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# Academic Speaking: Discussion (1)

By completing this worksheet, you should be able to:

1. Describe the structure of an academic discussion
2. Explain steps for disagreeing with others during a discussion
3. Use evidence to support your arguments

### *Part 1. Understanding academic discussion*

Academic discussion is a form of face-to-face communication. It is 'academic' in the sense that it is formalised and evidence-based. In order to achieve an effective discussion, you need to consider your audience and purpose, be polite and cooperative as well as to listen carefully.

A good member in a group discussion should follow three principles, whose acronym is PPB.

You should aim to be:

1. **P**olite – respect other people's right to their opinions and show your respect by your use of eye contact and body language
2. **P**ositive – help the conversation develop by being cooperative
3. **B**alanced – listen to both sides of the discussion and respond to each

*Activity 1. Decide if it is appropriate to do the following in a discussion.*

	Yes/No
1. Support people who share a similar opinion as you do, and reject all the ideas raised by people who have different or opposing views.	
2. Cut people off mid-sentence or talk over them to show that you are knowledgeable on the topic.	
3. Invite passive members to join the discussion.	
4. People take turns to present the points they have prepared beforehand.	
5. Take a stance and stick to it regardless of what the others say.	
6. Challenge points made by others with arguments backed up by data/facts you have found from the latest news reports.	
7. Acknowledge a point made by others and further elaborate it.	
8. Talk as much as you can to impress the examiner.	

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zw74xsg/revision/4>

[https://www.odelleducation.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/rg\\_acrg.pdf](https://www.odelleducation.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/rg_acrg.pdf)

### Phases in an academic discussion

We all have taken parts in group discussions. But if you are asked, "How many phases are there in a group discussion?" What is your answer? You may probably answer three – introduction, body and conclusion. You are not wrong, but to view it in a different way, there could be more phases than that.

### **Phase 0 Preparation**

As mentioned in the first section, an academic discussion is based on evidence. You do not just walk in the room and randomly share any ideas that pop up in your mind. Preparation is needed. You may be given some assigned readings by the professor, or you may spend time researching the topic by browsing websites on the internet or reading books and journals in a library. Or, for the very least, you would be given several minutes to organise your thoughts to select and structure some arguments.

### **Phase 1 Initiation**

It is a phase of uncertainty, as nobody knows who would initiate the discussion, or what the stance and arguments of each participant are. During this phase, someone states the topic and proposes a viewpoint and a discussion structure. Some other participants voice their opinions, this gives everyone an understanding of the group members and their views and roughly sets the direction of the whole discussion. Whereas being the one to initiate the discussion is a natural way to impress the examiner, it should be done with care. If you do it well with your data, facts, logic and your communication skills, you will give good impression on everyone. But if you start the discussion just for the sake of doing it, you may leave bad impression on others and give the other participants opportunities to 'attack' you.

### **Phase 2 Conflict**

After participants lay out their viewpoints and main arguments, disagreements naturally arise. Group members may challenge each other with the facts, data, and statistics. Conflict and competition are at its peak. Members can come up with the burning issues, and a debate takes place. The dominant view emerges and people take sides. The principles of **positive** and **polite** are especially important in this phase – to avoid developing the conflict in ideas into confrontation between people.

### **Phase 3 Collaboration - Performance**

After the power struggle, there comes a time when group members become calm and then it becomes easier to work in a group. Open communication happens between team members, and if there is any conflict, it gets resolved in a comparatively easy manner. In this phase group members begin to resolve their differences and appreciate other's skills and competence. As participants go

on inputting ideas and information or making clarifications and compromises, group members slowly and gradually move towards unanimity. Even though perhaps not all disputes may be resolved, a certain level of consensus is reached, with some reservations left.

#### **Phase 4 Closure**

While it is true that not all the group discussion reaches to a conclusion where everyone becomes assertive towards the point, but the entire discussion should still be summarized at the end. One can take the initiative to summarize the group discussion. If so, remember that no new point should be dug while summarising the group discussion. It should only be stated in a nutshell. Remember to summarise on all the main points that have been put forward, not only yours. Also should be stated would be achievements made as well as unsettled issues.

<https://www.managementstudyguide.com/group-discussion-phases.htm>

<https://www.student.unsw.edu.au/discussion-skills>

***Activity 2.** Watch a discussion between 3 students from The Education University of Hong Kong about 'E-sports' (Video A: [https://dses.eduhk.hk/?page\\_id=1587](https://dses.eduhk.hk/?page_id=1587)) and record on the phases they have gone through and also evaluate on their performance on each phase.*

<b>Phases</b>	<b>Period in the video</b>	<b>Your comments</b>
Preparation		
Initiation	Example: 0:07-1:06	
Conflict		
Collaboration		
Closure		

## *Part 2. Disagreeing without leading to confrontation*

An academic discussion is a platform for exchanging ideas. It allows the participants to explore into the discussion question. Due to people's varied academic backgrounds or life experiences, it is natural that they disagree at certain points for any given question. Disagreement is practically inevitable in academic discussions. You must be prepared for that.

