

classroom discussions in college.

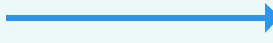
a primer for participating in dialogue

from the SNF Paideia Program, University of Pennsylvania

What applies to you? Read each one. Amend as needed. No one will see your responses.

- I have minority/unpopular beliefs or opinions and fear judgment.
- I hold one or more marginalized identities (I'm a woman; a person of color; LGBTQIA+; disabled; working class or poor; a Jew, Muslim, atheist, or other religious minority; etc) and worry I will be misunderstood, ignored, belittled, or otherwise harmed.
- I hold one or more privileged identities (I'm a man; White; cishetero; non-disabled; middle-class and above; Christian; etc) and worry people will hate me/blame me/disregard what I say.
- I'm afraid of saying something ignorant or insensitive by accident.
- I was homeschooled or educated in an unusual way and I'm worried that I don't know the "rules" for classroom discussion.
- I'm from a place that people have major preconceived notions about and I fear that who I am will be reduced to where I'm from.
- I tend to get passionate/emotional and I don't want to embarrass myself, alienate others, or be judged when I have a big reaction.
- I have experienced trauma (in any form) and worry that my trauma will be activated by what happens in class.
- I struggle to articulate my thoughts under pressure and tend to ramble/stumble over my words/trail off.
- I can't hide my reactions when people say stuff I think is ignorant or wrong. I'm afraid I'll come across as arrogant or rude.
- I communicate in a way that can be hard for others to understand (I'm neurodivergent, a non-native English speaker, or from a very different culture) and/or I have trouble understanding some communication styles (or I'm worried I might).
- It can take me a long time to gather my thoughts, and I'm worried I won't be able to keep up with the pace of the conversation and people will judge me.
- I think I talk too much / I talk for too long / I overshare.
- I get really nervous to speak up and it takes me a long time to feel comfortable in a group setting.
- I'm worried about being academically underprepared ("Everyone else seems to know about this already"), intellectually inferior ("They all sound so smart"), or experientially naive ("Everyone else is so worldly and well-traveled and has been exposed to so much more diversity than I have").
- Other (try to put it into words):

Where do you think these anxieties come from? Jot down some thoughts here.

general strategies. see other side for situation-specific scripts! 

taking space (for yourself)

Jot down some notes for what you'd like to say before raising your hand.

Let the professor know that speaking up can be challenging for you. Ask if they'd be willing to let you know ahead of time when they will be calling on you. Or ask them to make sure to call on you, if you know you won't raise your hand.

Set a goal for yourself, e.g. "I'm going to ask at least one question and make one comment today in class." Reward yourself for doing it!

Take deep, centering breaths. Say an affirmation to yourself (e.g. "I deserve to be here"). Then speak up.

Remember that others feel the same way you do, and you can help them feel braver by modeling courage.

making space (for others)

Put three scraps of paper in front of you on the desk. These are your tickets to speak, and when they're up, they're up.

Practice just listening without preparing any response. If you have trouble focusing under these conditions, try drawing or manipulating something with your hands so you can listen.

Redirect your urge to participate into observation and reflection. What patterns do you notice about who speaks up first and talks most? Whose voices are not being heard?

Resist the urge to fill silence. Take deep breaths. Let it be.

Ask questions as much as or more than you make comments.

Remember that others struggle with the same, and you can help them by modeling self-awareness and self-control.

scripts.

for participating in dialogue

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Use "I" statements. Speak for yourself + from your own perspective.

disagreeing

"I respect that, but I feel somewhat differently."

"From my perspective, things look different."

"While I agree with X, I don't think Y is the most accurate conclusion/best point of focus/relevant aspect/etc."

"I think I have different priorities, which are..."

"How do you think someone else might see this differently?"

Acknowledge multiple perspectives/priorities as valid.

seeking clarification

"Can you give an example?"

"Can you explain your reasoning a little more?"

"You're saying X, is that right? Or did I miss something?"

"How did you get to that idea? Where are you pulling your evidence from?"

Interest, not interrogation.

taking accountability

"I'm sorry."

"I made a problematic assumption."

"Thank you for calling my attention to that/explaining that."

"I regret not thinking about how that would sound."

"I am confused, but I believe you that it's hurtful, and I won't do it again."

Acknowledge impact. Resist defensiveness.

expressing openness

"I'm not sure yet exactly how I feel about this. I wonder if..."

"I would love the class's feedback."

"I interpreted/read it as...I'm seeing it through a lens of..."

"I am open to other ideas."

"I'd like to hear more perspectives before I draw any conclusion."

Be curious. Don't assert your truth as the only or obvious one.

sticking up for yourself

"Please let me finish."

"I don't deserve to be spoken to like that."

"When you say X, it makes me feel Y."

"You spoke for me. Let me speak for myself, please."

"I don't feel respected/welcome here."

affirming others

"Thank you for sharing that."

"I appreciate your openness/courage."

"I hear you."

"I acknowledge the labor you're doing."

It's recognition, not agreement.

drawing others in

"Did anyone else notice...?"

"I am really interested in other perspectives on this."

"I really like what So-and-so said. Can you share more about that?"

"What did you all think about X?"

challenging harm

"Ouch." "Yikes." "No."

"I think that is a harmful statement."

"I need you to know that this is how I heard what you just said."

"It sounds like you are saying X. Is that what you meant?"

"You might not know this, but that is a microaggression."

"That sounds like a big assumption/a generalization. Can you try to speak just for yourself?"

"I don't think that's funny/okay. Why do you think that's funny or okay to say?"

"I'm not sure why exactly, but what is happening just feels wrong. Does anyone else feel this?"

Name the issue, state the impact.

asking for understanding

"I need just a minute."

"Sorry, I'm a bit nervous."

"Please come back to me."

"I'm feeling emotional so this will come out a little jumbled, but it's important to me to get this out."

"I tend to do X to help me focus; it doesn't mean I'm not listening."

"When I feel X, it comes out as Y."

"Thanks for understanding/listening."

Make feelings and communication challenges part of the conversation.