

Student SkillPack

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Seminars, Group Tutorials and Meetings

STARTER LEVEL

SEMINARS, GROUP TUTORIALS AND MEETINGS

Starter Level

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'Seminar' and 'group tutorial' may mean a similar class, ie discussion based. You may be asked to prepare in advance (eg *by reading something*). There may be a presentation by a tutor or student, followed by discussion, or discussion without a presentation. Such classes help students to:

- look at a topic in more depth than in a lecture
- learn from each other's views
- develop skills in explaining and putting forward a case ('arguing a case')
- ask questions and explore issues with the tutor.

Meetings are common where people work together (eg *on a project*) to help them communicate.

You may take part in other discussions during your course (eg *a debate or a forum*). There may be special rules about them, but this SkillPack should help you take part in any discussion.

We suggest you use this SkillPack:

- when you need to take part in seminar or tutorial groups
- when you take part in meetings
- if, when applying for jobs, you must take part in a group discussion at an assessment centre.

When you have completed it, you should be able to:

Plan work

- identify what you want to get from a discussion (eg *aims*)
- do advance preparatory work
- identify your responsibilities (eg *for contributing*)
- agree ways of working within the group.

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Work towards objectives

- exchange information
- vary how and when to participate to suit your aims, allowing for context (eg *other group members, topic, role of the leader*)
- listen and respond sensitively and help others to contribute
- contribute relevantly for the topic, participants and purpose
- establish and maintain co-operative relationships (eg *anticipate needs of others, act assertively, deal with difficulties/conflict*).

Review work

- identify factors affecting the outcomes
- identify how to improve.

(Based on QCA Key Skill specifications, QCA 2000)

1 Preparing for the discussion

1.1 What would you like to get from the discussion?

Whatever sort of discussion it is (eg *seminar, group tutorial, meeting*), it helps to identify beforehand its purpose and what you would like to get from it (ie your aims). Your aims may relate to (eg *the topic; your skills in taking part; end results, such as grades/marks; making or keeping friends*). They may affect what you do in the discussion.

For a discussion you are taking part in or about to take part in, you could note here its purposes and your aims (what you want to get out of it).



The purpose of the discussion	Your aims

1.2 Responsibilities

It helps to be clear about who is responsible for what.

In seminars/tutorials the tutor is responsible for planning the class and encouraging participation.

In a meeting, either the whole group or a chairperson is responsible for running it (see the Starter Level SkillPack 'Group Work' for more guidance).

Discussing ideas/information is a valuable way of learning and you are responsible for taking part in a way which helps your own and others' learning. No tutor, no matter how good, can force you to speak, to listen or to learn.

1.3 Preparatory work

You may be asked to do work beforehand (eg *read something*). Doing it will help you to get the most from the discussion and to meet your responsibilities to the group (see 1.2 above). If you don't do it, the discussion may be poorer.

What else could you do to get the most out of the discussion? Would any other preparation help you meet the aims you noted in 1.1 above? Further preparation might include:

- find out more about the topic – read about it, watch TV/films on it, look out in the media (eg *newspapers*) for issues related to it
- jot down any questions you would like answering
- jot down any issues you think are interesting or could be discussed
- talk about it beforehand with friends, to sort your ideas out
- for a meeting, agree an agenda beforehand (ie the items to discuss in the order in which you will discuss them).

1.4 What sort of group is it

How you behave in a discussion depends on its purpose, on your aims (see 1.1 above) and on those taking part. Who are they (eg *other students/not students, men/women, ethnic mix, young/older, level of knowledge about the topic, experience, background, interests*)?

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Characteristics of those in the discussion (eg seminar/tutorial/meeting)	What might they want to get out of it?	What does this (ie your notes in the first two columns) mean for you?

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2 Setting up the discussion

The tutor may be responsible for setting up the discussion. However, you may be asked to lead a seminar, or to start a discussion, or you may have a meeting without a tutor there – if so it helps to agree and make clear at the start how it will operate.

Are you clear about the discussion's purpose? If a tutor is leading it, you could politely ask (eg *'What are we hoping to get out of this discussion please?'*). If there's no tutor, you could discuss this as a group (eg *'Do we all want to find out more about...?'*).

If you are leading a discussion it helps to:

- make clear what will happen (eg *'I'm going to speak for 10 minutes, please leave any questions until I've finished. We'll then have 10 minutes for question and a further 20 minutes for discussion'*).
- give them something to discuss (eg *questions or topics on a handout*) – expecting people to have a discussion without this can lead to silence or chaos
- to encourage people to talk, ask them to discuss the issues/questions in pairs for 2 or 3 minutes before asking them to talk about it in the whole group.