When we participate in an academic discussion, we 'argue' for our own stances. Unlike the everyday connotation of the word, an academic 'argument' does not suggest any trace of hostility and in fact we should try to avoid it. To 'argue' in an academic context is to put forward an opinion through the process of reasoning, supported by evidence. Although the purpose is to persuade others, we need not 'defeat' them. It is not important who 'wins'—what matters most is the quality of the argument itself. The key words here are 'reason' and 'evidence'. You need to back up your thinking process by evidence; or, in other words, link up the evidence you have with logical steps. A discussion in essence is a conversation between people. Therefore, one does not only present his/her ideas, but needs to interact with others. In the process, one often disagrees with them. How can we do that without leading to confrontation? It relates back to the principle of 'polite' we mentioned at the beginning. More concretely, there are steps you may take:

1. Acknowledge their thoughts/ ideas
  - In an academic context, we do not argue to defeat others. We can and should side with the truth – it is perfectly fine to acknowledge the points others make with sound arguments.
2. Explain why you disagree
  - Admitting that there is some truth in others' argument is not identical to agreeing to what they say totally. You can still disagree with some parts of their arguments or have reservations about them. However, remember that you have to explain why you disagree.
3. Offer your opinion complete with reason and support
  - As we mentioned at the beginning, an academic discussion needs to be evidence-based. Just like presenting your own arguments, when you argue against (parts of) somebody's arguments, you need to present a complete thinking process, supported by adequate evidence and sound logic.

**Activity 3** Watch the discussion about E-sports. ([https://dses.eduhk.hk/?page\\_id=1587](https://dses.eduhk.hk/?page_id=1587)) Compare it with Video B. In which video do the students demonstrate better disagreement skills? Explain your judgement, using the points mentioned above or your own ideas.

Comments:

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The Education University of Hong Kong

**Activity 4** List out methods you use to prepare for group discussions (in your own discipline).

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### *Part 3. Using evidence to support your arguments*

#### **Before the discussion**

In academic discussions, we use arguments supported by evidence and reasoning to convince others. These do not come from high intelligence or sudden intuitions, but from preparation. Also, be cautious when using anecdotal evidence as that is not academic and may not be credible.

Some of the discussions can be prepared beforehand. They include but are not limited to:

##### 1. Group discussions in tutorials

They are part of the formal curriculum in an academic course and may occupy a portion of the assessment scores. You can read the textbook, required or suggested readings by the professor, or search for academic journals related to the topic beforehand. Study the important theories and data. You may take notes so that you can study them a few times before the discussion.

##### 2. Group discussions as classwork

You may be informed of them in advance or not. But they should be related to the topics being covered recently. Therefore, you can get broadly prepared, by studying learning materials e.g. lecture notes or readings given, or by visiting academic websites or governmental websites for data or current trends.

##### 3. Group discussions as part of a language exam

Usually the testing point is not on the knowledge level. Still, presenting concrete facts and data will help you convince others better. Even though you do not know what exact theme you may encounter on the exam day, there should be a list of common themes to cover. You can prepare for it by reading newspapers regularly or doing background research on the Internet or by reading books on relevant themes.

#### **During the discussion**

The more you know about the topic being discussed, the more confident you are when you put forward an argument. Facts, statistics and examples are generally powerful convincers in a discussion.

The preparation needs to be done beforehand. You cannot change your knowledge level on the spot. However, there are still things you can do on the day.

You would be given a few minutes to organize your thought after receiving the discussion topics. Use the time to brainstorm all the points you can think of. As time is very limited, focus on

developing points that you are most knowledgeable on. Try to figure out the facts and relations as well as you can. Also, try to predict what points others are likely to make, as well as your possible responses.

During the discussion itself, prepare to interact with the other participants. Academic discussions are expected to be a collaborative process. When you agree with someone, you may develop on his/her points by giving more examples or facts. When you disagree with someone, remember to acknowledge the parts that are logical and well grounded, and you may challenge them politely using the methods in the previous section. Besides, you can clarify by raising questions. Generally speaking, you can ask people about the sources of the facts they mention, the relevancy to the discussion topic or the accuracy of such information. You can point out inaccuracies in facts or logics. However, beware of biases, including your own. Don't be defensive just because someone disagrees with you. An academic discussion is a collaborative process to seek the truth, rather than a competition of stances. It is usually fine to make concessions when your opponent supports his/her point well with concrete examples and logics.

