Learning from Seminars

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1. **Putting seminars in context**

   In order to get the best from seminars, you need to understand why they are used at university. What are they for? What's expected from a seminar participant? These are especially important issues to grasp at the start of your academic career.

   Seminars provide an opportunity for students to explore topics in a relatively small group in order to clarify their knowledge and understanding. They provide a relaxed and ‘comfortable’ environment that allows students to test out and explore their ideas.

   They will be led by a member of staff; but s/he is there to facilitate discussion as well as give an informed opinion, evaluation or body of information.

   So, at the end of an effective seminar engagement the seminar participant should have developed their understanding by a three-way process: learning from the seminar leader; learning from other participants; contributing to the general discussion themselves.

   As a consequence of this, it’s difficult – perhaps impossible – to gain much from a seminar unless you are actively involved. Attending a seminar means more than just sitting in the room! And effective participation may involve developing your speaking and listening skills: issues addressed elsewhere in this leaflet.

   The second thing to grasp about seminars is the way they fit into the structure
of a module or programme. This has important consequences for the way you prepare for, approach and use seminars. Take, for example, a 15 credit module delivered over an Autumn Term of 12 weeks. It is likely that the module will be supported by a sequence of about 10-12 lectures, perhaps interspersed by a reading week. Obviously, the initial lecture will be an introductory one, in part at least, setting the context for the whole module. Indeed, the aim of the whole sequence of lectures will be to give you a detailed overview of the module so you understand the whole area of learning.

But, crucially, each lecture will be followed by a parallel seminar; most probably, within a few days. Having gained a broad understanding of a subject within the lecture (Step 1), you can now explore and clarify issues in detail through the seminar (Step 2.) And because there’s been some time between lecture and seminar, you are likely to have absorbed the information from the lecture well…provided, of course, you have attended the lecture and paid attention!

So, from this follows four things:

| 1. | The best initial preparation for a seminar is good lecture attendance. |
| 2. | This means more than just sitting in the lecture theatre…it means active involvement in, and processing of, the lecture. |
| 3. | It’s a good idea to briefly but systematically review your lecture notes before the seminar. |
| 4. | You should deliberately think of issues you want to ‘take forward’ from the lecture for clarification during the seminar. |

Lastly, of course, it’s the combination of Step 1 and Step 2 that really gives you detailed knowledge to prepare for assignments and exams…so you need to think hard about the relationship between lectures and seminars and be diligent about both!

2. **Preparing for seminars**

Now let’s think about how you might prepare for the seminar in detail. There are two scenarios here; not mutually exclusive, of course. Firstly, where you are giving a seminar paper that week; secondly, when you are just attending.

2.1 **Preparing Seminar papers**

Seminar papers need time to prepare! Don’t leave it until the last minute, but plan your time so you finish, ideally, the night before with time for a final read-through.

Like an essay, seminar papers need dividing into key stages:

- Understanding/addressing the question.
- Reading and research.
- Planning.
- Writing.

Don’t muddle up these stages and jump about from stage to stage! In other words, doing a bit of thinking, a bit of reading, a bit of writing, a bit more thinking etc is a rather ‘clumsy’ way of proceeding! Try and move smoothly
from one stage to another. Time manage the whole process, deciding how much time will be spent on reading and research then moving on, at the time you have planned, to writing the document.

Most seminar papers are of 10-15 minutes duration. You need to plan accordingly. As a rough guide, any key point you make would need about two minutes to develop/outline. So for a ten minute paper you might have 1-1½ minutes to introduce the main points; 3 or 4 main points; 1-1½ minutes to conclude. If you prepare too much you will waste time because you won’t deliver it all! And if you speed up during the seminar to try and get through your prepared material you’ll just start garbling and lose everyone’s interest! Try and plan for the timing at the start.

There are two approaches to the actual document you prepare. You can either produce a series of brief notes or bullet points, in logical sequence, on paper or index cards. You use these to talk from. Or you can produce a piece of continuous prose that you read aloud. But if you chose this approach, remember this is not just a conventional essay you read out but a shorter piece of prose you read from whilst keeping eye contact with your audience.

Therefore, this needs to be short and succinct with clearly designed stages. It is best to use double/1.5 line spacing and a 14 point font, so that you can keep in active contact with your audience when you read the paper.

Finally, remember to structure your seminar paper. Like an essay, it needs a brief introductory section defining context and background, setting out your central ‘argument’/hypothesis and giving the other seminar participants an ‘overview’ of what you will cover. You then need to unfold/develop your argument in clearly defined stages. Finally, provide a succinct conclusion re-iterating and affirming your central point(s).