'Ground rules' for how to operate are helpful. You could discuss these at the start - if a tutor is 'in charge' and does not suggest this, perhaps you could do so? This is an example, but it depends on what your group needs (see 1.1 and 1.4 above):

- *keep to the point*
- *nobody to speak for more than 2 minutes*
- *encourage everybody to take part and speak*
- *avoid interrupting*
- *argue about ideas, rather than making personal remarks*
- *avoid putting down what others say.*

You may find it helpful to look at the Starter Level SkillPack 'Group Work'.

3 Speaking in discussions

3.1 How much do you speak?

How much do you speak in a discussion? You could note how often you speak, perhaps compared with others. If you don't say much, why? If you talk a lot, why?

What do you do?	Why do you do it?

3.2 If you don't speak much

Do you find it hard to speak because you don't feel confident about the topic? If so, prepare thoroughly – see 1.3 above. If it is difficult to sort out your ideas on the spot you could:

- make notes beforehand on points you'd like to raise
- make notes during the discussion on what others say or you could say
- when you speak, admit your thoughts aren't clear and that you are trying them out.

If it is hard to 'get into' the discussion which of the following could you try? ✓

Raise a hand when you'd like to speak	
Catch the eye of the tutor/chairperson (look as if you want to speak, sit up, look alert)	
Wait for a small pause and quickly speak	
Speak more loudly	
After the discussion, tell the tutor it is hard to 'get in' to the discussion, suggest (politely!) other ways of doing things (eg <i>time in pairs or small groups</i>)	
Ask the course representative to tell the tutor it is hard to 'get in' and to make suggestions to help	

If you are nervous, you could:

- build your confidence by making short contributions
- set yourself targets (eg *I'll say one thing today*)
- ask why you feel nervous and challenge your assumptions (eg *for how long will people really remember what you say*) - your answers to 3.1 above may give you clues
- accept that having your ideas challenged helps you learn.

Would any of the above ideas help you? What else might? Talking to others about this may give you ideas.

What do you feel nervous about?	What might help you deal with this?

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3.3 If you speak a lot

This may be OK, your comments may be helpful, but no matter how helpful they are the point of a discussion is that everybody takes part, that several heads are better than one. If you talk a lot it may be hard for others to speak. If you may do this (ask the tutor/others in the group for feedback) you could:

- set yourself a limit on how often you speak
- make notes on what you might say and ask yourself if it is really important to say it
- wait to see if others make the point first
- really listen to others – make notes to help you focus (see Section 4.1 below)
- encourage others to speak (eg *ask what they think*)
- look out for the reaction you are getting (eg *enthusiastic, bored*).

3.4 Getting yourself heard

You will be more easily heard if you:

- sit where others can see you (it is easier to hear if you can see a speaker's mouth)
- avoid speaking with your hand over your mouth
- avoid speaking too fast
- speak up
- look at the person you are speaking to, and scan everybody.

3.5 Engaging with/interesting others

To communicate well you need to consider who is in the discussion (see 1.4 above), and what they may want to get from it. What will appeal to them, or offend or annoy them? For example:

- *what sort of language will they understand or relate to?*
- *what sort of examples will they understand?*
- *what will interest or motivate them?*

What may others want to get from the discussion?	What will appeal to or interest them?	What will offend or annoy them?

3.6 Making your point

Identifying what helps you understand can help you to see how to present things to others.



What helps you understand other people?

To make your points clearly which of the following could you try? ✓

Avoid too much detail (the listener may get confused)	
Summarise your points first, then talk about each point in more detail	
Use language the group will understand (see Section 1.4 above), avoid jargon, avoid or explain abbreviations	
Use examples (eg <i>from your experience</i>)	
Describe how an idea could be applied in practice	
Use an analogy (ie saying 'It's rather like...')	
Describe any clear steps or stages	
Break a difficult idea into parts	
Ask the listeners if they have understood	

3.7 What will you do?

Which ideas from sections 3.1–3.6 will you try? You could consider this in relation to:

- the purposes of your group and your own aims (Section 1.1)
- the people in the group (Section 1.4 and Section 3.5).



Which ideas will you try? What else have you tried which worked well?

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You need to vary what you do in different situations. Thinking about how things went in a discussion helps you develop ideas on what works when and with whom. You could now think about a completely different discussion group. Would you need to do anything different for that group? What? Why?

