Participating in Class

Participating in class is a hallmark of higher education as these are opportunities to engage in scholarly conversation and peer review. For these reasons, many professors will make participation in course discussion a major element of your overall grade.

What are productive contributions?
- Sharing your informed ideas on the topic
- Providing relevant examples or evidence
- Asking for further clarification on a topic or assignment
- Making connections to other topics in the course or resources

What are unproductive contributions?
- Sharing uninformed ideas on the topic
- Engaging in side conversations
- Asking questions that have already been answered
- Making connections to other topics or resources outside of the course

Keys to Success

In order to help you participate in class, follow these keys to success:

For everyone:

Know the difference between attending and participating. While some faculty members may have attendance grades, you should not confuse these with actual participation. Attending a class is certainly important, but participating in class through active contribution and engagement is what your professors will expect. If you go to class, listen, and take notes, you are attending the course. If you are asking and answering questions, providing feedback, and sharing thoughts, you are participating in the course.

For quiet thinkers:

Find different ways to contribute. If you dread participating in class, look for different ways to contribute that do not involve raising your hand. Faculty members often build in alternatives to traditional participation to help out reluctant public speakers, such as short, written responses, discussion board posts, reflection essays, that will help you to demonstrate engagement. When all else fails: ask a question!

Practice makes perfect. The more you participate the less nervous it will make you. Try participating in courses with a smaller number of students or where you are familiar with the other students. You should also practice in a class where you feel comfortable with the professor to help break the ice.

For public speakers:

Keep participation productive. Participation isn't about the amount that you engage in the course, but rather, it's the quality of that engagement. You want to contribute to the course in a productive way that engages with the materials and keeps the conversation moving forward. Contributions that repeat, backtrack, or off-topic are not productive and should be avoided.

Participate not dominate. Professors need to ensure that everyone in the class has an opportunity to engage with topic. As someone who has no issues talking in class, you will want to regulate your own contributions to ensure that other students have a chance to engage. If you’re worried about over-engaging, talk with your professor about their expectations for discussion and contributions.