

Tutorials

How to get the most out of 'tutes'

What is a tutorial?

Tutorials are designed to complement lectures. In lectures, information, theories and principles are typically presented by a lecturer to a large number of students. During the lecture there is usually very little opportunity to discuss or question what the lecturer says. Tutorials ('tutes') are less formal than lectures and are conducted in smaller groups.

Tutorials provide an interactive learning environment where students can clarify and extend, through readings, discussions and other activities, what they learn from the lectures.

Why have tutorials?

Tutorials give you the opportunity to **actively engage with the course content** and to get to know other students and the tutor/lecturer. You can ask questions about the information presented in the lectures and clarify issues related to the course, for example, how best to approach an assessment task.

Tutorials also allow you to practise analytical thinking and problem solving strategies and to acquire important group work, presentation and speaking skills. You can learn from hearing other perspectives and you can use the other students to test your ideas. This means that tutorials can save you study time and help you to prepare for assignments and exams.

Your role in tutorials

Tutorials can be stimulating and also a lot of fun. However, their success depends on the participation of the students. You will get more out of a tutorial if you:

- prepare well for the topic
- actively participate in discussions
- ask questions to clarify your understanding of the topic under discussion
- offer your thoughts and ideas for others to consider
- are constructive and encouraging in your contributions
- listen respectfully to others.

Preparing for tutorials

You need to be prepared to participate actively in your tutorials. The more preparation you do, the more valuable the tutorial will be for you.

There will usually be **prescribed** and/or **recommended readings** to be completed *before* the tutorial. Often it will seem that there is too much to read. However, it may not be possible to read everything on the reading list. A good method is to read all the prescribed reading and one or two recommended texts thoroughly and briefly review several (or all) of the others. Thorough reading is not simply making summaries, but focusing on the topic so that you read with a purpose.

Usually you will have received an outline of the weekly tutorial topics at the start of the semester. Consider how the reading relates to the topic and the main points presented in the lecture (refer to your lecture notes). Think about similarities or differences between the texts and try to form your own opinions. Note down any questions and comments you have about the material or the lecture for discussion during the tutorial.

Even if you do not complete any of the preparation,

DO NOT MISS THE TUTORIAL.

You can still benefit from listening to others discussing the topic.

Participating in tutorials

In many subjects, a percentage of your final grade is for 'tutorial participation'. This mark reflects not only your attendance, but also how **active** you are in tutorials – whether you sit quietly and say nothing or whether you act as an interested, enthusiastic member of the group who asks questions, shares ideas, presents different perspectives, makes comments and raises issues.

The key to speaking in tutorials is to:

- know what the tutorial is about
- have completed at least the minimum amount of reading
- be prepared to contribute to the class.

Consider forming a study group with other tute students to tackle studies and discuss issues

Academic Skills

Aim to participate at least once in every tutorial.

The easiest way to participate is to add to the existing discussion. You can do this in a range of ways.

For example, you can:

- agree with what someone has said
- ask the speaker to clarify what they mean (perhaps by asking for an example)
- ask a specific question related to what the speaker has said
- provide an example for the point under discussion
- disagree (politely) with what someone has said and give reasons for your opinion
- respond to a question that is asked of the group
- try to relate what has been said to other points discussed earlier.

Consider the following examples of contributing to a tutorial discussion:

Jac: People in Victoria act as if Aussie Rules football is a religion for them.	Introducing a new topic
Sue: Yep, good point, they do!	Agreement
Ben: What do you mean when you say "religion"?	Asking for clarification
Jac: Well, it's like they worship it. The whole city stops every weekend to watch the games. It's like church.	Clarifying
Lin: Yes, and it's always in the newspapers or on TV. It's a constant topic of conversation.	Agreement (with example)
Raj: Although, over summer, when they're not playing games, you don't hear all that much about it, do you?	Disagreement (in form of a question)
Ben: No, I don't think that's the case. The papers usually spend the summer discussing who will play for which team or who the new coaches will be. There's always something new.	Disagreement (with example)
Raj: Yes, there is always something in the news, but there is much less of it over summer than during the football season itself.	Agreement (qualified)
Lin: But if football is something that is just frequently discussed, does that mean that it is like a "religion"?	Relating to what has been said earlier

The longer you wait to say something, the harder it will get! Even if you can't think of anything to say, show you are involved by 'listening actively'. Look at the person speaking, listen attentively, take notes of important points and use non-verbal signs such as nodding, to indicate you are following the discussion. You can build your confidence by taking small steady steps leading to longer contributions. A good strategy is to always go to a tutorial with **one or two comments or questions already prepared** to contribute to the topic. As you become more confident you can be more spontaneous with your comments.

Improving your confidence in groups:

Look at everyone: Eye contact will make your classmates feel involved in the conversation.

Speak to everyone: Don't just speak to the tutor. Include as many of your classmates as possible in the discussion.

Speak up: Make sure the class can hear what you're saying. Eye contact helps with this: you have to keep your head up.

Speak slowly: You are likely to speak faster when you are nervous, which can make you harder to understand.

Learn people's names: Knowing the names of people in the tutorial can help you feel more at home and less shy about talking to the others, both inside and outside the tutorial.

Tutorial presentations

In many tutorials, students are required to present a topic to the whole group. A presentation is usually 10 to 20 minutes long, followed by a class discussion.

If you are asked to present to the class:

- **Know your topic:** be able to relate it to course content.
- **Know your time limit:** make sure you can include the relevant information *within* the time you have. Rehearse the presentation to check your timing.
- **Have a clear structure for your presentation:** outline it to your audience *in your introduction*, so that they know what to expect.
- **Find a way to engage and interest the audience:** e.g. ask questions; provide examples the students can relate to; use graphics, such as maps, charts or photos; use sound recordings; or include activities that the students can participate in.
- **Avoid reading directly from your notes:** maintain eye contact with your audience, and vary tone and pace to help keep the audience interested.
- **Practise your presentation:** practise with your friends and get feedback following your practice presentations.
- **Prepare for questions:** think about questions that may be asked following your presentation.

Nervous about speaking?

Most people are nervous when they first talk in front of others. However, there are benefits to be gained from learning to speak up in tutorials. When you graduate, you are likely to engage in professional work that will require you to speak at meetings and give presentations. Tutorials are a chance to develop these professional skills.

If you are very nervous about speaking, you should try to say something at the first tutorial, even if you only ask a simple administrative question, such as the location of the tutor's office.

Further References

Peter Ruthven-Stuart. Phrases used in conversations and discussions. http://www.nsknet.or.jp/~peterrs/zemi/kiso_seminar_phrases.html

The Academic Skills and Learning Centre (ANU). Giving a tutorial presentation. http://www.anu.edu.au/academicskills/online_materials/oral_presentations/giving_a_tutorial_presentation.pdf

Academic Skills