

Suggestions for Seminar Exchanges and Presentations in a Seminar
—ways to prepare before and things to do during....

As with any form of communication, preparation is a key; so getting informed on the topics of the seminar are a first step for effective discussions and seminars.

Discussion:

Discussion is an important ingredient in many undergraduate courses and almost all graduate seminars. It is a setting for relaying and especially for assimilating information, and also for presenting interpretive perspectives and responding to those that others present.

Public culture in the media today includes many examples of discussion generally of one type: discussion for scoring points against an opposition, with members of that group speaking out in turn with contrasting views. And the discussions in public culture often involve voices raised and people talking at the same time. With these forms of discussion, it is difficult to listen or to learn. This is the *Aggressive Model* of discussion, and it is focused on winning, or more specifically defeating those in disagreement. Each point from one side, no matter its merits, must be met with a counter-point to express the flaws of that other side. There is little room in this approach for noticing gaps in one's own position, much less learning from the other side.

Seminar discussions in college have a goal based on the *Learning Model* of discussion, with facts and ideas presented as propositions (hypotheses, in the language of science) for answering questions or solving problems. With the focus on learning, each proposition is subject to correction or improvement from further comments in the seminar. While a frequent spoken comment, or tacit implication, in the *Aggressive Model* is, "You are wrong," the *Learning model* includes comments such as, "I hadn't thought of it that way." This model can accommodate sharp disagreements, but discussing with disagreement works best for learning with questions about how that position can work, or make sense of or address the facts. Another contrast between the models is that the *Aggressive Model* actively searches for facts to support only its own position, while the *Learning Model* searches for all facts, even if contrary to prior hypotheses.

Because the *Aggressive Model* is so common in public culture, many students are not familiar with the *Learning Model* for discussion, and expect talking in class to be like the first model. This generates a spectrum of responses to discussions in class ranging from *fighting* to *fear*. The assumption of talking to win suggests the need to fight, but for those who do not speak, that same assumption can produce a fear of speaking up much at all for not wanting to engage in fighting or simply for not wanting to be defeated or subject to defeat. These assumptions intrude on seminar learning.

By contrast, the *Learning Model* is built on getting well informed, and on listening to the various comments of seminar participants; this involves comparing what you hear with what you know already, sorting out point of view and information, and being prepared to comment in response not just in reaction. Listening is not only for information, but also for timing, for finding the right time to enter into the discussion in order to follow from the previous comments and extend them for further learning.

Ironically, many of the comments in the Learning Model can have the very same content as those in the Aggressive Model, but when delivered to facilitate learning, they have a less dismissive tone.

Presentations:

Student-led presentations have many similarities to written work, especially in content, but they tend to require more highlighting of key points and fewer illustrative examples in order to reach the human ear rather than the eye. PowerPoint slides can complement a presentation with the use of visuals, but these are best used sparingly and explicitly for visual needs, not simply for visual display of written text. For short presentations, the amount of time on set up and the potential delays from technical issues can rival the time of the presentation itself making this an inappropriate use of technology. The most important part of a presentation is the delivery of the patterns of thought that can be used to organize the factual material and convey point of view (subject to disagreement!: see notes on Discussions above). On issues related to oral delivery of presentation, see the web posting on Public Speaking.

Presentations also involve questions from the other seminar participants; for this, being well informed is again key, but just as important is succinctness, so select the particular piece of information most relevant to the topic. To keep your audience's attention, don't just have information in abundance, but also be prepared to select from that abundance for facilitating the discussions that follow from a presentation. And so a Presentation, with its question-and-answer period, evolves toward a Discussion for exchange of ideas—which may bring on disagreements, with each position a source of potential learning.