7.2 Participating in Class

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1. Understand how to set yourself up for successful participation in class.
- 2. List guidelines for effectively asking and answering questions in class.
- 3. Describe how to interact successfully with an instructor in a large lecture class.
- 4. Explain strategies for effective learning if your learning style is different from your instructor's teaching style.

We've already discussed the many benefits of participating in class as a form of actively engaging in learning. Not everyone naturally feels comfortable participating. Following some general guidelines makes it easier.

Guidelines for Participating in Classes

Smaller classes generally favor discussion, but often instructors in large lecture classes also make some room for participation.

A concern or fear about speaking in public is one of the most common fears. If you feel afraid to speak out in class, take comfort from the fact that many others do as well—and that anyone can learn how to speak in class without much difficulty. Class participation is actually an impromptu, informal type of public speaking, and the same principles will get you through both: preparing and communicating.

- Set yourself up for success by coming to class fully prepared. Complete reading assignments. Review your notes on the reading and previous class to get yourself in the right mind-set. If there is something you don't understand well, start formulating your question now.
- Sit in the front with a good view of the instructor, board or screen, and other visual aids. In a lecture hall, this will help you hear better, pay better attention, and make a good impression on the instructor. Don't sit with friends—socializing isn't what you're there for.
- Remember that your body language communicates as much as anything you say. Sit up and look alert, with a pleasant expression on your face, and make good eye contact with the instructor. Show some enthusiasm.
- Pay attention to the instructor's **body language**, which can communicate much more than just his or her words. How the instructor moves and gestures, and the looks on his or her face, will add meaning to the words—and will also cue you when it's a good time to ask a question or stay silent.
- Take good notes, but don't write obsessively—and never page through your textbook (or browse on a laptop). Don't eat or play with your cell phone. Except when writing brief notes, keep your eyes on the instructor.
- Follow class protocol for making comments and asking questions. In a small class, the instructor may encourage students to ask questions at any time, while in some large lecture classes the instructor may ask for questions at the end of the lecture. In this case, jot your questions in your notes so that you don't forget them later.
- Don't say or ask anything just to try to impress your instructor. Most instructors have

been teaching long enough to immediately recognize insincere flattery—and the impression this makes is just the opposite of what you want.

- Pay attention to the instructor's thinking style. Does this instructor emphasize theory more than facts, wide perspectives over specific ideas, abstractions more than concrete experience? Take a cue from your instructor's approach and try to think in similar terms when participating in class.
- It's fine to disagree with your instructor when you ask or answer a question. Many instructors invite challenges. Before speaking up, however, be sure you can explain why you disagree and give supporting evidence or reasons. Be respectful.
- Pay attention to your communication style. Use **standard English** when you ask or answer a question, not slang. Avoid sarcasm and joking around. Be assertive when you participate in class, showing confidence in your ideas while being respectful of the ideas of others. But avoid an aggressive style that attacks the ideas of others or is strongly emotional.
- When your instructor asks a question to the class:
 - Raise your hand and make eye contact, but don't call out or wave your hand all around trying to catch his or her attention.
 - Before speaking, take a moment to gather your thoughts and take a deep breath. Don't just blurt it out—speak calmly and clearly.
- When your instructor asks you a question directly:
 - Be honest and admit it if you don't know the answer or are not sure. Don't try to fake it or make excuses. With a question that involves a reasoned opinion more than a fact, it's fine to explain why you haven't decided yet, such as when weighing two opposing ideas or actions; your comment may stimulate further discussion.
 - Organize your thoughts to give a sufficient answer. Instructors seldom want a yes or no answer. Give your answer and provide reasons or evidence in support.
- When you want to ask the instructor a question:
 - Don't ever feel a question is "stupid." If you have been paying attention in class and have done the reading and you still don't understand something, you have every right to ask.
 - Ask at the appropriate time. Don't interrupt the instructor or jump ahead and ask
 a question about something the instructor may be starting to explain. Wait for a
 natural pause and a good moment to ask. On the other hand, unless the instructor
 asks students to hold all question until the end of class, don't let too much time go
 by, or you may forget the question or its relevance to the topic.
 - Don't ask just because you weren't paying attention. If you drift off during the first half of class and then realize in the second half that you don't really understand what the instructor is talking about now, don't ask a question about something that was already covered.
 - Don't ask a question that is really a complaint. You may be thinking, "Why would so-and-so believe that? That's just crazy!" Take a moment to think about what you might gain from asking the question. It's better to say, "I'm having some difficulty understanding what so-and-so is saying here. What evidence did he use to argue for that position?"
 - Avoid dominating a discussion. It may be appropriate in some cases to make a follow-up comment after the instructor answers your question, but don't try to turn the class into a one-on-one conversation between you and the instructor.

Lecture Hall Classes

While opportunities are fewer for student discussions in large lecture classes, participation is still important. The instructor almost always provides an opportunity to ask questions. Because time is limited, be ready with your question or comment when the opportunity arises—and don't be shy about raising your hand first.

Being prepared is especially important in lecture classes. Have assigned readings done before class and review your notes. If you have a genuine question about something in the reading, ask about it. Jot down the question in your notes and be ready to ask if the lecture doesn't clear it up for you.

