

# Tips for Class Discussion

*“At Reed we follow an unconventional tack, and we do so self-consciously. To be sure, there are as many kinds of Reed conferences as there are Reed professors. But they all tend to share this belief: that...education is most effective when students develop, articulate, criticize, and defend their own arguments... Students—all of whom have a comparatively limited acquaintance with the subject matter—are responsible, through discussion, for formulating and evaluating theories and interpretations. Understood in this way, education at Reed is an eminently practical activity because it gives students systematic and ongoing experience in the actual practice of making and evaluating arguments.”*

--Peter Steinberger, former Dean of Faculty and current Professor of Political Philosophy

Participating in conference is an essential part of the Reed educational experience. Like writing or researching, contributing to conference is a skill you can develop. Here are some tips to help you meaningfully engage in class discussion.

## Come to Class Prepared

- Do as much of the reading as you can.
- While reading, write down observations or questions.
- Bring these notes to class and review them just before class starts.
- You can practice speaking in class by talking to classmates, peers, and/or tutors about the material *before* you get to class.

## Listen Respectfully

- You shouldn't expect to speak more than a handful of times per class period, so listening is key.
- While listening, demonstrate your engagement with non-verbal communication cues: sit up (don't slide back in your chair), look at the speaker, nod when you agree, and monitor your facial expressions.
- If you think of something to say but the timing isn't quite right, write it down so you don't forget. You may be able to bring it up later, either in discussion or during a visit to your professor's office.
- If your learning style permits you to take notes while listening, do so.

## Speak with Confidence

- When you speak, do so loudly, clearly, and slowly.
- Avoid speaking with food or gum in your mouth. Don't cover your mouth with your hand while talking.
- Make eye contact with your classmates and professor.
- If you're asking a question, be sure to demonstrate that you're paying attention to the answer.

## But what I am going to say?

### Asking Questions

Asking questions is a valuable way to contribute; it shows you're listening, interested, and trying to learn. There are several kinds of questions.

- Clarifying questions: "I'm not sure I understood your last point. Can you explain what you mean by xyz?" or "I think the author is trying to say abc. Is that right?"
- Relevancy questions: "How does this (argument, thesis, example, etc.) relate to that (previous discussions, other readings, purpose of the course, etc.)?"
- Application questions: "If we assume xyz is true, what impact does that have on abc?"

### Facilitating Conversation

You can also contribute to class discussion by steering the conversation along. The professor isn't the only person responsible for facilitating! You can:

- Point out when you think debaters have common ground: "Even though Justina and Natalie seem to disagree, they both assume that xyz is true."
- Bring the discussion back to the text: "Where did you find evidence of that in the reading?" or "I'd like us to talk more about what the author meant in this passage."
- Remind the class about agreed upon community norms or definitions: "We agreed to offer positive feedback before disagreeing with each other" or "I thought we made a distinction between *gender* and *sex* but I notice that some of us are using those terms interchangeably."
- Get things back on track: "We've steered far away from our original question about xyz. Can we go back to that?"

### Expressing Your Point of View

While listening, asking questions, and facilitating conversation are all legitimate ways to participate, you should work toward developing speaking skills that enable you to express your opinion, offer your analysis, and make/defend an argument.

- You can use someone else's comments as a jumping-off point: "I agree (or disagree) with Lucy, because..." or "I think Max's interpretation left out xzy..."
- Remember to limit your comments to fit the class objectives. If you choose to share a personal story, be sure it relates to the course material.
- Just like in writing, your argument will be stronger if you have some evidence to back it up. Be prepared to defend your claim with a reference to the text, to agreed upon facts or concepts from the course, or with uncontroversial common knowledge.
- Be prepared for someone to disagree with you! It doesn't mean your contribution was a failure—sometimes talking in class is a chance to try out ideas that you might later develop further or discard entirely. It's all part of the learning process.

## **Other ways to work on your class discussion skills**

### **Talk to Yourself!**

It might feel a little silly, but you can rehearse your arguments by speaking them out loud when no one is around. Don't just think about it—say it. You'll quickly realize how different it is to speak than to think.

### **Study Groups/Informal Conversations**

Make it a habit to chat about your readings, assignments, and previous class discussions with your friends and classmates. The more you practice talking about academic subjects, the easier it will get.

### **MRC (Multicultural Resource Center)**

The MRC is a place where students get together to have conversations about race, class, gender, identity, and current events. As you might imagine, some of these discussions turn into debates. Stop by to participate or to listen.

### **Tutors**

Working one-on-one or in a small group with a tutor is a great way to practice for class discussion. Try out an argument, practice new vocabulary, or explain something out loud to make sure you understand what you want to say in class. You might want to schedule individual tutoring appointments for just before class so that you're warmed up a bit. Tutors don't have all the answers, but they're excited about the material and enjoy talking to students about concepts, interpretations, and arguments.

### **Office Hours**

Show that you are actively engaged in a class by visiting your professor's office hours. *Every student should be using office hours for every class!* You can bring questions or observations about readings, assignments, or class discussion. If you're not used to visiting professors in their offices, you can start by talking to them right at the end of class and walking back to their office together, schedules permitting.