

## Tips for participating in discussion

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### What if I am shy?

- Most of us are nervous to talk sometimes! **Recognize that people want to hear what you have to say**, and that **what you say does not need to be “right”**
- **Start out small:** try asking a clarifying question of a classmate, “what did you mean by...?” or be the first one to say something when everyone is sitting in silence (that way you don’t have to worry about how to fit your comment into the context of the discussion because you are STARTING the discussion!).
- **Test out your ideas in a pair or small group.** After you’ve gone over them in a smaller setting, you may feel more comfortable bringing them to the larger group.

### What if I talk a lot?

- **That’s great!** No one likes a discussion where no one talks, after all.
- **View yourself as a facilitator.** If you aren’t busy worrying about yourself feeling comfortable in the discussion, pay attention to the class discussion dynamic and ask yourself what you can do to improve it. Try asking a question of your classmates, making a bold statement to provoke further discussion, or responding directly to a point made by another classmate.
- **Avoid dominating discussion.** Wait for 30 seconds of silence before offering your opinion to give other classmates a chance to speak up. Another helpful rule is “three before me”—wait for three classmates to say something before raising your hand again.

### What should I do when I am listening?

- **Make eye contact**, and look at your classmates, not the instructor. Your classmates will feel more comfortable talking when they know that they have your attention.
- **Use body language.** Nod when you agree or are hearing an interesting point.
- **Take notes!** Your classmates can teach you as much as the instructor. When someone makes a poignant point that you’ll want to remember later, write it down.

What if I have something controversial to say?

- Check yourself once: **does the point relate directly to the academic material** being discussed? It should.
- Check yourself twice: is what you have to say controversial because it is **rooted in prejudice or stereotype**? It shouldn't be.
- **Pay attention to phrasing**: think about the best way to make your statement. Sometimes it's good to start with "I noticed..." or "it seems to me that..."
- If you've done these three things, **don't be afraid to say what's on your mind!** Bold statements provoke learning.

What if someone has said something that bothers me?

- **Check yourself**: why does the statement bother you? Does it make you uncomfortable because it feels true? Or does it make you feel uncomfortable because it is rooted in stereotype, prejudice, or ignorance?
- Know that **you have options** for how to respond:
  - **Within the context of the discussion**: you can respond in the discussion. Just make sure that you are raising the fact that the STATEMENT bothers you, not the person who made the statement
  - **To the person directly**: if you feel comfortable, you can talk to the person who made the statement after the discussion is over
  - **Talk to the instructor**: you can send an email or talk to the instructor in person.
- **Respond in some way**. You have the right to feel safe in your learning environment, and we will all learn more if you bring your concerns forward.

What kinds of things can I say in a discussion?

- **Ask a clarifying question.** If you are unsure about something in the material, chances are, several other people are too. Try, “I wasn’t clear on what \_\_\_\_\_ meant—does anyone else know?”
- **Identify an argument**—this might provoke more discussion than you expect. “I think article X is making the point \_\_\_\_\_. Does that seem right to the group?”
- **Put the articles in conversation with each other** “article X seems to contradict article Y, do you think these authors disagree?” or “article X provides evidence that supports the theory in article Y. That makes me think article Y is onto something.”
- **Critique an idea!** This is a very popular way to participate in a discussion. Here are some things you might object to in an article:
  - The argument is not logical
  - The evidence does not support the argument
  - The evidence is biased or inaccurate
  - The tone of the article is not appropriate for an academic setting
  - You have other evidence that contradicts what is being said in the article
  - The author has not taken some factor into account when making his/her argument
- **Say what you liked about the article.** This could be:
  - A compelling or interesting form of evidence
  - An argument that made you think differently than you had previously
  - Something that surprised you
- **Apply the argument to a real-world example.** This is a good way to test an argument. For example, take an article written in the 1970s and apply it to a contemporary example. How does the theory hold up in this context? Or take an article written for the U.S. context and apply it to an example based in another country.
- **Ask a question of a classmate.** The best discussions occur when people are talking with each other, not over each other. Respond to a point your classmate made. Ask a clarifying question, respectfully disagree with a point they made, or extend their argument using an example.
- **Synthesize the discussion.** Often, there are many points and perspectives flying around the room during a discussion. Simply saying what you are hearing can help direct the conversation.