Seminar papers that don’t have this clear introduction > development > conclusion structure tend to become a mumble/ramble around a few key points in fairly random order…not surprisingly, everyone loses interest and the whole experience rather falls apart! Not exactly good learning practice!!

2.2 General Preparation

Again, leave time for this! You need to plan your seminar preparation along with all the other things you need to do that week. It’s no good doing a bit of hasty reading half an hour before; equally, it may be unrealistic to try and read everything on the reading list for that week carefully…work out what you think you can do, using your other commitments, personal interests and the demands of any assignments you are working on as a guide…

But as a minimum make sure you have read the recommended reading for the week. You should aim to cover that as well as you can. This probably means taking a few brief notes on your reading material so that you retain what you have read: so you may want to spend a bit of time reviewing your reading and note-taking. Consult the Student Learning Advisory Service for this, www.kent.ac.uk/learning. (If you feel this reading is beginning to erode time spent on other aspects of your studies, remember that good reading for seminars will also help you prepare for assessments and exams.)

As noted above, put each seminar into context by reviewing its relationship to
the lecture(s) for the module.

In addition, it’s a good idea to review - briefly – your notes from the previous week’s seminar when you are attending a sequence of seminars.

Finally, it’s a good idea to make a note of any points you want to clarify or discuss within the seminar, even if you aren’t actually giving a paper. This will give you a focus point during discussion and is an excellent way of maintaining concentration and interest. Keep a checklist of the points that interest you, or you need to clarify, in front of you. You can annotate this with brief comments during the seminar. Perhaps the last thing you should do just before the seminar is to spend five minutes jotting down these points so you go in with a good level of focus and concentration.

3. **Active Participation**

3.1 **General Points**

Do try and join in! It’s an obvious point, but the more you contribute the better it will be for all. Bad seminars have a leaden feel in which everyone stares at the table, expectant pauses lengthen into embarrassing silences and the seminar leader eventually talks all the time…often because s/he feels they are the only person willing to say anything!

Good seminars feel lively and engaging. Without interrupting one another, people are always wanting to say something. Time passes quickly; students really learn something and there’s even time to develop a collective sense of humour.

But the good seminar does depend on everyone being willing to contribute, to ‘have a go’…Students sometimes feel, of course, diffident about contributing. There can be a feeling that, “If I speak I’ll make a fool of myself…”; “They look as if they understand - I’m the only one that doesn’t.” These fears are misplaced. Students may think they are ‘unique’ in having these fears; in reality many others feel the same! Especially in Stage 1 seminars, everyone may feel a little…awkward…particularly at the start of the seminar series.

There is only one way to break this feeling: and that is to join in! Logically, if you have thought sensibly about the topic(s), done some of the reading and left time to prepare you are probably going to say something useful rather than ‘silly’. So join in…

As noted above, take in a few notes about points you want to clarify.

It may also be helpful to have a few notes about your reading in general. Post-its marking key passages in some of the core reading can be very useful.

3.2 **Speaking**

Look up when you want to say anything, and do look around…one of the simplest things you can do to make sure you can be heard is simply to look up! If someone mumbles, or looks down, then what they say sometimes just fades away.

To keep people’s interest, and to encourage them to listen to you, keep eye
contact across the room.

Many people find it hard to sequence what they want to say when they start speaking, or they forget exactly what they want to say and start repeating themselves. Hearing this, they become self-conscious and thereby less able to articulate their thoughts!

There is no easy solution to this problem, but one thing you can do is keep a piece of scrap paper by you during the seminar, and make a very brief bullet-point note of something you want to say. Then use this as a ‘prompt’; when you have finished talking score a line through the notes so they can’t get muddled up with any subsequent bullet-point notes. This process may feel a little strange at first, but gradually you will get used to the idea of rapidly rehearsing what you want to say. And with growing confidence, you may begin to dispense with these notes altogether.

Indeed, this is something you will note across your time at the University: the more you contribute to seminars, the more natural it will seem… and you will begin to feel confident about voicing an informed opinion.

Finally, a few points about your voice and techniques for effective speaking. Admittedly, some people seem to be naturally ‘strong’ speakers… you will probably know that you are one, if you fall into this category! But everyone can control three key elements of their speech: speed, volume and tone. Learn to monitor and control these… most importantly, don’t rush in whenever you talk! Pause, briefly, before you start speaking… and use constructive pauses throughout.

