

MAXIMIZING YOUR SUCCESS:

Graduate School Seminars

WHAT IS A SEMINAR COURSE?

Seminars differ from lectures as they are discussion-based courses. In seminars, students are expected to engage in meaningful conversation about the course material through active participation with their professors and classmates. Academic discussion can be intimidating, especially if English is not your first language. It can also be difficult to determine when, why, and how you should be speaking in class. This document will provide some valuable information to help boost your confidence and maximize your success in graduate school seminars!

BE PREPARED



Coming to class prepared is the single most important factor of success in seminar courses. You cannot make meaningful contributions to class discussions if you are not familiar with the source material. Completing all the required readings and activities ahead of time, taking diligent notes, and formulating your own ideas is the best thing you can do to increase your confidence, as you will be able to follow along with your peers without feeling lost or discouraged. When you are familiar with a topic, you are more likely to get involved and speak up during class.

FOCUS ON QUALITY NOT QUANTITY



Sometimes students make comments during seminar discussions simply because they think it will increase their participation grade; however, if your remark does not add any value to the discussion, you might be interrupting the professor or the flow of the conversation. Always aim to build on the thoughts and ideas of others rather than commenting for the sake of participation.

Before speaking, think of the acronym, W.A.I.T: Why Am I Talking? If you do not have a meaningful contribution to make then you may want to reformulate your argument or think about something else you can say.

LISTEN TO UNDERSTAND, NOT RESPOND



Good communication requires mutual understanding and respect. Show interest in what the other person has to say and actively reflect on their words rather than focusing on what you will say next. During class discussions, ask follow-up questions and respond to others by rephrasing their points in your own words. You can say things like, "If I understand you correctly, you are saying..." or "Are you talking about...?"

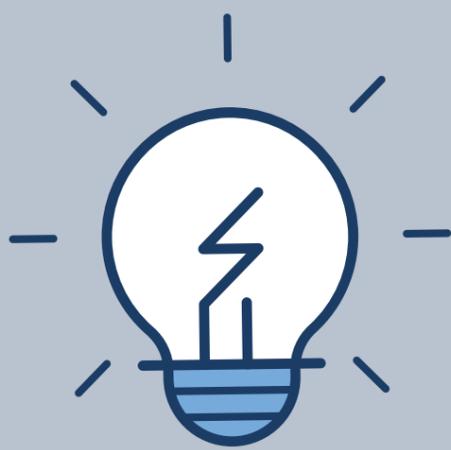
Remember, your seminar discussion is not a debate or a competition: there is always more than one right answer. Be open-minded about other thoughts, opinions, and ideas when they contradict your own.

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ASK QUESTIONS

Asking questions is one of the main advantages of seminar courses. It shows that you are curious and engaged with the subject as well as actively involved in the learning process. Remember that questions are never silly or dumb, but it is important to pay attention and not ask a question that somebody else already asked earlier on. You should also be mindful of asking questions that you can easily find the answer to on your own (ex: questions that can be answered by checking the syllabus). This ensures that the time spent in class is used wisely.



STICK TO THE TOPIC

Conversations can sometimes be exciting and remind you of things unrelated to the subject at-hand. Be sure to only contribute meaningful points to the discussion, as unrelated topics can be distracting and disrupt the flow of the conversation. Only use anecdotes if they provide an example that will improve your argument or enhance your overall contribution.

ADOPT A GROWTH MINDSET

Learning how to accept and build on other people's arguments and perspectives can be challenging, but it is a valuable skill to have. It will show that you can work in professional environments with people from diverse backgrounds. Be supportive and encourage your classmates to participate if you notice they are not contributing to the discussion. The more students participate, the more each individual will learn and take away from the course. Considering new perspectives can teach you something new so long as everyone is respectful.



BE YOURSELF

Stay true and authentic to your own beliefs, values, and opinions. Diversity of perspective is what makes seminar courses as valuable as they are. It can be scary to have a different opinion than the majority, and oftentimes students feel pressured to hide their true thoughts and feelings about a topic in fear of retaliation or judgement; however, remember that seminar courses are meant to be safe spaces for learning and open dialogue. If your professor establishes the right culture, take advantage of the opportunity to share your ideas and respectfully engage in conversation that will enhance your learning and understanding of the topic.

