

Writing Sample 3 - Academic Discussion

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1 Introduction

Joseph Joubert, a French essayist and moralist, is attributed to writing the statement “The aim of an argument or discussion should not be victory, but progress”. [2] Academic discussion in its most basic form is any conversation, written or verbal, that occurs between two or more individuals on a particular topic of academic nature. As Mr. Joubert points out, an academic discussion should also be in pursuit of some form of progress, rather than for the sake of “one” individual feeling as though they have “won” the conversation. Academic discussion is a multi-phase process, which involves the collaboration and input of all parties involved. There is a science to proper academic discussion, and if all members of a group understand the proper methodology, it progresses the goals of the collective.

2 Prepare and Gather Material

When getting ready for a class, a student prepares by doing their homework or studying materials for a test; academic discussion is no different. As the Chatsworth Consulting Group, a leadership-oriented consulting firm points out, “...preparing helps you to reflect on your intentions and goals...”, giving direction to the upcoming discussion. [3]

2.1 Invitation

In the days of old, invitations to more formal academic discussions would have come in the form of a handwritten letter stamped with a wax seal. However, in the modern-day, an invitation is likely to come by **email** or some other form of a digital invite. These invitations often come with some information such as a **topic or question list**, which a participant can use in order to prepare some thoughts or main ideas to present during the future discussion. [7] It is important to also note that in a more ad-hoc academic discussion, such as those in a classroom setting, an individual can directly ask the professor or lecturer to clarify any information ahead of time. In either case, the participant should research as much information prior to the academic discussion.

2.2 Material Preparation

Academic discussion is built as a foundation of progressing research, and as such, research should be fundamental to the preparation of academic discussion. Attending lectures related to the upcoming topics, searching online for academic resources, and even created summarized notes on source information are all useful techniques. [5] It is also important to generate a **short list of relevant and thought-provoking questions** that merge well with the topic list. [1] This will help stimulate conversation and may lead to answering any initial questions addressed by the starting topics.

In the case of an **ad-hoc discussion**, one that occurs spontaneously, it may not be possible to conduct preliminary research. In this case, ask the lecturer, researcher, or professor leading the discussion for as much background as they are willing to provide before the discussion. Alternatively, during the discussion if possible, ask for clarification for any confusing statements made.

3 Pay Attention

To be able to ask someone to clarify a statement made during a discussion, the participant must be practicing **active listening**, in which the listener is taking in everything being said, free from distraction. In recent practice, various news outlets including Psychology today have warned against “*Listening to Respond*” in favor of “*Listening to Understand*”. [6]

3.1 Listening To Understand

The danger in listening to respond is that the listener is focusing all of their energy on crafting a response instead of fully taking in what the speaker has to offer. By choosing to listen to understand, the listener has time to fully digest the details of what the current speaker is saying. This can enable a discussion that prompts questions and comments that are more complex, as opposed to potentially shallow rebuttals generated when understanding is lacking.

4 Participate in the Discussion

With a clear understanding of how to listen, it is important to address exactly how to respond as well. The University of New South Wales [7] suggests to start with “smaller contributions” like the following:

1. Agree with what someone has said
2. Ask someone to expand their point
3. Ask a question prepared ahead of time

From there, UNSW suggests, a participant can move onto the following when they are more comfortable:

1. Answer a question
2. Provide an example for a point addressed
3. Disagree with what someone has said

Using any notes or thoughts gained earlier as backing, a participant gains the ability to hold their own in the discussion at hand. Through preparation work and active listening, the participant yields the ability to further understanding of the topics at hand, to the benefit of the whole group. Another item to keep in mind is that the participant should take precautions to avoid breaking up progress in the academic discussion.

4.1 Common Mistakes

Journalist Swati Mittal encourages individuals in a group discussion to “**Avoid interrupting others**” when engaging in a group discussion. [4] This is a call back to the principle of listening to understand, discussed previously. Additionally, He denotes the importance of “**[contributing] during the entire discussion**”, as opposed to just “speaking once”. [4] As a member of an academic discussion, the participant’s thoughts and opinions are desired, and as such they should attempt to contribute throughout the entire process.

5 Conclusion

Although a good academic discussion is not a victory in the traditional sense, it will yield results, ideas, and knowledge that will inspire progress in a topic of study. The principles of proper preparation, active listening, and insightful contribution build members of an academic discussion up, enabling them to take something away from their time and effort invested. Academic discussion is what begins all research projects, and the active participation in academic discussion is what enables research to continue in a methodical and scientific manner.

References

- [1] Jay Howard. How to hold a better class discussion, May 2019.
- [2] Joseph Joubert. *The Notebooks of Joseph Joubert*. New York Review, 2006.
- [3] Robyn McLeod. How To Prepare For an Important Conversation.
- [4] Swati Mittal. 10 mistakes you must avoid in a group discussion, Feb 2020.
- [5] University of Waterloo. How to hold a better class discussion, May 2019.
- [6] Caren Osten. Are you really listening, or just waiting to talk?
- [7] UNSW Sidney. Guide to Discussion Skills, Aug 2014.