### References

<https://libraryblog.monash.edu/?p=73201>

<https://www.student.unsw.edu.au/discussion-skills>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zw74xsg/revision/4>

<https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/leadership/group-facilitation/group-discussions/main>

*Activity 5* Imagine you are going to participate in a group discussion of your major. Fill in the following table.

Topic:	
Your stance:	
Argument 1:	
Evidence(source):	
Argument 2:	



Evidence(source):	
Possible counter-argument 1:	
Evidence:	
Your Possible Response:	
Possible counter-argument 2:	
Evidence:	
Your Possible Response:	

### Vocabulary in the videos

1. **vocational (adj.)** /vəʊ'keɪ.ʃən.əl/ providing skills and education that prepare you for a job
2. **up-and-coming (adj.)** /,ʌp ən 'kʌmɪŋ/ likely to be successful and popular in the future
3. **merchandise (n.)** /'mɜːtʃəndaɪs/ things you can buy that are connected with or that advertise a particular event or organization
4. **arena (n.)** /ə'ri:nə/ an area of activity that interests the public, especially one where there is a lot of opposition between different groups or countries
5. **expertise (n.)** /,ek.spɜː'tiːz/ special skills or knowledge in a particular subject, that you learn by experience or training
6. **feasible (adj.)** /'fiːzəbl/ that is possible and likely to be achieved
7. **notion (n.)** /'nəʊʃn/ an idea, a belief or an understanding of something
8. **boom (v.)** /bu:m/ (of business/economy) to have a period of rapid growth
9. **infiltrate (v.)** /'ɪn.fil.treɪt/ to become a part of something – used especially to show disapproval
10. **collegiate (adj.)** /kə'liːdʒiət/ relating to a college or its students

### Further study

- **How to disagree with someone in group discussions** by Katie from School Habit:  
<https://schoolhabits.com/how-to-disagree-with-someone-in-group-discussions/>
- **Participating in tutorials and discussions** (from the University of Melbourne):  
<https://students.unimelb.edu.au/academic-skills/explore-our-resources/speaking-and-presenting/participating-in-tutorials-and-discussions>
- **Top Group Discussion Skills You Should Have** by Vidhi Shukla on shinelearning.com:  
<https://learning.shine.com/talenteconomy/career-help/top-group-discussion-skills/>

### Possible responses to the activities

*Activity 1. Decide if it is appropriate to do the following in a discussion.*

	Yes/No
4. Support people who share a similar opinion as you do, and reject all the ideas raised by people who have different or opposing views.	Yes
5. Cut people off mid-sentence or talk over them to show that you are knowledgeable on the topic.	No
6. Invite passive members to join the discussion.	Yes
7. People take turns to present the points they have prepared beforehand.	No
8. Take a stance and stick to it regardless of what the others say.	No
9. Challenge points made by others with arguments backed up by data/ facts you have found from the latest news reports.	Yes
10. Acknowledge a point made by others and further elaborate it.	Yes
11. Talk as much as you can to impress the examiner.	No

*Activity 2*

Phases	Period in the video	Your comments (Possible answer)
Preparation		From the students' speech, it appears that they probably have not done sufficient research before the discussion. They could not mention any concrete examples or data to support their arguments and many of the arguments are not based on evidence, but mere speculations. 'I think', 'I don't think...' and 'This is just what I think' can be heard throughout the discussion. No creditable sources or their data have been quoted.

Initiation	Example: 0:07-1:06	It is slightly informal to define the topic in terms of 'what we want'. Student A goes on in length discussing her own view without setting the structure of discussion or interacting with the others.
Conflict	1:08-5:01	Student B is blunt to comment that 'You're missing the point there'. Student A talks back saying 'I don't think you know the topic very well'. Student C interrupts her in the middle of a sentence and states her own point without addressing what the other two have said. She also bluntly responds to Student A's point, 'I think you are wrong'. In return, Student A says 'I think you are totally wrong...' The confrontation persists and they keep on ridiculing or criticising each other without reaching the last two stages or any consensus.
Collaboration		
Closure		

*Activity 4* (Possible answers)

1. Study research reports of renowned scholars
2. Study past papers
3. Study previous case reports, company financial reports, etc. (depending on your discipline)
4. Pay attention to current news all the time and do research on key points or points that interest you
5. Pay attention to important announcements and interviews from credible sources