

Raise Your Voice! How to Speak Up in Class

From the Academic Advising Office, Grinnell College

JRC 3rd floor, x3702 [advising]

When you take a class you sign up to be a member of a “mini community” with a responsibility to everyone. When class participation is strong, students learn more (and enjoy class more!), but everyone must do his, her or his part. If you stay silent, you're not living up to your responsibility. That said, not everyone finds class participation easy. It's not! Speaking up requires preparation and active engagement on many levels. **Fortunately, participating in class a skill that can be (and should be) developed.**

BEFORE CLASS

1. Get prepared! While you are reading for class, note things you want to add to the discussion. Make note of things that...
 - you find interesting,
 - get to the point of the passage,
 - the author uses to support their argument,
 - are debatable,
 - apply to other readings,
 - are questionable about author's position, and/or
 - could lead to an interesting discussion.

Write your questions and ideas in a specific place in your notes so you'll have them for class.

2. Sit in the “best location for listening, asking questions, seeing visual materials, and discussing”— not only with teachers but with classmates also.

DURING DISCUSSION

Active Participation

1. Don't be afraid that you will sound ignorant. If you are prepared, you won't.
2. Jot down thoughts and questions as they come to you, and refer back to these ideas when speaking.
3. Take a second to think through what you will say before you say it.
4. Speak in the first five minutes of the discussion. Once you break the ice it will be easier to speak again. If you are bold enough to be the first to contribute, even better, because then the topic will be one that you want to talk about!
5. Be bold: It's okay and beneficial to the discussion to have a differing opinion than everyone else or offer a different perspective
6. Your spoken thought can be based on the text, other readings, class discussions, library sources, experts in the topic, and your own opinion.
7. Evaluate as you listen: Has something been left out? Has the discussion digressed from stated objectives?
8. A question is just as valuable as an opinion or example. It shows you are trying to understand and be understood. Plus, it is likely that others share your question.
9. The opposite of talking is listening. Listening is very important to good discussion skills. Listen to and try to understand others' opinions. Respect others' opinions and insist on them respecting yours.
10. Speaking up can be more than voicing one's own opinion – asking questions of classmates, presenting problems for discussion, suggesting evidence that works for or against someone else's comments, and so on, are approaches that can lead to effective contributions.

Speaking Effectively

1. Help maintain the thread of the discussion. Use transition phrases that acknowledge the previous speaker (or someone who has contributed recently) to introduce your idea: "I can appreciate that Dan points out _X_, but I think that ..." or "This kind of relates to what Jessica said," or, "I agree with Roberto because..."
2. Introduce your contribution with a quick summary of the discussion or point... "As I understand it..." or restate the author's main idea.
3. Ask for feedback after you have commented: "Does that make sense?"
4. It is not a speed test. Feel free to look at your notes or thoughts you jotted down before raising your hand.

GET HELP FROM YOUR PROFESSOR

1. If you have trouble participating voluntarily, meet with your professor outside of class. Talk about what is causing difficulty with participating in the course. If it's shyness, you can ask your professor to call on you. If you're having difficulty with the material, thus making it difficult to talk, ask if it would be ok once or twice to meet during office hours before class to talk about the material and/or send your instructor some thoughts before class. Perhaps with this extra assurance that you're "on the right track" you can feel more comfortable chiming in.
2. If called on, it's okay to ask the professor to give you a few moments to think and to come back to you.
3. Ask your professor for an evaluation of your class participation throughout semester.

ADVICE FOR FACILITATING DISCUSSION

1. Convey some questions in advance so people can think about them.
2. Structure an activity that facilitates discussion of the material such as talking in small groups first, for example.
3. Try to create a relaxed atmosphere in which emphasis is on the exchange of ideas and not right or wrong answers.
3. Call on people in a friendly way.
4. Don't just rely on people with their hands raised.

This handout was initially developed by Latona Giwa '09, in Fall 2006. Ideas and edits provided by: Dotty Slick, formerly of Intercultural Affairs; Darren Gallant and Joyce Stern, Academic Advising; The Voicebox; Jon Andelson, Anthropology, Nancy Hayes, formerly of the Education department, and Erik Simpson, English. Also drawn from Bookwolf Reference Study Guide—Classroom Participation, www.bookwolf.com, Study Guide Strategies, www.studygs.net/instudy.htm, and Class Participation Tips, collegeuniversitysuite101.com/article.cfm/class_participation_tips.