

FACULTY OF BUSINESS AND LAW

## **Skill: Communication**

# **Guide: Taking Part in Discussions**

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## Overview

Communication is about developing the ability to select and apply skills in ways that are appropriate to their particular context, audience and situation. Communication is a fundamental part of all our lives and the range of methods we can use to communicate with each other is growing. We can communicate using everything from a note stuck on the fridge door to video-conferencing. But no matter which medium we choose, the underlying structure or communication cycle remains the same. If we are unsure of what we wish to communicate, or transmit it badly, we run the risk of not being understood by other people.

Your first experience in university in taking part in discussions is likely to occur in tutorials. For tutorials to be effective learning experiences, you need to be able to prepare appropriately for discussions, listen carefully and respond appropriately to what others have to say, speak clearly in ways that suit the situation and use appropriate body language to support what you are saying.

At the start of this guide, a checklist list for graduates in the Faculty of Business and Law in respect of participating in discussions is presented. This will guide you in determining your skills in participating in discussions.

This guide consists of four topics that are deemed important to effectively take part in discussions. These include: preparing for discussions; listening skills; speaking skills; and non-verbal communication. It specifies the important areas of knowledge and skills that need to be developed, provides a self-review exercise(s) or test(s), and some resources, which will enable you to learn and practice the relevant skills.

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## Checklist

A checklist for of graduates in the Faculty of Business and Law in respect of taking part in discussions

- Make a note of any questions or views you have before the discussion starts, so you feel prepared for your contribution.
- During the discussion, if you have an idea or a comment you wish to make, jot it down so you can remember it.
- Listen carefully to each speaker:
  - identify the main points that are being made
  - do not be tempted to guess what they are going to say before they say it
  - pay attention to their non-verbal messages
  - avoid distractions
  - maintain eye contact.
- Don't interrupt people.
- Think about what the speaker is saying and be prepared to alter your viewpoint.
- Follow through any ideas or opinions others have expressed.
- Avoid making comments unrelated to the discussion.
- If you don't understand what someone has said, ask.
- Try to make sure that everyone in the group has a chance to speak, and avoid dominating the discussion.
- Make your own points as clearly and briefly as possible.
- Don't be afraid to put forward opposing views.
- Be supportive of others and build your confidence in discussions together.

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## Self-review/assessment

Please answer the questions in this self-assessment.  
Read each question and tick the value which you feel is most appropriate to you. Each answer has a point value:

|                   |   |
|-------------------|---|
| disagree strongly | 1 |
| tend to disagree  | 2 |
| tend to agree     | 3 |
| strongly agree    | 4 |

Add up your scores. The final tally will give you an idea of how confident you feel about your skills in 'Taking part in discussions'.

|       |   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|-------|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1     | I complete the required research, reading and learning activities prior to the tutorial/discussion.   |   |   |   |   |
| 2     | I make a note of any questions or views I have before the discussion starts.  |   |   |   |   |
| 3     | During the discussion, if I have an idea or a comment I wish to make, I jot it down so I can remember it.   |   |   |   |   |
| 4     | I look at the person who is speaking. I assure the speaker that I am taking in what they are saying by, for example, nodding occasionally.  |   |   |   |   |
| 5     | When listening I am not tempted to guess what they are going to say before they say it.   |   |   |   |   |
| 6     | When listening I identify the main points that are being made.  |   |   |   |   |
| 7     | I don't interrupt other people and I wait until they finish speaking, even if I strongly disagree with it.  |   |   |   |   |
| 8     | When speaking in discussions, I focus on saying things that are relevant and timely. I avoid making comments unrelated to the discussion.   |   |   |   |   |
| 9     | When speaking in discussions, I focus on saying the right amount and saying things in an appropriate way.   |   |   |   |   |
| 10    | I am able to speak clearly, at the right volume and in an appropriate tone of voice.  |   |   |   |   |
| 11    | I pay attention to their non-verbal messages, such as how a person stands/sits/walks around, whether a person's feet are still, whether they are relaxed or restless, what a person is doing with their hands, and whether a person's attention is focused. |   |   |   |   |
| TOTAL |   |   |   |   |   |

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# Topic 1

## Preparing for discussions

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### Objectives

At the completion of this topic you should be able to:

- recognise the purpose of discussions in which you are to attend
- identify and recall the main issues in preparing for discussions
- identify and recall the main expectations of students in discussions
- locate relevant resources on preparing for discussions

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### Recognise the purpose of the discussion

The first task is to understand whether the discussion is formal or informal. This will influence the type of language used, the tone and mannerisms etc. Find out about the ground rules that have been developed in face-to-face and online tutorials.

