

Discussion skills

Here I will describe one method for making more productive contributions to academic discussions. Then I will offer some brief notes on modifying this technique for non-academic conversations. For the rest of the semester, we will regularly refer to the discussion skills described here. Thus, please **print this handout right now** and **bring it with you to all future seminars**. (You will need a hard copy even if you use a tablet in seminar.)

In brief, the method is this:

1. *Turn your gaze, body, and attention* towards the speaker.
2. *Give context*, usually in a single short sentence.
3. *Identify* precisely what type of contribution you will make, usually by saying, “I would like to ____.”
4. *Make* your contribution.
5. *Support* your contribution with evidence, if appropriate.

In more detail:

1. *Turn your gaze, body, and attention* towards the speaker.

Do not spend your time mentally rehearsing what you are going to say. Instead, focus every fiber of your being on absorbing what is being said.

2. *Give context*.

Provide whatever context your audience will need to understand your contribution. Be very concise. You might need to summarize what the previous person said, or what question or topic you are going to discuss.

Do not yet indicate whether you agree or disagree with any of these ideas.

3. *Identify* precisely what type of contribution you will make.

You will often find it helpful to say, “I would like to [identify type of contribution].” For example, you might be asking for clarification, giving evidence, giving an objection, replying to an objection, or explaining the significance of an idea.

Focus on being as precise as possible. For example, it is unhelpful to say, “I would like to comment on what Winnie said.” It is better to say, “I would like to object to what Winnie said about pleasure.” It is even better to say, “I would like to object to Winnie’s claim that pleasure is always good.”

4. *Make* your contribution.

Do not try to express all of your thoughts on the topic! Instead, you should typically restrict yourself to just one contribution.

5. *Support* your contribution with evidence (if appropriate).

Even if your contribution consists of a claim that you take to be obviously true, it is worth saying so. Of course, if you are simply asking a question, then there may be no need to support your contribution with evidence.

Here are a few further tips:

- Avoid asking a question when you in fact intend to make a claim.
- Be very concise.
- Practice being precise, as described in the handout on precision. This will be even more difficult for you in speech than in writing, but at least practice noticing the imprecise expressions that you use, and begin to think about how to replace these with more precise expressions.

Because students usually find it very difficult to structure their thoughts in an academic discussion, we will practice using the method above in a very systematic way. This is just for practice! In other seminars, and indeed in your non-academic life, you should feel free to adapt the method as appropriate. For example, you might need to vary the order in which you carry out these steps. Or, if you are responding in seminar to a single-sentence question that someone has just asked, then you might skip step 2 (summarizing the last contribution). Similarly, if you are just chatting casually with a friend, then step 5 (supporting your contribution with evidence) might be irrelevant.

However, step 1 is the one that I most encourage you to use in all parts of your life. I have had many students tell me that this seminar has taught them to *truly listen* to others, and that this practice has been nothing less than transformative for them. I myself remember the period when I first started truly listening to others. I, too, was transformed. I hope that you will have the same experience!