

Basics

Agreeing and disagreeing are an important part of any discussion as people put forward different points of view. In an academic discussion, in a seminar or tutorial, agreement and disagreement are part of the process of understanding a topic by looking at all sides of the argument.

The academic context

In colleges and universities, students are expected to show critical thinking skills. One context where you can show that you are thinking about different possibilities and different sides of an argument is in a discussion, for example, in a seminar or tutorial. It is important that you link your ideas both to what you have read or heard in lectures, but also to the points made by other students. An academic discussion should not just be a series of statements by different students. By agreeing or disagreeing with others, you show that you are listening and following the discussion.

Key features

- Think carefully about the topic and any background information, from your reading or from a lecture. Which points do you agree with and which ones do you have questions about?
- Listen carefully to what other students say during a discussion. Which points do you agree and disagree with? Do you agree/disagree with their whole argument or just part of it? Make it clear exactly who/what you are agreeing/disagreeing with.
- If you agree with what someone else has said, don't just repeat the same idea. Can you add more information about the same point, such as extra evidence or another example?
- If you disagree with what someone has said, explain why and give support for your point of view.

Agreement and disagreement isn't always 'black and white'. You can agree with part of what someone says, but disagree with another part. You can express doubts or ask questions if you are not completely sure about a point.

Challenges / difficulties

During an academic discussion, you can't always speak directly after someone you want to agree/disagree with. When you get the opportunity to speak, it sometimes feels like the discussion has moved on. If you think your point is important to the discussion, it's OK to refer back to an earlier point.

How can I develop this skill?

Think critically about people's opinions. Even if an opinion initially seems perfectly reasonable and you are likely to agree with it, force yourself to think about the other side of the argument. What would someone say if they disagreed with this opinion?

Learning outcome

Expressing agreement and disagreement will allow you to take an active role in discussions in and out of the classroom and therefore further your learning.

Theory to practice

Read the discussion and look at the notes next to the dialogue. Then answer the questions below.

- Tutor** Because of modern communications technology, more and more people are now working from home. Some business experts argue that in the future, most people will work from home rather than travelling to an office. What do you think?
- Adam** Yes, I agree. For lots of jobs, I don't think we need to travel to an office to sit in front of a computer all day. It's much easier to work from home now. You just need a laptop and an internet connection.
- Bethan** Yes, that's true, but I'm not sure working from home suits everyone. Sometimes, it's important for people to have contact with their colleagues, to chat or to have meetings. It could be very lonely working from home all the time.
- Charlie** Yes, but you can chat with your colleagues online or have meetings via Skype or whatever. I agree that communications technology will completely change the way we work.
- Emma** I think Bethan's right. Sometimes we need real social contact. It's good to see people face-to-face. But, maybe we don't need to go to an office every day.
- Adam** That's a really good point, Emma. I agree with Charlie that we can probably use online messaging for lots of communication, but perhaps we need to have face-to-face meetings sometimes, too. You know, if you're working with a new person, for example, I think it's really good to meet up with them.

Adam agrees with the tutor's main idea and explains why.

Bethan partly agrees with Adam, but then she mentions a possible problem and explains it.

Charlie partly agrees with Bethan, but gives a solution to the problem she mentioned. He agrees with the tutor's main point and refers back to 'communications technology'.

Emma refers back to Bethan's point and agrees with her. Then she suggests an alternative view.

Adam agrees with Emma. He also refers back to what Charlie said. Then he adds an example to support his point.

- 1 How many different ways do the students express agreement and disagreement?
- 2 How do they show they partly agree/disagree?
- 3 How do they refer back to previous speakers and ideas?
- 4 How do they support their points after they have agreed/disagreed?

Ways to get more practice

With friends, you can discuss anything that you are all interested in. You don't have to disagree to have a good discussion; a discussion where you all share similar perspectives can be just as constructive. If you all agree, discuss how people might defend a different opinion. What do you think of their arguments? Could you imagine ever making those arguments? If not, why? Not all opinions are equally valid, but it's worth examining the limits of what you could sympathize with.