

English for Classroom Discussions

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What Is This About?

Classroom discussion is simply any exchange of ideas or opinions between and among students and teachers. Participating in discussions is a valuable way not only to enhance your own learning, but also to let your instructor know that you are paying attention in class.

This handout will introduce a few sentence patterns as well as strategies for when to use them in conversation.

Let's get the conversation started!

Who Is This For?

If you struggle with participating in class, do any of these describe you?

I'm an introvert. (I feel uncomfortable being the center of attention)

I don't know enough about the subject. (I feel lost in class)

I've never been asked to participate in classes before. (I don't know how to participate)

If so, this handout is for you. If you are taking an English-taught class, looking to study abroad, or just want to improve your spoken English, you can use the patterns and strategies provided below to practice speaking in class.

The content of this handout will be most helpful if you are at an intermediate English proficiency or above. If you already feel comfortable speaking in class using English, feel free to jump below to the section on advanced strategies.



Basic Patterns

The patterns below are a good place to start for any class discussion. During a discussion, you can easily participate by agreeing, disagreeing, or asking a question.

Agreement

Agreeing or complimenting someone else's comment is one of the simplest ways you can jump into the discussion. You can start with one of the short phrases below, then add another sentence supporting why you agree.

- Exactly!
- You're right.
- I totally agree.
- Thanks for bringing that up.
- That's such a(n) good/great/insightful point.

For a more interactive discussion, try to give credit to the classmate you are agreeing with. In the sample patterns below, you can replace “___” with the word “you” or your classmate's name.

- Echoing what ___ said,
- Building on what ___ said,
- I want to expand on that a bit.
- Going off of what ___ just said,
- I just want to add on to what ___ just mentioned.

You can also mix and match any of the phrases in this section to create a customized statement. For example: **“Exactly! That's such an insightful point. Going off of what you just said...”**

Polite Disagreement

When done respectfully, disagreeing with either your teacher or classmates is a fantastic way to spark a deeper, more lively discussion. When you hear someone saying things you don't agree with, but you want to acknowledge their ideas, try starting with the following patterns.

- Yeah, but...
- I'm not sure I agree.
- Don't get me wrong, but...
- That's true, but what about...
- Not necessarily/not always.
- I see where you're coming from, but...
- You made a good point, but I'd also like to point out...



Asking Questions

Feeling lost in class? Asking questions not only helps you catch up, but benefits classmates with the same question. It also helps your instructor understand how to better guide the class.

You can use some of the patterns below when you want to clarify meaning or ask for more information from the instructor. These questions work equally as well for getting clarity in a group discussion, too.

In the patterns below, you can replace “...” for the topic or idea that was just mentioned, or simply use the word “that”. For example: “What did you mean by, ‘the death penalty is sometimes justified’? Can you say more about that?”

- **Are you saying...?**
- **What did you mean by...?**
- **Can you say more about...?**
- **Can you share an example of that?**
- **Could you be more specific about...?**
- **Sorry, I didn't catch that/Sorry, I'm not sure I'm following. Can you rephrase what you just said?**

A helpful way to clarify meaning is to repeat what someone just said using your own words. For instance, we can use the same example as above:

Jamie: **Well, I think the death penalty is sometimes justified.**

Matt: **Sorry, I'm not sure I'm following. Are you saying, there are some cases it's okay to use the death penalty as a punishment?**

Advanced Patterns

Once you feel comfortable using English to hold a conversation about an academic topic, you can even start to guide the direction of the discussion. A couple ways you can do that are: summarizing the discussion and making connections to other topics.

Summarizing a Discussion

- In conclusion...
- Can we conclude by saying...
- It sounds like we all agree that...
- It sounds like a few people think... and others think...

Making Connections

- Bring up a related concept
- We talked about this in my ___ class...
- Last semester I read an article about this issue...
- We read something about this in another class I took...

Connecting to Shared Goals

- I think this is a really great example of the course theme....
- I think this relates really well to...

Putting It All Together: Sample Dialogue



Matt, Katie, and Jamie are all taking the seminar course “Technology and Society.”

In today’s class, they are asked to discuss the following question: Should social media platforms be responsible for fake news that’s shared using their platforms?



Katie: I don’t really think so. It’s not realistic to expect social media sites like Facebook and Twitter to monitor every single post people make. Plus, it’s a violation of people’s right to speech.



Jamie: **You made a really good point,** Katie. **But I’d also like to point out** that fake news can be really dangerous for the public. So if the social media sites don’t take responsibility, who will?



Katie: The government should take responsibility for this. The government should make laws that punish people who spread fake news.



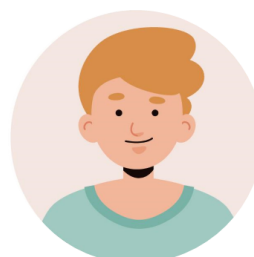
Jamie: **Yeah, but** the government doesn’t have the resources either to monitor all the posts and punish the offenders.



Matt: **Don’t get me wrong, but** I think there’s another way we can think about this. What about the technology that can prevent fake news from being shared? That way, administrators can shut down the fake news before it becomes a problem. And not just fake news, this kind of tech can filter for and protect users from receiving other types of inappropriate content, too.



Jamie: Matt, **what do you mean by,** “technology that can prevent fake news from being shared”? **Are you saying** use some kind of AI (artificial intelligence) in social media sites that detects if someone is spreading false information?



Matt: Yeah, exactly.



Katie: Hang on a minute, **could you be more specific about**, “inappropriate content”? **Could you** maybe **share an example of that?**



Jamie: Sure. Inappropriate content could refer to anything from fake news and spam, or even violent content, illegal content, or things that lead to massive public disorder. You know, for example, the January 6 mob attack on the United States Capitol Building.



Matt: **You're right!** You know, at that time I saw a lot of news saying AI technology can help predict and prevent violence. Social media sites should do more to block users who purposely want to cause trouble.



Katie: **I see where you're coming from, but** that sounds like an infringement on people's right to free speech. Shouldn't people be allowed to say what they want to online?



Jamie: Actually, **this sounds like a really great example of one of our course themes**, how technology has changed human communication. Just from our discussion, I really feel that the development of technology has totally changed the norms and expectations surrounding speech and communication. It's so different from what it was just a half century ago.



Katie: **So, can we conclude by saying**, social media technology has introduced a new set of norms for how people should participate in online speech, and how this speech should be received and regulated?



Jamie: Agreed! **Going off what you just said**, this is really a complex issue that will require individuals, tech companies, and legal advocates to come together and find a way forward.



Matt: Absolutely.



This is not an exhaustive list of references. The Center for Academic Literacy encourages you to do additional research on speaking and discussion strategies that work best for your situation. As always, we welcome you to book a one-on-one session with one of our Academic English Tutors to work on your English communication skills.

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