What I would do differently	Why?

4 Dealing with others

4.1 Listening and attending to others

Active listening is about understanding what somebody means, not just being able to repeat what they said. You could:

- concentrate on what they say (making notes while they speak can help)
- avoid interrupting them
- ask them to explain anything you do not understand
- check you understand by summarising what they said (eg 'Did you mean...?').

Feedback from others helps. How would you rate yourself on a scale of 1-4, where 1 is being a great listener and 4 is being a poor one? You could ask others (eg *friends, relatives, other students, tutors, workplace supervisor*) to rate you on the same scale. Does your rating agree with theirs? You could ask them why they rated you like that, and to be specific (eg *do you look at people when they talk?*).

Do you look for non-verbal signals? If there are others around you now, how are they sitting or standing? What does this suggest about how they feel? Non verbal signals include:

- mirroring - if you and another person relate to each other well, you may both sit in the same way
- signs of boredom - yawning, slumping, fidgeting, looking at a watch, reading something unrelated to the discussion
- signs of interest - sitting up or forward, alert face, looking at the speaker
- signs of anger - pointing fingers, distorted face

A person's non-verbal signals do not always match what they are saying, and this can give clues as to their real feelings. If they sound angry but are smiling, why?

Being aware both of what people say and of how they are feeling is essential if you are to communicate well.

4.4 Co-operating with others



What do others do which makes you want to co-operate with them?	What do they do which makes you not want to co-operate with them?	What do you do to co-operate with others?

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What does this tell you about what you need to do in discussion groups?

Some basics can help, such as being polite, being considerate (eg *making sure others can see or get round the table*), and doing preparatory work (see Section 1.3 above).

4.3 Encouraging others

Everybody in a discussion has a responsibility to encourage others to speak. Which of the following do you do?




Looking interested (eg <i>looking at them</i>)	
If you agree with them, saying so	
Avoiding put-downs	
Avoiding off-putting reactions (eg <i>facial expressions</i>)	
Asking them what they think	
Avoiding dominating the discussion	

4.4 Dealing with conflict

In a good discussion you expect debate and disagreement, but heated arguments are unhelpful. It helps to:

- refer to a group member's ideas, not their personality
- avoid using very emotional (or 'bad') language
- keep a reasonable voice level
- focus on relevant points
- avoid a back and forth discussion (eg *stop the discussion and ask what others think*).

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What do you think works in dealing with conflict or with somebody who is angry? 

How can you avoid becoming angry?	What do you (or could you) do which is helpful when others become angry?

Look at the SkillPacks on 'Negotiating and Assertiveness' for more help.

4.5 Questioning


Asking and being asked questions helps you to understand and to hear others' views.

Asking questions

You could prepare beforehand by: identifying what to ask; making notes during the discussion of questions to ask; phrasing your question clearly.

Being asked a question

You could: check you have understood it; in replying, keep to the point (avoid 'waffle' or going on too much). If you don't know the answer, you could: say you do not know; attempt an answer, to find out if it is correct or to see what others think.

What do you tend to do? Which of these suggestions could you try? 

Asking questions What you do and what you could try	Being asked a question What you do and what you could try

5 Improving what you do

It might help to think about the last discussion you were in, or several recent discussions.

What did you do which worked well?	What did you do which did not work well?	What factors affected what you did?

You could now identify what you need to do to improve.

What or who could help you?

You could work through this chapter again before your next discussion. The SkillPacks on 'Negotiating and Assertiveness' can help if you need to be more assertive, as can the SkillPacks on 'Coping with Pressure'. You could talk to the tutor, or others in the discussion, or friends, or get more feedback.

Aspects to improve	Actions I can take	Resources/help needed	By (date)

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6 References and bibliography

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6.1 Student skills product list

Having worked through this SkillPack you might like to know that similar structured, straightforward guidance is also available on the following topics:

- Identifying Strengths and Improving Skills
- Organising Yourself and Your Time
- Note Taking
- Gathering and Using Information
- Critical Analysis
- Essay Writing
- Report Writing
- Oral Presentation
- Visual Communication
- Solving Problems
- Group Work
- Negotiating and Assertiveness
- Coping with Pressure
- Revising and Examination Techniques
- Improving Your Learning
- Reflecting on Your Experience
- Action Planning

The Student Skills Guide Second Edition

All of the SkillPacks listed above are gathered together and are available as a paperback workbook (0 566 08430 9).

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