Intro to In-Class Discussions

Responding to Questions

Stay on topic. Try to answer the exact question your professor asked. If no one is speaking, but you have an answer to a similar question, you can address that instead with your professor’s permission.

“I don’t have an answer to that question, but I have a similar question I’d like to discuss.”

Avoid repeating the same sentiment as your peers. If you agree with someone’s statement, find another way to back it up either with a text you are discussing or another example.

“I agree with Veronica, but for a different reason. I’d like to show you this section of the chapter on page 86 that also demonstrates her point.”

If you disagree with someone, do it politely. If you’re bringing the topic up for debate, then you should have evidence of why you disagree with someone’s viewpoint to direct the class to.

“I see where John is going with his argument, but I actually disagree. On Wednesday we covered this topic, and I feel like it’s really pointing in a different direction because of X, Y and Z.”

Your professor might expect the class to generate a discussion without her interference. If so, you’ll need to be prepared with strategies to come up with questions on the fly.

Have evidence ready when you ask a question. This could be a passage from the novel the class is reading, a concept from your textbook, or a specific (if hypothetical) scenario.

“On page 45, Jane tells us that the ghost walks through a wall. Why, then, did the same ghost knock over a chair on page 62? Is it a flaw in the characterization, or is something bigger going on?”

Be sure your questions elicit a discussion, not just a one-word, or “yes/no” response.

“What do you think the purpose of Hamlet’s soliloquy is?” Instead of “Did you find Hamlet’s soliloquy interesting?”

Write down your ideas as you come up with them. That way, you’ll have an easier time remembering your comment once you have a chance to speak.

Asking Questions
Avoid the word “interesting” (as in, “I found this passage/concept/idea interesting.”). The word is an overused catch-all or students who aren’t exactly sure what they want to discuss.

If you’re pointing to a specific concept or quoting from a book, let your peers know the page number before you read it or get into your explanation. This will allow for a very specific and more informed discussion.

Avoid “bunny trails.” Discussions are meant to promote creative thought and engage students by encouraging them to draw connections between concepts. However, there’s a difference between discussing a topic related to the original question and bringing up a topic from several weeks prior or one that only you can speak to. If you have to spend more than 30 seconds to explain the connection, then it’s probably too far off topic to be useful.

What to do if:

The conversation moves away from something you wanted to comment on.
As soon as possible (without interrupting anyone) draw the class’s attention back to the subject you want to speak about.

“Before we move too far along, I had a comment about what we were talking about a few minutes ago that I think is worth discussing.”

Someone monopolizes the conversation.
If one person is speaking for so long that everyone else has lost interest and no one can contribute to any type of conversation, it’s your professor’s job to step in. If they do not, the best you can do is wait for your classmate to become self-aware. It’s likely you’ll appear rude for interrupting them.

Someone interrupts you (when you haven’t been monopolizing the conversation).
Let them finish, and then address the class again, from where you left off.

“I wasn’t quite finished earlier, and I just wanted to be sure I had made my position clear before we move on.”

A classmate misinterprets your contribution.
Let them finish, and then clarify your position.

“Actually, that’s not exactly what I meant, so let me try to rephrase my point.”

Your professor misinterprets your contribution.
Sometimes a professor sees the bigger picture and will expand on what you were saying without disagreeing with you exactly. If this happens, you may choose to agree with your professor.

If a professor misinterprets what you said in a negative way, listen to what she says, and then respectfully backtrack. You want her to know that you know your material. If you’re uncomfortable doing this in front of your peers, you could always clarify your position with her after class.

“I feel like I didn’t word what I said very well, but that’s not exactly what I meant. Let me try to rephrase my thought.”