

Basics

Expressing opinions is an important part of discussions in seminars and tutorials. In *C21 English for the 21st Century*, Level 4, you learn about the importance of justifying your opinions. In an academic discussion, you especially use evidence from your studies, from reading and from lectures to support your opinions.

The academic context

In an academic context, the 'gap' between the spoken and the written language is often smaller than in everyday life. For example, when they are giving opinions, people sometimes use quite long or complex sentences, since to achieve an academic standard of precision, a simple statement often needs qualification, explanation or evidence. In a discussion, although you do not usually need to give the same level of detail about sources as in a written essay, you should still make it clear where your ideas come from.

Key features

Expressing opinions in an academic discussion typically involves:

- thinking carefully about the topic and thinking critically about any evidence from sources
- using evidence appropriately to support your opinion
- expressing your opinion clearly
- making the source of any supporting evidence clear
- using tentative language to avoid overconfident statements and overgeneralization
- acknowledging any limitations in your argument

TIP

When we cite an academic source as evidence, we usually use the family name of the author(s) of the book or paper:
according to Ellis ... , as Mason and Smith point out ...

If a source was written by more than two people, we use the name of the first author followed by the Latin expression *et al.* which means *and others*. It is pronounced /et æl/.

Challenges / difficulties

Expressing an opinion can be intimidating. Try not to put pressure on yourself to 'get it right first time'. Like in any other conversation, contributions to a discussion in an academic context are prompts for other people to listen respectfully and to ask more questions or make their own response. If your teacher/lecturer or another student asks you what you mean, or to say more about your point, they are not criticizing you – they are interested in what you have to say. Remember that the other people in the room are there to support you.

How can I develop this skill?

Look out for opportunities to contribute to discussions. A low-pressure way of practising is to ask a question in a lecture. A good way to do this is to restate one of the lecturer's opinions (using their words or a paraphrase) and then ask a question about it. Usually there is only a little time available, so try to ask your question in just two or three sentences.

Learning outcome

Students will be able to express opinions as part of an academic discussion using appropriate evidence to support their view.

Theory to practice

Read the opinions expressed by four different students below and the tutor's responses.

Student 1

I think individual consumers should be responsible for cutting the amount of waste they generate.

Tutor

Why do you think that? Do you have any evidence to support your view? How would that work in practice? Can you give any examples?

Student 2

As Lewis points out, recycling is only effective if there's a market for recycled materials.

Tutor

Yes, but what do *you* think? Do you agree with Lewis?

Student 3

I'm not sure that recycling is as effective as we think. Twenty-five per cent of the materials we put out for recycling end up in landfill anyway.

Tutor

Where did you get that 25% figure from? What's the source? And who do you mean by *we*? Is that worldwide or for a specific country?

Student 4

In 2018, a study by Geyer et al. found that more than 90% of plastic is never recycled. I think that's a shocking statistic. As consumers, I believe we should stop buying goods that come in plastic packaging.

Tutor

Do you think it's practical for consumers to avoid all plastic packaging? Is that the only possible solution to the problem?

- Have students 1–4 expressed their opinions well? What are the problems (if any) with each statement?
- How could they have expressed their ideas differently to avoid these problems?

Ways to get more practice

Before you attend a seminar, tutorial or lecture, have a discussion about the topic with another student or in a small group. See if you can agree to do this regularly. You will find that you gradually become more confident in expressing your opinions. You will also find it easier to follow other people's opinions and decide when to ask a question or contribute.