

Seminar Class Success

Seminar classes are classes in which the majority of time is devoted to discussion and student participation. Seminar classes hone students' presentation and critical thinking skills, and they provide opportunities to apply learning. Most graduates consider seminar classes to be some of the most potent learning experiences of their university career. Learning in a seminar class, however, requires a different set of skills than learning in a lecture or a one-to-one tutorial.

Participation

Seminar classes do not work if students do not participate; therefore, students have to take responsibility for their participation. If you think a seminar is boring, you should review your own participation. The following are some suggestions to maximize seminar class participation and success:

- Answer or attempt to answer questions from the instructor or other students. Discussion is a primary goal of the seminar format.
- Ask questions of the group. Asking questions can draw others into the discussion ("I find this concept intriguing, but can it feasibly be applied?"). Asking questions or exploratory comments can also be appropriate when a question is vague ("Perhaps this question is actually two separate issues.").
- Do not be afraid to disagree. The discussion that springs from disagreement can be uncomfortable, but it can also be very productive. For some questions there are no right answers; exploring a question from different perspectives can result in a much more nuanced understanding.
- Give positive feedback to the seminar leader. ("Thanks for that down-to-earth example. It makes the concept much clearer.")
- Help keep the session organized. ("We seem to have moved from Question 1 to Question 3. What about Question 2?"). Draw attention to the process of the seminar. ("Our purpose in this seminar was to provide examples of situational ethics in our university experience. Are we still doing that?")

Preparation

In order to get the most out of a seminar, you have to be prepared.

- Read all of the assigned readings, and finish any associated assignments.

- If you do not understand everything within the readings, find other background sources to fill in your gaps in knowledge.
- Take some time immediately before the seminar to review the readings.
- Bring the readings and your notes to the seminar to use as references.
- Create handouts if you are leading a seminar; they help keep the group on task.

Some questions to consider while preparing:

- What are the most important concepts or facts? Why are they important?
- What do you agree or disagree with? More importantly, what do you have mixed feelings about that you would like to sort out?
- What do you not understand? Why? Do you need a broader perspective? Are you lacking some background knowledge?
- How does the material relate to the rest of the course?
- How does the material relate to your experience?

Challenges

Personal attacks are not acceptable in a seminar class. The goal is to explore topics in detail using reasoning and facts, not to “win.” Referring to personal beliefs or personalizing the discussion (e.g., “I cannot accept this outcome because I believe in Creationism.”) makes the debate personal and should be avoided. Debate around contentious issues can be uncomfortable, and many students will not participate out of concern that their views and comments may be perceived as prejudiced or ignorant. Students should not be afraid to address controversial or unpleasant topics or to follow unpopular arguments. A skilled leader will facilitate these discussions and define the boundaries of what is acceptable in the seminar.

Sometimes specific students dominate the conversation. The following are three scenarios that can lead to this outcome:

- Some students appear to be dominating the discussion because of a lack of participation from other students.
- Some students are used to a more aggressive style of interaction and aggressively pursue lines of reasoning to satisfaction. These types of interactions are not personal attacks but can lead to heated discussions. Excessive aggression is unacceptable, but false consensus and agreement are equally undesirable.
- Some students lack the appropriate social awareness to understand they are taking up an inappropriate amount of the discussion time. In this case, the leader is responsible for enforcing the guidelines for the seminar.