The second task is to understand the purpose of the discussion. You should know how the purpose of a discussion can affect the nature of the discussion. Once the purpose is clear it is much easier to contribute.

- Discussions always have at least one purpose. A weekly schedule is often provided about the work to be covered in tutorials.
- You should be aware of any work to be completed prior to the tutorial and how the tutorial is expected to proceed. For example, you may be required to research in order to find the necessary material, read to gather the material, and select to sort out the material.
- Depending on the purpose, you may be required to express statements of fact, give short explanations,

instructions, accounts of events or incidents in a logical sequence, provide descriptions of people or places, express your own opinions and ideas.

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## **Things to do to prepare for a discussion**

You can help discussions go well if you:

- Complete the required research, reading and learning activities prior to the tutorial/discussion;
- think about what you want to say yourself, and find out from other people;
- prepare a list of open questions to gain information and closed questions to check that you have obtained the correct information;
- write down your questions and make sure that you are well prepared beforehand;
- test your questions on a colleague first. In this way, you will be able to tell if your questions work or not. Change the ones that don't!
- take your turn – it's important that everyone has a chance to speak if they want to;
- keep what you say short;
- don't interrupt other people – wait until they finish speaking;
- stick to the point – avoid spending ages on topics that interest you but no-one else.

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## **Learning Resources**

### **Library**

You should check the library for references on oral communications. You can do this by typing 'oral communication' in as a keyword when searching the entire

catalogue. The following is an example of a publication that has been identified through this search approach.

Summers, J. & Smith B. 2004. Communication skills handbook : how to succeed in written and oral communication, Milton, Qld., John Wiley & Sons Australia, (658.45 Sum/Csh)

### **Other resources**

### **Internet resources**

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## Topic 2

# Listening skills

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### Objectives

At the completion of this topic you should be able to:

- recognise the importance of listening as part of effective communication
- identify and recall the main expectations in respect of effective listening

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### The importance of listening

- In all oral communication situations, the skill of listening is very important. You will get much more out of all forms of oral communication if you are a good listener. If you don't listen well enough it can be difficult or impossible for you to do what is expected of you. You may get into trouble, misunderstandings can arise or mistakes may be made.
- Usually, much more time is spent in a discussion listening to what other people say than speaking.
- Speakers need to feel confident that they are communicating with their audience, whether one person or several. Good listening skills help them feel confident that they are succeeding.
- A good listener works out what the speaker wants to say and the purpose of their contribution.
- Paying attention and listening closely means tuning in to what the other person thinks or feels.
- An active listener shows they are listening in the way they sit or stand in relation to the other person.
- The most important thing to remember is that every speaker needs a listener – and this includes you. If listeners don't listen properly, communication doesn't happen.

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## Effective listening

We should always listen carefully to what people say to us. Sometimes we only listen to what we want to hear! We often take listening skills for granted – effective listening means concentrating on what the other person has to say.

- Look at the person who is speaking. In individual conversation, make eye contact if the speaker appears to desire it.
- Adopt an open, relaxed posture. You can send negative messages to the speaker by doing things like crossing your arms.
- Assure the speaker that you are taking in what they are saying by, for example, nodding occasionally.
- Allow the speaker to complete a point before interrupting, even if you strongly disagree with it.
- Try to begin any reply you make by referring to something that the speaker has said.
- If you ask a question about what has been said, make sure it is an open question.

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## Resources

### Library

You should check the library for references on oral communications. You can do this by typing 'listening skills' in as a keyword when searching the entire catalogue. The following is an example of a publication that has been identified through this search approach.

