Dealing with questions

Be honest if you don’t know the answer to a question asked by the seminar leader or a group member. If you have nothing relevant to say, there is no need to pretend, but just saying “I don’t know” won’t help either. Opening the question out to the rest of the group may spark a discussion and help you (and others) build a better understanding.

Try some of these:

- Ask for clarification – you can repeat or paraphrase the question, or pose questions of your own to get more information, such as “Do you mean...?” or “Could you give an example of...?”
- You could try to steer your response to something you have read or are confident about, such as “I’m not sure about that, but what I do think is...” or “I haven’t thought about that particular point, but something related to it is...”
- Try opening the question out to the rest of the group by asking “What do people think about this...?” or “What are other people’s thoughts on...?”

Top Tip: Rather than waiting to be put on the spot by a seminar leader, get in first by making a contribution or asking a question of your own. If you have already spoken, they are less likely to choose you.

For more information....

See Lectures, seminars & group work 1. Getting the most from lectures
See Lectures, seminars & group work 3. Effective group work

Study Advice and Maths Support

Getting the most from seminars

Lectures, seminars & group work 2

This guide offers advice on how to learn effectively in seminars and how to speak confidently in groups.

- What are seminars for?
- Before, during, after
- Speaking in groups
- Dealing with questions

What are seminars for?

Seminars are a way of learning by discussing and sharing ideas in groups.

Seminars are a chance to:

- Discuss theories and ideas in more detail than in lectures
- Gain new perspectives and points of view from other people
- Try out your ideas and get feedback
- Develop your skills at giving and receiving constructive criticism

You are not alone...

Many people feel anxious about seminars: nervous of speaking in front of a group; concerned about being asked a question and put on the spot; afraid of being ridiculed if you do speak, or being left out of groups.

Remember: Seminars are not there to test how much you already know about a subject, they are there to help you learn more.

For more on this and other aspects of academic study, see our website at www.reading.ac.uk/studyadvice

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Before, during, after

Preparing for the seminar helps you feel more able to contribute. Spending time afterwards going over what you have learned helps you retain the ideas.

Before the seminar:

- Ensure you have done any tasks or reading that was set
- Think about the topic – what is interesting, surprising, confusing?
- Find connections with other seminars and lectures on your course
- Think of a few points you can raise or questions to ask

Doing the set reading is essential, but you don’t have to read everything in the same depth. If you have limited time, skim over everything, then pick one passage or article to become more expert on – discussing this can be your contribution to the seminar.

During the seminar:

- Be open to new ideas and perspectives
- Jot down any useful information or questions you have
- If you don’t understand something, ask – it is likely that others will be glad you asked
- Link what you hear to what you already know – make connections
- Raise points that interest you – they don’t have to be perfectly formed, as seminars are an ideal place to try out new ideas
- Try to include others by asking open questions, such as “What did other people think about…”

Seminars are collaborative, not a competition. Don’t be put off by people who always have a lot to say - good group dynamics needs a mixture of styles and roles. Speaking too much can be unhelpful if it takes over the discussion or if everyone comes to rely on that person always to speak.

After the seminar:

- Go over your notes, add any new thoughts or ideas, and file them somewhere you can find them when you need them for revision
- Make sure you know exactly what you need to do to prepare for next time and put reminders in your diary

Speaking in groups

Speaking in a group of people you may not know well is something many people find difficult. Having some strategies to deal with your anxiety and work on your contributions will help.

In general:

It will help to get to know the other group members, so that you feel more at ease. Sit next to someone you find reassuring.

Set yourself a target to speak at least once in each seminar. Start small - saying “yes” in response, or repeating a question for clarification. Once you have done this it will be easier to speak next time.

When preparing to speak:

- Write down what you want to say and if necessary read it out
- Find an example or evidence to support your point
- Breathe out more slowly if you feel anxious

When speaking:

- Speak clearly and sufficiently loudly – people will be more sympathetic if they can hear and understand easily
- Smile and make eye contact with people to engage them with what you are saying
- Take your time when speaking – aim to talk a little more slowly than usual to avoid rushing if you are nervous
- Be brief: Make your point and then stop – avoid going back over what you’ve said
- Be clear: If something sounds confused you can always say “I’ll make that clearer” or check if people have understood
- Don’t apologise – it will make you seem less authoritative. Act confident, even if you don’t feel it!

Top tip: Aim to state your view near the beginning of a seminar as it is easier to make an original contribution before the discussion is in full swing.

After speaking:

- Congratulate yourself on any progress
- Keep any mistakes in proportion – it’s not the end of the world
- Set a target for the next seminar