nodding at appropriate times, or by occasionally checking you have understood their point with phrases like “So what you’re saying is...” or “So in your opinion...”. Most importantly, active listening means making sure that you are actually thinking about what the others are saying rather than using their speaking time to plan your next contribution. It sometimes takes a conscious effort to do this!
- 4 When you respond to others’ contributions, be positive. It is quite possible to disagree completely and still be positive. You do this by acknowledging the speaker’s views before stating your own e.g. “I can see what you mean, but...” or “I understand what makes you think that, but I would argue that...”
- 5 During a discussion your views may (and perhaps should) change as you listen to others’ contributions. If you come to recognise that you were in error, admit it; if another person’s opinion has helped change yours, thank them for it. This sort of honest, open attitude will help develop motivation and trust in the group.

Overcoming shyness

Following the five rules above will help to encourage ‘inclusiveness’. For some students, however, a lack of confidence may still prevent them from fully contributing to a discussion. Three good tips for overcoming shyness are:

- 1 Build your confidence gradually by setting short, manageable targets. For example, to begin with you might have a target of making one contribution to a discussion.
- 2 Plan your contributions, by, for example, writing them out after you have done the preparation for the discussion.
- 3 If you still find it hard to ‘get into’ the discussion, use a more formal method such as slightly raising your hand and catching the eye of the group leader.

When your group first meets it can be easy to imagine that the other students are more confident and more knowledgeable and that they are just waiting for you to show yourself up. Try to remember that they are, in fact, almost certainly feeling the same as you.

For further help with seminars, or any other study skills issue, contact the Academic Skills Unit (ASK):

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