

Basics

In academic settings, all students encounter problems during their studies. It is important to listen to advice from tutors and offer advice to other students with practical solutions to the issues they face. Collaborating successfully and working well on projects in teams and in other group work is a key skill for students. Giving suggestions and responding positively to others is essential in sharing ideas and finding solutions the whole group can agree on.

The academic context

In the academic world, there are numerous situations where you need to offer advice and make suggestions. Examples include: tutorials, seminars and discussions during projects and group work.

Key features

Be prepared before you speak. There are some suggestions about this below:

- Listen carefully to the issue to fully understand what the problem is.
If I were you, I'd ... In this situation I'd advise ...
It would be a good idea to ... What you ought to do is ...
I really think you'd better ... I strongly recommend that you ...
In my experience, what works well is ... One thing you should do is ...
- Respond positively and politely to advice given.
That sounds like a good idea ... Yes, I'll do that, thanks.
- In group work, use polite phrases to enter the discussion.
Can I speak, please? I have an idea. If I may? I've had a thought. Can I come in here?
- Offer polite suggestions.
It might be a good idea to ... What if we talk to ... One possibility is to ...
We could ... How about we ...
- Respond positively.
I really like that idea. That sounds great. Thanks for that. I really like the sound of that.

There are some ways you can prepare yourself to offer advice or make suggestions:

- Think about the situation: Is the person asking for advice? What is the problem with what they are doing? How can they improve their situation?
- Think about how polite you are: Can you use a more polite phrase? Does your voice sound polite?
- Think about group discussions: How can you politely enter a discussion? Is your suggestion relevant to the discussion? Is your response positive and encouraging to the group?

Challenges / difficulties

It takes experience and knowledge to offer useful advice. Sometimes it is better to say you don't know and direct the person to somebody who can help.

Maintaining a positive atmosphere in group discussions can be challenging sometimes, but it will result in better outcomes for the group.

Try to get as much practice of working in groups as you can to hear how other people encourage collaboration through polite suggestions and positive discussion.

How can I develop this skill?

It really is mainly a question of practice when it comes to developing this skill. Learning suitable polite phrases to use when offering advice is important. You could also watch some online videos showing people giving advice or making suggestions, to see what approaches work best. Finally, role-play different situations that need advice/suggestions with your fellow students, then discuss which approaches worked best and why.

Learning outcome

When you have mastered this skill you will know how to offer advice on specific issues and reply politely, using key phrases to achieve results in discussions. You will know how to offer suggestions in group discussions and respond positively, and you will feel confident about giving advice and taking part in collaborative discussions.

Theory to practice

Look at the discussion below. The key phrases are highlighted.

- James** Does anyone have any suggestions about what title we can give the project?
Sam Can I speak, please? Yes, it might be a good idea to call it something everyone can relate to, such as 'Fast food and students'.
Zac That's a good idea. But I'm not sure it covers what we need to do. Anyone else?
Shia I have an idea. What if we call it 'Eating habits of students'?
Joe No, no. I don't like that.
Charlie If I may? One possibility is to focus on what we're measuring – fast food intake per week for young people.
Leo That sounds great.

- 1 What is the purpose of the highlighted phrases?
- 2 Would you highlight any other phrases?
- 3 What advice would you give any of the students about group discussions?

Ways to get more practice

Work with a partner. Take turns giving advice and offering suggestions about subjects they know a lot about (playing a sport, academic activity, visiting a city, etc.).

Listen to spoken English on the internet, especially podcasts which give advice, as much as you can. You can easily search for these online.