

Class Participation: Getting Started

Say something at the first opportunity! Ask a question or answer a question (no matter how simple). The first time is the hardest and participating gets easier with practice. (Conversely, it often gets harder the longer you wait to say something.)

Get to know the students in your class. If you have talked with fellow students in an informal setting, you will probably feel more comfortable talking in front of them in the classroom.

Notice how often people survive after giving wrong answers. Look around. You are probably surrounded by people who have made mistakes and lived to tell the tale.

Be prepared for class. The people who feel most comfortable speaking in class are often the ones who have done the assigned readings and have thought about the topic in advance. Before class read, write, think and talk to others. If it helps, write your questions and ideas down on a piece of paper and refer to it in class. By using these strategies, you'll feel more confident that you understand the material and you'll therefore be more prepared to talk about it.

Sit in the front of the classroom. If looking out over a sea of faces makes you uncomfortable, try sitting in the front of the classroom. Then, when you speak, imagine you are simply talking to the instructor and a few students.

Set small, reasonable goals for participating more. If frequent participation is expected in a class, start by promising yourself that you will say one thing – answer or question – in each class. Once this feels comfortable, increase the amount you expect of yourself!

Start with a class in which you feel safe. Make your first efforts to participate in a class that feels safer. Perhaps you will choose a class with fewer students, or a class being taught by an instructor who seems particularly supportive or a class where you sit beside a good friend.

Assume people are supportive. Before speaking, imagine that everyone in the room is rooting for you. Focus on the people who seem friendly. If there are students who are not very supportive of your efforts, ignore them!

Recognize that disagreement does not have to be threatening. If others disagree with you in class, this doesn't necessarily mean that you're wrong. It doesn't necessarily mean that they're wrong either. Quite often multiple points of view are discussed in class and each point of view has merit. Even when people express themselves very strongly, they often don't mean to intimidate you; they simply want to present their own ideas firmly. Although it may sometimes feel difficult, try to think of 'disagreements' as a healthy component of discussion and recognize that this exchange of ideas and points of view encourages learning.

Separate yourself from your answer. If you do happen to give the wrong answer to a question, try not to blame yourself. Just because your answer was incorrect does not mean you are a "bad" or "stupid" person. It just means you didn't get the right answer. It may also help your instructor to understand where you're having problems, so that he or she can help you.

Ask the instructor for help. If you'd like to participate more but don't know how to get started, talk to your instructor. He or she may be able to help you in a variety of ways. By doing this you've indicated your desire to participate & your instructor will appreciate that!

Put past experiences in their place. If you've had difficulty participating in the past because of bad experiences, reflect on the differences between your past experiences and your present situation. You may realize that your fellow students are more supportive or that the situation is different in other ways. Focus on those differences when you are in class.