

Basics

Expressing your opinion is a common part of any discussion. In places like colleges and universities, the exchange of ideas is a crucial part of academic discussion, and being able to express your opinion is particularly important.

The academic context

Discussions about academic topics can take place in seminars and tutorials. Tutors will often introduce a question for discussion and ask students what they think. Expressing your opinion is one way of demonstrating you can think critically. To express an opinion in an academic discussion, you need to think carefully about the topic. You need to consider the information you have and think about different possible perspectives. Your opinion should not just be based on your personal feelings and beliefs, but it should be supported by reasons and evidence where possible.

Key features

- Think carefully about the topic and any information you know about it.
- Make it clear that you are expressing an opinion not a fact (*I think ... For me, ...*).
- Give reasons for your opinion.
- Use evidence from academic sources to support your argument.

Here are some ways you can develop your own opinions:

Think about your opinion

- When you're reading or in lectures, think about your own opinion of the ideas and arguments.
- How do the ideas link to your own experience of the world?
- Have you heard or read different arguments or opinions before on the same topic?
- Which argument do you think is the strongest? Why?

Keep notes

- When you make notes, note down your own ideas and reactions as well as just facts.
- You could write your own ideas in a different colour or in a separate column.

Prepare for discussions

- Check the topic of a seminar or tutorial in advance, if possible. Is it shown in your course programme?
- Make sure you do any reading you have been set and make notes on the main ideas.
- Look at your notes from lectures or reading that are relevant to the topic.

Challenges / difficulties

It can be difficult to come up with your own opinions in a discussion if you haven't thought about the topic before. Thinking about your own opinions of the topics you study, making notes about your ideas, and preparing for seminars and tutorials can help you have some ideas ready.

Listen to how other people express their opinions (lecturers, tutors, other students). What makes a convincing argument? Notice the language and strategies they use.

How can I develop this skill?

The first step in developing your ability to express opinions is to have them! Think carefully about everyday topics (news, etc.) and academic discussions, listening to both sides before forming your own opinion.

Once you have well-thought-out and well-informed opinions, you will feel more confident to express them, both in and out of the classroom. Even if you don't have the chance to voice your ideas, rehearse mentally how you would do so and you will be prepared when the opportunity presents itself.

Learning outcome

You will learn strategies to prepare for an academic discussion by developing your opinion based on sources. You will practise useful language for expressing your opinions in a discussion.

Theory to practice

Look at the notes a student has made when reading a text in preparation for a discussion. Then answer the questions below.

Students in my uni use laptops

We have all become used to recording our ideas on a digital device, on our smartphone, tablet or computer. We do it all the time, whether we're communicating with our friends on social media or taking notes in a lecture. Typing has become much more common than handwriting with an old-fashioned pen and paper. However, some research suggests that we remember information better if we write notes by hand.

Yes!!

But do we miss some info?

Although typing may be quicker, that's part of the problem. When we type notes, we just copy the words we hear. Because handwriting is slower, we can't copy down every word, so we have to think more carefully about what we choose to write down. It is this processing of the information as we decide what to write that helps us remember.

Slow handwriting = better memory > think, choose words, process info

1 Find an example of each item (a–d).

- a an argument they agree with
- b a reason they can use to support their opinion
- c a point that links to their own experience
- d a possible different point of view

2 Does the student agree or disagree with the argument in the text? Do they have reservations?

Ways to get more practice

Often, students are afraid of voicing their opinions in front of a larger group. This is a shame, as the free exchange of ideas is key to any academic environment, but if you feel that way, make notes of your thoughts and have a discussion after the lesson with one or two colleagues. Not only will you recycle the content, which will facilitate your learning, but you will also increase your confidence to a point where you can express your ideas freely to the whole class.