

Common Challenges in Discussion Participation

And Strategies to Overcome Them

Many classes require students to participate in discussions. But how do you participate effectively?

Issue1: Disconnected ideas

Often students make comments that do not have a clear connection to the previous comment made, making the discussion seem disjointed. A variation on this issue is that students may focus on responding to the professor rather than to the broader discussion in the class. Instead, when you respond to a peer's comments, try:

- Agreeing or disagreeing with the comment and clearly explaining why.
- Asking a question about the comment; seek elaboration or clarification as appropriate.
- Providing an example, drawing from class readings, outside sources, or your own experience.
- Making a connection; help your classmates see how you connect ideas.
- Contributing a new idea; just be sure that you are clear in how your new idea contributes to the discussion (don't presume connections you made in your head are clear to others).

Issue2: Wandering attention

In focusing on what you want to say, you may stop following the thread of the conversation. Then, your response may seem unrelated to what is happening at the time you speak. To help with this problem, consider jotting down your idea or question. You can then pay attention to the discussion while keeping track of what you wanted to say or ask. If your mind tends to wander in general, you may find that jotting down notes throughout the discussion about what others are saying will help you stay focused on what is being said.

Issue3: Rambling responses

Avoid dominating the conversation by keeping your responses succinct. It may help to think of each comment as its own mini speech or essay. You should state the point clearly up front, support it with some evidence, and then summarize at the end. It should be clear to others when you are done speaking, rather than simply trailing off.