LECTURES AND SEMINARS

While few people would see university now as being about tutors imparting wisdom to their unquestioning pupils, a great deal of university teaching still takes place in lectures and seminars. So it'll be important for your study success to know how to get the most out of these. Participation in seminars may even be assessed, so thinking ahead about strategies to deal with speaking and listening in groups can be especially important. Browse these pages and the useful links provided to help you develop your skills for dealing with lectures and seminars.

Getting the most from your lectures

Lectures are an efficient way of reaching a large group so they are common at university. Students sometimes fail to get the most from lectures because they misunderstand their purpose and expect to be given all the answers.

Lectures are designed to:
* Give a way in to a topic - an intro or overview
* Summarise the key ideas, principles, or controversies
* Stimulate your own thinking
* Provide you with reading and ideas to follow up afterwards

You might think of lectures like the warm-up stretches you do to prepare yourself before playing sport or doing exercise. You need them to get moving, but you then go on to do more active training (or studying).

Preparing for your lectures

Coming into a lecture unprepared - especially if it is on an entirely new topic - can soon leave you struggling to follow the lecturer and awash in a sea of unfamiliar terms and ideas.

Doing a little preparation beforehand can help you follow the lecture by giving you a basic framework onto which you can hang all the new information.

Things you could do before a lecture:
* Look at the lecture title and outline to see the basic content
* Get any handouts from Blackboard and skim through them
* If it is a new topic, find an overview on the web or in a textbook
* Think about how this lecture fits into the whole module and with previous lectures
* Think - what do you want to find out from this lecture?

….and of course get all the pens, paper, and equipment you need, and set yourself a reminder alarm if you are likely to forget to turn up!

If you have dyslexia, or find it hard to follow lectures, then preparation before is really beneficial - make sure you get to see any handouts in advance and also look up unfamiliar terms.

What to avoid…

There is no need to do a lot of extra reading before your lectures. This is unnecessary and inefficient, as you may duplicate what is covered in the lecture anyway, or go off on the wrong track. Remember lectures are your introduction to a topic, so save in-depth reading for afterwards.

Active listening and note-making

Lectures can involve a lot of multi-tasking: you have to listen, comprehend, understand, interpret, and write down information, often all at once! So it will help to have strategies which will keep your mind active and organised.
Listening:

Listening and understanding are often more important than trying to take lots of notes. Focus on the lecturer rather than having your head down scribbling notes.

* Listen actively by thinking about what you are hearing. What questions are raised? Do you agree with what is being said? What evidence is there to support this? Does it link to anything you have come across before?

* Think about the preparation you have done: what are you hearing that links to this? Or says something different?

* Look for clues: if the lecturer lists, repeats, or summarises something it is likely to be important. Pay attention to the lecturer’s introductions and conclusions, as these also tell you what is important.

* If you lose track of what is being said, don’t just switch off or worry about what you may have missed. Listen carefully to the next section of the lecture - you may even find that you can work out what you’ve missed.

Note-making:

Develop a system for taking notes that works for you. You might use abbreviations, colour, keywords, and pictures - whatever makes your notes meaningful. If you have handouts, find a way of annotating them or writing notes that link to them.

* Resist the temptation to transcribe every word the lecturer says - this won’t help you understand. Leave your pen on the desk and only pick it up when there is something important to note down.

* Spider diagrams can be a good way to show connections and avoid transcribing everything.

* Note down your own thoughts as you go: for example, ideas to follow-up later or parts you don’t understand that you need to read more about. Make it clear which are your own ideas - perhaps underline or circle them?

* Finally, leave some spaces so you can add to your notes later and fill in any gaps.

For more on this, see our guide to Effective note-taking.

To record or not to record…

Recording lectures can be a useful back-up to taking notes in the lecture in case you miss something. However you will find it very time-consuming if you try to transcribe everything afterwards - not an efficient use of your time! If you have a counter on the recorder, you can note down the times of key information to find it later. If you have a reported specific learning difficulty like dyslexia, you may have been advised to record lectures, but it will still help you to engage with the lecture if you expect to write some notes at the time. It’s courteous to let the lecturer know that you’re recording.

Reviewing and retaining information

How long do you think you retain information after a lecture? If you simply put your notes away and don’t look at them again, it is likely you will forget about 80% of the lecture within as little as a week.

So what can you do after a lecture to help you remember?

* Soon after the lecture, spend a little time thinking about and writing what you have learnt without consulting your notes. This gets your brain to process the information and makes a good basis for revision notes later.

* Talk with friends - check what you understood and compare what you found out…it’s a good chance to have a coffee too!

* Skim over your notes - identify any gaps you need to fill, then do some extra reading to fill them!

* Do a coversheet or spider diagram summarising the key points of the lecture as a trigger when it comes to revising.

* Have a simple and easy to use filing system so you can find everything again e.g. a box file for each module.

Top Tip: Copying your notes out neatly afterwards is quite passive and won’t necessarily help you to remember or process what you’ve heard. Try something more active and effective, like making your notes into a spider diagram, a series of flash cards, or a poster.
Getting the most from your seminars

Participating in seminars and working with other students is an important part of university study which usually involves group discussion of material presented either in a lecture or in set reading.

Seminars:
* Offer opportunities to think about and discuss theories and issues in more detail than lectures allow.
* Encourage the sharing of ideas and enable you to gain extra perspectives and points of view, which otherwise you might not have considered.
* Help to clarify your own thinking through providing an environment in which you can ask and answer questions.
* Enable you to develop skills in giving and receiving constructive criticism.

