# Learning from Seminars

## The purpose of seminars

Seminars are small group discussions organised and led by staff. The purpose of a seminar is to enable students to improve their knowledge and understanding of a topic by engaging with key issues - participation is therefore necessary and successful participation involves preparation.

## Preparation before the seminar

* Identify how the seminar subject relates to the lectures that preceded it.
* Revisit your relevant lecture notes and create a brief summary to take to the seminar.
* Complete any recommended preparatory reading, noting down key points or issues most relevant to the forthcoming discussion.
* Note a few questions to ask that will help you clarify your understanding of the topic.

## During the seminar

Try to strike the right balance between listening, speaking and notetaking. To gain the most from seminars it is advisable to:

* Keep your summary notes and list of questions to hand.
* Listen intently to what is being said.
* Take fresh notes (add to existing notes) as the seminar unfolds.
* Jot down ideas for additional points to make, or questions to ask.
* Think before you speak, making short and timely contributions.
* You will therefore need two skills: **‘**active listening’and **‘**speaking clearly’.

‘Active listening’:the more you concentrate on what someone is saying the more of it you will understand and retain:

* Look at the speaker, tune into their voice to filter out any distractions.
* Listen for key signposting phrases, especially from the seminar leader e.g. ‘Another aspect of this theory is…’
* Pay attention to answers to questions that you and others ask.
* Do not be afraid to clarify your understanding of an answer e.g. ‘So what you’re saying is…’

‘Speaking clearly’: Be very clear on what you want to say before speaking:

* Keep brief bullet-point notes of the key things you want to say by your side so, if you falter, you can use them as a ‘prompt’ before continuing. They may also help you avoid repeating yourself.
* Monitor the speed, volume and tone of your speech, and don’t rush when you talk. Use constructive pauses between key points.

## After the seminar

Check with tutors to clarify anything which you felt was unclear, then edit, tidy up and condense the notes you took during the seminar. These may offer useful preparation for the next lecture or seminar in the series, or form part of your exam revision later in the year. So, ensure that they make sense, that they carry the date and topic of the seminar, and that they are filed alongside other material (lecture notes, for example) relating to the same topic.

## Preparing seminar papers

At some stage in your academic career, you may be asked to give a ten-minute presentation during a seminar. For more information about how to plan, research, write and deliver an oral presentation, please refer to the SAS study guide: ‘Giving an oral presentation’.

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