

Academic discussions cultural differences and useful phrases

Warmer – Academic discussions discussion

Choose one of the topics below and share your experiences, opinions, etc of that kind of discussion or aspect of discussions (in English, your own language or other languages). You can also mention non-academic discussions, as long as they are connected to the topics below.

- (Formal) debates (debating societies, parliaments, congresses, etc)
- Discussions with lecturers/ professors
- Discussions with (dissertation) supervisors/ tutors
- Discussions with TAs
- Discussions with fellow students
- Discussions in class
- Discussions in conferences
- Discussions in small groups
- Discussions in large groups
- Discussions during poster presentations
- Panel discussions
- Planning joint presentations (with your fellow presenters)
- Online discussions
- Active listening in discussions (= not just passively listening in silence)
- Turn taking (interrupting, getting other people to speak, etc) in discussions
- Checking/ clarifying in discussions/ Dealing with communication problems in discussions
- Giving opinions in discussions (including agreeing and disagreeing)
- Supporting your opinions in discussions
- Discussions in different countries/ Cultural differences in discussions

Ask about anything you are not sure about above, discussing it as a class each time.

Discuss the last topic above as a class.

Cultural differences

Read the descriptions of academic discussions in the UK below and decide if each is the same in your country or not. If it is the same, write the first letter of the name of your country next to that point, e.g. "J" if you think that thing is also the same in Japan. You can also write the first letter of any other countries that you know about, e.g. "Ch" if something is the same in China. If the UK is different from all other countries that you know about, leave that point blank and move onto the next one.

Academic discussion situations cultural differences

Lecturers, professors, teachers, tutors and/ or TAs often ask students to discuss a topic in pairs or groups, perhaps in the middle of a lecture or lesson.

Lecturers, professors, tutors or supervisors often meet students individually or in small groups and encourage discussion of the topics that they have been studying, researching and/ or writing about (for example in regular tutorials).

The Q&A session of a presentation sometimes turns into a discussion of the points raised (rather than just questions and answers), for example if a professor thinks that you haven't thought deeply about the issues or if someone has very different views on the topic.

Poster presentations can sometimes turn into quite involved discussions with the people listening, for example if they find that what you are presenting could have connections to their own studies or if someone disagrees with your conclusions or approach.

Academic discussions can have many different levels of formality, from very formal/ polite to very informal/ casual.

People rarely take part in formal debates (perhaps only in special debate clubs).

Only experts take part in panel discussions, so most people will never take part in a panel discussion (although they might be in the audience of one).

Online discussions of academic topics (on discussion boards, etc) are similar to spoken academic discussions.

People tend to avoid discussion of academic topics during social occasions like parties.

Active listening cultural differences and useful phrases

Even in academic discussions, It's normal to respond to everything that the other person says in some way (= active listening) rather than listening in silence.

We hate repeating in English, so each active listening phrase should be different ("Mmm hmm", "Sure", "Of course", "Right", "Really?", "No kidding", "You reckon?", etc).

Repeating the same active listening phrase ("Mmm hmm, mmm hmm, mmm hmm", etc) makes it sound like you aren't really listening and/ or aren't interested in what is being said.

Turn taking cultural differences and useful phrases

Silence in a discussion is always negative and makes people feel uncomfortable, so it's better to talk over each other, respond before you have really thought about what you want to say, etc rather than being silent.

Because we often speak before we have thought about what we want to say, no one expects academic discussions to be like academic writing or academic presentations (so people rarely say “There are three main reasons for my opinion”, “I am going to speak about...”, “I will look at the two sides of the argument in turn”, etc).

The first few words of a sentence often have no meaning but are simply to fill silence while we think of what we want to say (“I guess I would probably say that...”, “That’s a really interesting question”, “What do I think about that? Well,...”, etc).

Because we often speak before we have planned what we want to say, it’s normal to later modify what we have said (“Sorry, what I meant to say was...”, “No, that’s wrong. What I should have said is...”, “Sorry, that wasn’t very clear. To put that another way,...”, etc).

Even in academic discussions, conversations tend to consist of many short turns (not a long speech followed by another long speech). This is often “volleyball style”, meaning commenting on what the other person has said, adding something, then giving the turn (back) to someone else (“Absolutely. In fact, I’d even say that... Or wouldn’t you go that far?”, “That’s interesting. My own experience is different. I... I’m not sure whose experience is more typical”, etc).

To encourage the other person to respond, it is normal to add a question to the end of what you say (“... , right?”, “... , don’t you think?”, “... , or not?”, “What do you think?”, “How do you feel about that?”, etc).

In academic discussions, the best way of interrupting is usually with something positive such as (partial) agreement and then your own point (“Absolutely. What’s more...”, “Good point, but...”, etc).

You have to be careful about how you change topic and get back to the main topic, as many getting back on track phrases can be rude with the wrong intonation or in the wrong situation (so “So, where were we?” is usually better than “Anyway, as I was saying...” and definitely better than “Anyway, as I was saying before I was interrupted,...”).

Checking/ clarifying cultural difference and useful phrases

If you can’t follow someone’s point, it’s normal to interrupt after a sentence or two to ask for clarification (“Sorry to interrupt, but...?”, “Before you go on,...?”, “Sorry,...?”, etc).