### 3.3 Listening

Like speaking skills, listening skills will develop over time. You will find that the more you concentrate on listening to others, the more effective you will be in retaining information. There are, however, a few ways in which you can enhance your listening skills:

Concentrate when someone is speaking. Try and focus attention on them, looking at them and almost ‘filtering out’ other voices. As noted with speaking, eye contact is an important corollary of effective listening too.

Listen for key junctions in talk; especially from the seminar leader who is likely to be expert in summarising ("So having looked at x so far, we need to consider how much y also contributes to…")

Cultivate the habit of taking brief notes so you are always jotting down what people say; then edit, tidy up and condense these notes later.

Pay particular attention when you have asked a question and are listening to the reply. Sometimes it’s easy to concentrate on raising the question, but slacken off concentration during the answer! An effective way of keeping an even flow of concentration, and of checking you have understood the answer, is to summarise the response to your question, “So what you are saying is…” For all within the seminar group, this is an excellent process for clarifying what’s been said.

### 3.4 Giving a seminar paper

A good seminar paper should be a constructive experience for all concerned. If well organised, and effectively delivered, it will encourage active
participation. You need to take charge of the seminar group for the 10 minutes or so you are delivering your paper, and display active involvement yourself. In many ways, all the tips and techniques in the sections above will help you here. But perhaps it is worth setting out an action plan for giving an effective seminar paper:

- Make sure you are comfortable where you are sitting/standing, with your notes and visual aids, if you use them, in front of you in an orderly way.
- Take up a position that is relaxed, informal but not unintentionally giving a ‘can’t be bothered message’, e.g. slouching backwards in a chair.
- Have a good view of the room and all within it.
- Look around when you start your paper, and establish general eye contact.
- Pause before starting…DON’T RUSH into, or rush through, your paper.
- As noted above, make sure you have material you can talk from, not just read out.
- Keep your head up.
- Raise the volume of your voice fractionally higher than normal.
- Observe the structure of your paper – beginning, development, conclusion - as noted above.
- It’s best to encourage questions at the end (where questions are allowed before the end of seminar paper, it can throw overall timing and create a situation where the group rambles from point to point).
- Pause between sections of your paper.
- Give a summary at the end.
- Leave time for questions.
- Don’t panic when questions are asked, rephrase for clarity and think before you reply. If you don’t know, say so.

3.5 Note-taking

As Section 4 below suggests, the real point of seminars is both to clarify your knowledge and give you information and evaluations you can take forwards to the rest of your degree. If you attended a seminar in Autumn Term Week 3, you could well be using the learning you gained from it around about Spring Term Week 20 when you start revising for exams. In short, you need more than just memory to retain the information, ideas and concepts you explore…you will need some form of note-taking (See separate ‘Note-Making Study Guide).

The way you take notes is highly individual; it would be inappropriate to offer any student a ‘formula’ for note-taking. But there are a few guiding principles:

- Explore different techniques. You will need to take notes rapidly, so adapt your notes accordingly so that they are brief and to the point.
- You will not have time to summarise the whole of the discussion within a seminar! Be selective…aim to record the salient points that relate to your particular interests and concerns.
- Try and form a type of notes template that allows you to record different aspects of the seminar. Again, experiment with this…but you need a section that records the basic details of the seminar; a section that summarises the main discussion; a section that records points you still don’t quite understand, or need to follow up on; a section to record future reading/resources.
4.0 **Processing seminar information**

You will need to keep accurate records of the seminars you attended so you can build up a knowledge-resource. In combination with other materials – lecture notes; reading material etc – the seminar material you collect will help you prepare for assignments and exams…but ONLY if you can make sense of your notes later on, and access your seminar material in an orderly way.

Again, there are a few guiding principles:

4.1 **Immediate afterwards**

Date and entitle all your notes and seminar material so that it’s always clear what seminar they relate to.

Straighten everything up, put it in order.

Spend a couple of minutes going over any notes you took during the seminar to make sure they are tidy and legible and make sense later on!

4.2 **Longer term**

Systematically file away your seminar material at the end of the day/week.

Review your notes at the end of the day/week.

Review your notes at the end of the module/term.

As you head towards exams, and prepare revision material, you might like to think about combining resources to make revision subject packs; i.e. bringing together seminar notes, lecture notes, photocopies of journal articles, reading material, etc.

Good luck for effective seminar participation! If you want to follow up on any of this advice and guidance, or raise any further questions, please contact us: [www.kent.ac.uk/learning](http://www.kent.ac.uk/learning)