Housel, Deborah J. 2003. Developing listening skills, Cheltenham, Vic., Hawker Brownlow Education, (372.69044 Hou/Dls)

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## Topic 3

# Speaking skills

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### Objectives

At the completion of this topic you should be able to:

Recognise the importance of speaking skills.

Recall effective speaking skills.

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### The importance of speech

Speech is one of the most important forms of communication, with success dependent, not only on what you say, but on how you say it. In many instances in tutorials your main speaking task will be to respond to a question.

However, you will also be provided with the opportunity to ask your own questions. The purpose of asking questions is to find out information. This information could be for a report or a survey. The information we receive depends on the type of questions we ask.

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### Effective speaking in discussions

- When speaking in discussions, you need to focus on:
  - saying things that are relevant and timely,
  - saying the right amount and saying things in an appropriate way.
- You need to be able to speak clearly, at the right volume and in an appropriate tone of voice.
- Mumbling or speaking too loudly are often a sign of anxiety or lack of confidence.

Here we are looking at two ways of questioning which will show us how to obtain the right amount of information that is needed.

### *Closed Questions*

A closed question will normally result in short or one word answers. This is useful if a specific piece of information is needed. The way in which it is worded will only allow the person who is being asked to give specific or exact information, e.g.:-

- How old are you?
- What colour eyes do you have?
- Do you have a current passport?

### *Open Ended Questions*

When using this form of questioning the information received back will not be as specific and it will usually consist of much longer replies. This is useful if the information required needs to include feelings, thoughts or ideas. The wording of the question allows the person asked to give as much response as is necessary. Examples of these questions are:-

- Why do you think that cars are better than motorbikes?
- How would you describe yourself?
- What are your opinions on smoking?

### Probe Questions

When wishing to search for information in depth, 'follow up' or probe questions may be necessary. The main object of these questions is to get beyond superficial replies to open questions. Phrases like 'I see...?' 'And then...?' 'That's interesting...?' are a way of saying 'Go on then, I'm with you, tell me more'.

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## **Learning Resources**

### **Library**

You should check the library for references on oral communications. You can do this by typing 'speaking skills' in as a keyword when searching the entire catalogue. The following is an example of a publication that has been identified through this search approach.

Baker, J. & Westrup, H. 2003. Essential speaking skills, London, Continuum (428.0071 Bak/Ess)

## **External resources**

The following site permits you to download a document on speaking, negotiation, and presenting an informative talk. You only need to examine the section on speaking at this stage. It is, however, only a limited guide.

Adult Returners Key Skills (ARKS) ARKS keys to communication, Speaking

[http://www.keyskillssupport.net/resources/SchoolsColleges/shared/dbaseout/disclaimer.asp?url=http://www.keyskillssupport.net/files/kssp/resources/arks/ARKSKeystoCommunicationsJune2001/Ch1\\_Speaking.pdf](http://www.keyskillssupport.net/resources/SchoolsColleges/shared/dbaseout/disclaimer.asp?url=http://www.keyskillssupport.net/files/kssp/resources/arks/ARKSKeystoCommunicationsJune2001/Ch1_Speaking.pdf)

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## Topic 4

# Non verbal communication

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### Objectives

At the completion of this topic you should be able to:

Describe what is meant by non verbal communication.

Explain the cues for non verbal communication.

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### Non verbal communication

Effective communication relies on more than the written or spoken word. Think of the difference between a conversation on the telephone and face to face interaction.

If you can see the person you are speaking to you can gain additional information from them through their facial expression, body language and appearance.

To become effective in speaking and listening, students should have an understanding of non-verbal communication (NVC), sometimes referred to as 'body language'.

NVC means any form of communication that does not use words. NVC is how we communicate without words—the most basic form of communication. It is less structured, more difficult to study, may be sub-conscious and is generally more difficult to control than verbal communication. Examples of non-verbal communication include traffic lights and smoke signals.

