

Entering Class Discussions

From Gerald Graff and Kathy Birkenstein, *They Say/I Say*. Norton: 2009, pp. 133-135.

The conversational principles discussed in this book apply to speaking as well as to writing, and in particular to speaking in classroom discussions. But speaking in class has some special requirements, as the following guidelines suggest:

Frame Your Comments as a Response to Something That Has already Been Said

Since the best group discussions are genuine conversations rather than a series of disconnected monologues, the single most important thing you need to do when joining a class discussion is to link what you are about to say to something that has already been said:

- I really liked the point Aaron made earlier when he said that _____ . I agree because _____ .
- I take your point, Nadia, that _____ . Still . . .
- Though Sheila and Ryan seem to be at odds about _____ , they may actually not be all that far apart.

In framing your comments this way, it is usually best to name both the person and the idea you're responding to. If you name the person alone ("I agree with Aziz because _____"), it may not be clear to listeners what part of what Aziz said you are referring to.

To Change the Subject, Indicate Explicitly That You Are Doing So

It is fine to try to change the conversation's direction. There's just one catch: you need to make clear to listeners that this is what you are doing. For example:

- So far we have been talking about _____. But isn't the real issue here _____?
- I'd like to change the subject to one that hasn't yet been addressed.

If you try to change the subject without indicating that you are doing so, your comment will come across as irrelevant rather than as a thoughtful contribution that moves the conversation forward.

Be Even More Explicit Than You Would Be In Writing

Because listeners in an oral discussion can't go back and reread what you just said, they are more easily overloaded than are readers of a print text. For this reason, in a class discussion you will do well to take some extra steps to help listeners follow your train of thought. (1) When you make a comment, limit yourself to one point and one point only. Although you can elaborate on the point, fleshing it out with examples and evidence, it is important that any elaboration be clearly focused on your point. If you feel you must make two points, either unite them under one larger umbrella point, or make one point first and save the other for later. Trying to bundle two or more claims into one comment too often results in neither point getting the attention it deserves. (2) Use metacommentary to highlight your key point.

- In other words, what I'm trying to get at here is _____.
- My point is this: _____.
- My point, though, is not _____, but _____.
- This distinction is important for several reasons: _____.