

The language of seminars

Preparing to express your opinions

Much of the discussion in seminars involves putting forward ideas, viewpoints or responses to current issues relevant to your field of study. When putting forward an argument you will need to also provide some evidence that supports your point of view. By practising how to present strong evidence-based opinions in seminars, you will develop a better understanding of how to think critically, and also clarify for yourself how you might organise these ideas in an essay.

Here is one suggestion for preparing for seminar discussion:

1. Complete the set weekly readings. Identify the main ideas and key concepts / vocabulary.
2. Make some notes: your thoughts, reactions, any questions.
3. Compare and contrast different ideas and opinions in the readings, and from class notes.
4. Begin to formulate your own opinions and how you might express them in the seminar:
Based on what I have read, I believe that ...
5. Be prepared to explain why you have this opinion:
One of the main reasons I believe this is ...
6. Be prepared to direct others to evidence from the readings to support your opinion:
In the 2009 Smith reading, she points out that ...
7. And remember, asking questions can also be a valuable contribution to the discussion:
I'm not sure what Smith meant when she said ...

Observing your classmates

In your next seminar, use the questions below to make observations on what makes a successful discussion. Use your observations to then prepare for the following seminars.

1. How is the discussion started?
2. How do tutors or students 'break the ice?' (when everyone is new to the group)
3. How is an opinion introduced?
4. How are disagreements dealt with?
5. How do people ask for clarification if they don't understand something?
6. How do people negotiate solutions to problems?
7. What do people say when they want to interrupt?
8. How are questions asked?
9. What is the tone of voice when successful constructive criticism is given?
10. How do people politely tell others to be quiet or to stay on track?
11. How do tutors or other students encourage the quieter students to get more involved in the conversation?

The everyday language of seminar discussions

While the language used in seminars is often informal, some preparation can be very useful. Use this checklist to get a better understanding of everyday language that is used in your seminars or team discussions.

Type of Interaction	Possible examples	Observations from my seminar
Requesting Information	<i>What do you think about that point?</i> <i>I would like to know your thoughts on ...</i> <i>What did everyone else think?</i>	
Providing an opinion or comment	<i>From what I have read, I think that ...</i> <i>In my opinion, this is not a ...</i>	
Agreeing with others or offering encouragement	<i>Yes, that's right, that's what I was saying.</i> <i>Absolutely!</i> <i>That's a great idea.</i> <i>Yes of course! I agree totally!</i> <i>I like what you said about ...</i>	
Disagreeing with others	<i>I'm not sure if I agree ...</i> <i>I'm not sure about that because ...</i> <i>Yes perhaps, I see where you're going, but what about ...</i> <i>But in the article it says ...</i> <i>I think you're right to a point but what about...</i>	
Restating your own ideas	<i>Let me be a little clearer on that ...</i> <i>What I wanted to really say was ...</i> <i>In other words ...</i> <i>But again, let me just say ...</i>	
Restating or clarifying what others have said	<i>So what you're saying is ...</i> <i>So you think that ...</i> <i>Sorry, I may have this wrong, but are you saying that ...</i>	
Elaborating on someone else's idea	<i>So to develop your idea further ...</i> <i>So another example of what you're saying is ...</i> <i>Going from what you said then, I think ...</i>	
Asking for further evidence or examples	<i>But what do you mean by that? Could you please give another example?</i> <i>Where does he say that in the article?</i>	
Keeping things on track	<i>Let's keep going with this ...</i> <i>So should we look back at ...</i> <i>What if we start again by ...</i> <i>We've only got 15 minutes. Should we have a quick look at ... ?</i>	