Consider the following points:

- NVC, which can be either intentional or unintentional, is more likely to be believed than the spoken word.
- Words alone are often not enough to communicate all that we want to say.
- NVC is used as an aid to speech or to replace it altogether.

- NVC provides information about the emotional state and attitudes of a speaker or listener.
- First impressions of people are often related to NVC.
- NVC is often an indicator of whether a situation is formal or informal.

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## **The cues of non verbal communication**

Successful speaking and listening depends on feedback, and this is a major use of NVC.

You can give to and receive recognition from others verbally and non-verbally. It can be about the person, in other words who she or he is, irrespective of their behaviour, and/or it can be about their behaviour and performance.

Negative non-verbal recognition includes:

- Not looking at the person when she or he is talking.
- Ignoring the person.

Positive non-verbal recognition includes:

- a warm handshake.
- looking at the person when she or he is talking.
- nodding in agreement with a person.
- smiling in acknowledgement of the person.

Examine:

- How do people stand/sit/walk around?
- Are their feet still? Are they relaxed? Are they restless? Do they repeat one movement?
- What are they doing with their hands? Are they holding something for no obvious reason?
- What mannerisms do you notice?
- What can you tell about their mood from their posture?
- What about their facial expressions?

- What are they looking at? Do you think their attention is focused or are their eyes wandering?

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## **Resources**

### **Library**

You should check the library for references on oral communications. You can do this by typing 'non verbal communication' or 'body language' in as a keyword when searching the entire catalogue. The following is an example of a video that has been identified through a search of non-verbal communication.

Body Language: An introduction to non-verbal communication (158.2 Bl/ltn)

This video introduces aspects of non-verbal communication such as eye contact, silent language, personal space and subconscious gestures.

### **External resources**

Inspire source files. Although these resources refer to UK they offer exercises etc

NVC can be located in Level 2 materials

<http://www.keyskillssupport.net/resources/schoolscolleges/grimsby/comm.asp>

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# Conclusion

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This module has presented learning materials on preparing for discussions. The following points should be borne in mind when participating in discussions

- Courtesy - the effective communicator is always courteous. Avoid:
  - Interrupting
  - Contradicting
  - 'Showing off' to impress someone
  - Making someone 'look small'
  - Losing your temper
  - Being condescending
  - Showing boredom or impatience
- Listening - failing to listen to someone is not only a grave discourtesy, but also may result in your looking silly or making a faux-pas. Pay attention, consider the implications of what is being said. Look at the speaker, provide him with feedback to show you are following.
- Styling - strive to ensure that the manner in which you speak is appropriate to the circumstances. Choose your words and expressions carefully, mindful of the personalities and backgrounds of others present. It is easy to give offence, but difficult to overcome its effect.
- Mannerism - avoid irritating, unpleasant or discourteous mannerisms of speech, gesture or posture. Do not distract by 'fiddling' with a pencil, doodling or indulging in other distractions.
- Thinking - it is vital to think before you speak - once a statement is uttered it may be difficult to retract. If you agree with a point, try to develop it constructively; if you disagree do not become over-assertive. Show that you can see more than one point of view. Remember it is better to say a little which is considered, than a lot which is superficial.

- Timing - choose the right moment to speak; sometimes it is better to let others have their say first. Listen for the drop in a person's voice, look for a smile or nod which may indicate that someone has finished making a point. Be alert for the signs a person makes when he wishes to end a conversation or interview. Know when you have won and leave promptly!
- Structuring - if others are to follow your argument and value what you say, it is important that you structure your points logically, and express them in connected phrases and sentences. It is also essential that you do not speak for too long at a time; people will quickly reject what you have to say if you deprive them of the opportunity to have their say too!
- Reacting and contributing - one of the quickest ways of alienating others is to show no reaction to what they have said. Enthusiastic agreement or determined disagreement both indicate that there is an interest and commitment present. Ensure you make some positive contribution to the dialogue - if you have nothing to say, people will assume that you have nothing of value to contribute and may assess you accordingly.

Source: Inspire level 4

<http://www.keyskillssupport.net/resources/schoolscolleges/grimsby/comm.asp>

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