

Participating in Class Discussion: Contributions That Count

Participating in discussion-based classes is an unfamiliar expectation for many Princeton students. Some students have already developed strategies for effectively speaking up in class, asserting their ideas and opinions, and taking center stage, whereas others are acquiring them now. But if the aim of class discussion is to learn from others and allow them to learn from you, there are lots of contributions that count, including questioning, listening, and responding. And, there are lots of ways to make these contributions, such as those described below. Your instructor will value these, too.

- **Prepare to contribute** by carefully reviewing the syllabus and locating the current readings and topics in relation to the course as a whole. Know why you are discussing this particular topic at this juncture in the course. Use the syllabus and lecture material to generate questions and comments in advance.
- **Explicitly relate or link** your observations and comments to course objectives, central themes and main topics.
- **Ask a question** that encourages someone to clarify or elaborate on a comment.
- Make a comment to **link two people's contributions**.
- **Explain that you found another person's ideas interesting** or useful, and describe why.
- **Build on what someone else has said**. Be explicit about the way you are extending the other person's thought.
- **Paraphrase a point** someone has already made and build on it.
- **Summarize several people's contributions**, taking into account a recurring theme in the discussion. "It seems we have heard variations on two main points of view; on the one hand..."
- **Ask a question that relates to that week's course topic**--for example, "Can you explain how this example illustrates the concept (course topic) of ...?"
- Find a way to **express appreciation for the insights you have gained** from the discussion. Be specific about what it was that helped you understand something better.
- **Disagree with someone in a respectful and constructive way**. You might reflect the comment back to the speaker to indicate that you have listened well. If possible, point out what is interesting or compelling in someone's comment before explaining why and how you disagree.