Being prepared before asking a question also includes listening carefully to the lecture. You don't want to ask a question whose answer was already given by the instructor in the lecture. Take a moment to organize your thoughts and choose your words carefully. Be as specific as you can. Don't say something like, "I don't understand the big deal about whether the earth revolves around the sun or the sun around the earth. So what?" Instead, you might ask, "When they discovered that the earth revolves around the sun, was that such a disturbing idea because people were upset to realize that maybe they weren't the center of the universe?" The first question suggests you haven't thought much about the topic, while the second shows that you are beginning to grasp the issue and want to understand it more fully.

Following are some additional guidelines for asking good questions:

- Ask a question or two early in the term, even on the first day of class. Once the instructor has "noticed" you as a class participant, you are more likely to be recognized again when you have a question. You won't be lost in the crowd.
- Speak deliberately and professionally, not as you might when talking with a friend. Use standard English rather than slang.
- If you're very shy about public speaking or worried you'll say the wrong thing, write down your question before asking. Rehearse it in your mind.
- When you have the opportunity to ask questions in class, it's better to ask right away rather than saving a question for after class. If you really find it difficult to speak up in a large class, this is an acceptable way to ask your question and participate. A private conversation with an instructor may also be more appropriate if the question involves a paper or other project you are working on for the course.

A note on technology in the lecture hall. Colleges are increasingly incorporating new technology in lecture halls. For example, each student in the lecture hall may have an electronic "clicker" with which the instructor can gain instant feedback on questions in class. Or the classroom may have wireless Internet and students are encouraged to use their laptops to communicate with the instructor in "real time" during the lecture. In these cases, the most important thing is to take it seriously, even if you have anonymity. Most students appreciate the ability to give feedback and ask questions through such technology, but some abuse their anonymity by sending irrelevant, disruptive, or insulting messages.

Teaching Style versus Learning Style

As you learned in <u>Chapter 1 "You and Your College Experience"</u>, students have many different **learning styles**. Understanding your learning style(s) can help you study more

effectively. Most instructors tend to develop their own teaching style, however, and you will encounter different teaching styles in different courses.

When the instructor's teaching style matches your learning style, you are usually more attentive in class and may seem to learn better. But what happens if your instructor has a style very different from your own? Let's say, for example, that your instructor primarily lectures, speaks rapidly, and seldom uses visuals. This instructor also talks mostly on the level of large abstract ideas and almost never gives examples. Let's say that you, in contrast, are more a visual learner, that you learn more effectively with visual aids and visualizing concrete examples of ideas. Therefore, perhaps you are having some difficulty paying attention in class and following the lectures. What can you do?

- Capitalize on your learning strengths, as you learned in <u>Chapter 1 "You and Your</u> <u>College Experience"</u>. In this example, you could use a visual style of note taking, such as concept maps, while listening to the lecture. If the instructor does not give examples for abstract ideas in the lecture, see if *you* can supply examples in your own thoughts as you listen.
- Form a study group with other students. A variety of students will likely involve a variety of learning styles, and when going over course material with other students, such as when studying for a test, you can gain what they have learned through their styles while you contribute what you have learned through yours.
- Use ancillary study materials. Many textbooks point students to online resource centers or include a computer CD that offers additional learning materials. Such ancillary materials usually offer an opportunity to review course material in ways that may better fit your learning style.
- Communicate with your instructor to bridge the gap between his or her teaching style and your learning style. If the instructor is speaking in abstractions and general ideas you don't understand, ask the instructor for an example.
- You can also communicate with the instructor privately during office hours. For example, you can explain that you are having difficulty understanding lectures because so many things are said so fast.

Finally, take heart that a mismatch between a student's learning style and an instructor's teaching style is not correlated with lower grades.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- To prepare for class participation, come to class ready, sit in front, and pay attention to the instructor's words and body language.
- Use good communication techniques when asking or answering questions in class.
- Take advantage of all opportunities to interact with your instructors, even in large lecture classes.
- If your learning style does not match the instructor's teaching style, adapt your learning and study with other students to stay actively engaged.

CHECKPOINT EXERCISES

1. For each of the following statements about class participation, circle T for true or F for false:

т	F	To avoid having to answer a question in class when you don't know the answer, sit in the back row and avoid making eye contact with the instructor.
т	F	If you haven't finished a reading assignment before coming to a lecture class, bring the book along and try to complete the reading during the lecture.
т	F	Although it is OK to disagree with something in your textbook, never disagree with something the instructor says in a lecture.
т	F	If you are asked a question but don't know the answer, it's best to be honest and admit it.
т	F	Before raising your hand to ask a question, take a moment to consider whether maybe it's a stupid question.
т	F	Because you don't want your instructor to form a poor impression of you, wait a week or two into the term before starting to ask questions in class.
т	F	If you're shy, it's best never to speak up in class at all.
т	F	If you are struggling with a class during the first two weeks of the term, it's always best to drop the class immediately because the situation won't improve.

2. List two things you can do if you are having difficulty understanding what your instructor is talking about.

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