Most checking/ clarifying phrases are requests (“Can you explain...?”, “Can I just check if you mean...?”, “Can you spell that for me?”, “Can you say that another way?”, etc).

Giving opinions cultural differences and useful phrases

There is a clear difference between strong opinion phrases (“I strongly believe that...”, “I’m pretty sure that...”, “It seems clear to me that...”, etc) and weak opinion phrases (“I’m not sure, but...”, “I guess...”, “I suppose...”, etc).

Pronunciation can make an opinion phrase stronger or weaker (“I believe...” vs “I believe...” vs “I beliiiiiiiiieve”).

There are phrases which can soften the negative impact of a strong opinion by warning the other person that a strong opinion is coming (“To be frank,...”, “Not many people will agree with me, but...”, etc).

In academic discussions, you should avoid stating your opinion without supporting what you say (so you have to say “I’m sure that... because...”, not just “I’m sure that...”, etc).

The best ways of supporting your arguments include quoting data and trends (“Recent statistics from... show that...”, “There has been a 300% increase in...”, etc), quoting other people’s opinions and experiences (“Chomsky says that...”, “All the speakers at a conference I went to last year agreed that...”, etc), knocking down opposing arguments (“Although many people believe that...”, “It could also be said that..., but this doesn’t mean that...”, etc), and logical arguments such as cause and effect (“This would inevitably lead to...”, “The result of this is likely to be...”, etc).

Unlike most academic writing, it’s okay to use personal experience to support your arguments in academic discussions (“I have found that...”, “In my limited experience”, “I usually find that...”, etc).

Direct disagreement phrases are rare in academic discussions (so we don’t often say “I disagree”, “I don’t agree”, etc).

The most common way of disagreeing in academic discussions is with a positive statement then “but” (“I see what you mean, but don’t you think...?”, “That’s a good point, but it could also be said that...”, “I used to feel that way, but recently I read that...”, etc).

Instead of disagreeing directly, in academic discussions it’s common to ask the other person to expand on their views (“Hmmm, what makes you say that?”, “What are you basing that on?”, “Do you have any data on that?”, “Can you unpack that for me?”, etc).

Hedging and generalising cultural differences and useful phrases

In academic discussions (as in academic writing), we need to be very careful not to overgeneralise (so don’t say just “Japanese people think...”, “It is thought that...”, etc).

To not overgeneralise, in academic discussions we often add information on how many or how much something matches our statement, for example how many people something is true for (“almost everyone”, “the vast majority of people”, “most people”, “many people”, “a considerable/ substantial number of people”, “some people”, etc).

To avoid overgeneralising, in academic discussions we often add information on how often something is true or happens (“almost always”, “usually/ generally”, “often/ regularly”, “sometimes”, “occasionally”, etc).

So that we don’t overgeneralise, in academic discussions we often add information on how likely something is to be true or to happen (“almost certainly”, “very probably”, “probably”, “possibly”, “conceivably”, etc).

Brainstorming stage

Without looking above for now, write at least two suitable phrases in each of the gaps below. Many phrases not above are also possible.

Active listening cultural differences and useful phrases

We hate repeating in English, so each active listening phrase should be different (_____
_____).

Turn taking cultural differences and useful phrases

The first few words of a sentence often have no meaning but are simply to fill silence while we think of what we want to say (_____
_____).

Because we often speak before we have planned what we want to say, it's normal to later modify what we have said (_____
_____).

Even in academic discussions, conversations tend to consist of many short turns (not a long speech followed by another long speech). This is often "volleyball style", meaning commenting on what the other person has said, adding something, then giving the turn (back) to someone else (_____
_____).

To encourage the other person to respond, it is normal to add a question to the end of what you say (_____
_____).

In academic discussions, the best way of interrupting is usually with something positive such as (partial) agreement and then your own point (_____
_____).

Checking/ clarifying cultural difference and useful phrases

If you can't follow someone's point, it's normal to interrupt after a sentence or two to ask for clarification (_____
_____).

Most checking/ clarifying phrases are requests (_____
_____).

Giving opinions cultural differences and useful phrases

There is a clear difference between strong opinion phrases (_____

_____) and weak opinion phrases (_____

_____).

Pronunciation can make an opinion phrase stronger or weaker (_____ vs

vs _____ or _____ vs _____ vs _____).

There are phrases which can soften the negative impact of a strong opinion by warning the other person that a strong opinion is coming (_____

_____).

The best ways of supporting your arguments include quoting data and trends (_____

_____), quoting other people's opinions and experiences (_____

_____), knocking down opposing arguments (_____

_____), and logical arguments such as cause and effect (_____

_____).

Unlike most academic writing, it's okay to use personal experience to support your arguments in academic discussions (_____

_____).

The most common way of disagreeing in academic discussions is with a positive statement then "but" (_____

_____).

Instead of disagreeing directly, in academic discussions it's common to ask the other person to expand on their views (_____

_____).

Hedging and generalising cultural differences and useful phrases

To not overgeneralise, in academic discussions we often add information on how many or how much something matches our statement, for example how many people something is true for (_____

_____).

To avoid overgeneralising, in academic discussions we often add information on how often something is true or happens (_____

_____).

So that we don't overgeneralise, in academic discussions we often add information on how likely something is to be true or to happen (_____

_____).

Check your answers above, then brainstorm more.

Use phrases from above to discuss good and bad ways of improving your English.