Making Effective Comments in Class Discussions: Best Practices

Your Work Outside the Classroom Influences What You Can Say in the Classroom

• First, diagnose what is keeping you from commenting in class (shyness, anxiety, language issues, an intimidating professor, cultural or classroom dynamics, not understanding what the class discussion is demanding?). Once you do this, you’ll be well on the way to a solution!
• Write comments about the materials down before class and use them to prepare your class commentary. Practice these comments as necessary. In other words, “prepare” to make “off-the-cuff” remarks—everyone else does!
• Discuss classes with friends (“What did you get out of that class”) to prepare for talking in class. And you’ll make friends by talking to them about classes!
• Ask the professor outside of class about the expectations for class participation and what types of comments are productive for the class discussion. Remember: even if they are intimidating in class, professors might be much more approachable in person.
• Overall: Think of the classroom as one, but not the only, venue for the class.
• Dealing with intimidating professors: Decide how much you are invested in them before you have conversations with them in person about problems with class discussions (your own or the class as a whole). If invested enough in that professor, ask them the questions you need to ask; if not, ask those questions to fellow class members.
• Dealing with annoying class members who “hijack” the conversation: if you confront them in class, arrange in advance to have someone back you up with additional comments. Also, consider talking to the professor about the issue.

Strategies for Helping You Contribute Productively to Class Discussions

• Get used to jumping in when there is an opportunity to speak.
• Say something in the first week or two of class, just to get yourself in the habit (and everything else you say will improve on that!).
• If shy about speaking, position yourself in the classroom so that a friendly colleague is in your main field of vision. Direct your comments to them.
• Ask a student who brings in outside reading to clarify their comments to help yourself and other people in the class understand those materials.
• If you don’t have an original “take” on something, (a) summarize the class conversation (this is useful for all the class members), (b) do work connecting that week’s readings to previous week’s readings, or (c) bring the class back to an analysis of the materials on the syllabus for that week.
• The more honest, supportive, and intellectually generous you are in discussions, the more others might be. Your tone and actions in class can influence other people’s behaviors in class.
• Take cues from classroom responses to your comments when deciding how much you should talk and what kinds of comments are productive.