You are certainly not alone if you have any of the following worries about seminars:
* Fear of speaking out in a group, particularly among strangers.
* Having nothing to say or being ridiculed by others for what you do say.
* Being 'put on the spot' and embarrassed by not knowing the answer.
* Fear of being left out when told to get into groups.

Developing your skills in working with others and in orally presenting material will help you to take a full and active part in seminar groups. Participation in seminars is sometimes assessed, so it's a good idea to think ahead about how to develop your skills in this area. Being well prepared and knowing something of how a group works will help you to feel less concerned, and to get the most out of your seminars.

Preparing for seminars
You will get more out of any seminar if you do some preparation for it, and spend some time going over what you've learned afterwards.

Before the seminar
* Ensure you have done any tasks agreed for the group.
* Read around the subject. Think about it.
* What questions do you want answered?

During the seminar...
* Be open to hearing something new.
* Jot down useful information.
* Jot down questions to ask.
* If you don't understand something, ask.
* Link what you hear to what you already know.
* Make contributions – for example, raise points that interest you
* BUT try to get others involved too - ask open questions: "did anyone else think that....?"

After the seminar...
* Go over your notes and summarise them. Add any new details and thoughts.
* Make sure you know exactly what you have to do for next time – put new tasks in your diary.

Speaking up in a group
One of the things about seminars that causes anxiety is the idea of speaking out in a group of people that you may not know well, or at all. Working out some strategies beforehand will help you to deal with this anxiety.
* Get to know other group members if possible, so that you feel more at ease.
* Make a decision to speak at least once during the group – even if it is only to hear yourself say 'yes' out loud or ask someone to repeat a point that you don't quite understand. Build up from a small base.

When preparing to speak...
* Sit next to somebody you find reassuring.
* Write down what you want to say – if necessary read it out.
* Think of an example or evidence to support your point.
* If you are nervous, breathe out slightly more slowly than usual.

* When speaking...

  * State your view at the beginning of the seminar before the debate is in full swing.
  * Take your time when speaking – aim to speak more slowly than you feel necessary.
  * Make eye contact with at least one person in your audience.
  * Smile!
  * Be brief. When you have made your point – stop. Avoid going back over what you have already said.
  * Be clear. If something sounds confused, say 'I'll make that clearer', or check people have understood.
  * Speak up so everyone can hear. If people have to strain to hear you, they will be less sympathetic to what you are saying – and you may have to say it all over again.
  * Don't apologise – your audience will lose confidence in you.
  * Act as though confident, even if you don't feel it.

* After the group

  * Congratulate yourself on any progress.
  * Keep any mistakes or stumbling in proportion – it is not the end of the world.
  * Decide what you will do next time.

* Dealing with questions

Be honest if you don't know the answer to a question asked by other members of the group or by the seminar leader. Similarly, if you have nothing relevant to say on a point, there is no need to pretend.

Some of the following strategies might also help when dealing with questions you are unsure of:

  * Ask for clarification before you answer a question. You can do this by asking your own questions, repeating or paraphrasing (putting it into your own words) the question. For example, "Do you mean...?" "Could you provide an example?"
  * You could try to steer your response to what you have read or are interested in e.g. "I'm not exactly sure about that but what I do think is..."; "I haven't thought about that particular point but related to it is the idea that..."
  * Try redirecting the question back to the individual (e.g. "What do you think about that?") or to the class. This ensures that everyone has heard the question and may provoke class discussion around the issue.
  * Don't be put off or intimidated by people who always have something to say or are quick to respond. Good seminar participation does not depend on the frequency or length of your remarks; in fact this can be quite disruptive if other people feel excluded or begin to rely on one person for keeping the discussion going.

REMEMBER:

- It is the quality not the quantity of comments that matter in a seminar discussion; interesting and relevant points are the most valuable.
- Seminars aren't to test how much you know on a subject, but to help you learn about it.

* Developing your speaking and listening skills

To really make the most of seminars you will need to both participate in the discussion and listen to others.

* How to improve your speaking skills...

Do you talk to people or at people?

- People who talk at you are listening to themselves; they leave no space for a response.
- People who talk to you consider you and your response carefully.

What you can do:

  * Contribute to the discussion - but don't dominate it
  * Ask questions – but not too many
  * Speak to everyone in the group, not just particular individuals.
* Indicate when you agree with someone's point: 'So do I...', 'Yes, that's true...'

* If you disagree with something, instead of just rejecting the other person's ideas, explore them: 'What makes you think that...?', 'Have you thought about...?'

* Acknowledge your own errors and apologise: 'Sorry, my mistake'; 'Oh, I see! I misunderstood...'

How to improve your listening skills...

How well do you listen?
- Do you take in what other people say?
- Do you give others room to speak?
- Do you use encouraging non-verbal signals?
- Do you 'switch off' when bored or if you dislike the person?

If you struggle to tune in to speakers try some of the following techniques:

* Consider the speaker's feelings

* Focus on the content; think of some way it could be of value to you

* Listen for key words and jot them down

* Link what they are saying to something you already know

* Think of a question you could ask (when they have finished speaking)

This guide reproduces the text of our LibGuide on Lectures and Seminars. The online guide has links to additional information and can be found at:

https://libguides.reading.ac.uk/lectures

For tips and guidance on other academic skills, see the Study Advice website at

www.reading.ac.uk/library/study-advice