

# 4 Talking and listening

A note to readers. It is suggested that you increase magnification to 125% or 150% to read the guide on screen. Click on the magnifying glass icon at bottom left of the screen and select your magnification.

## Key points in Chapter 4

- Talking with friends, even in a casual way, about the topics you study, should not be neglected.
- Talking is an easy and enjoyable way to help sort out information, test judgements and assessments and further clarity of thought and expression.
- Class discussion provides an opportunity to hear ideas and to test arguments in a more formal setting.
- In discussion, informal or formal, the listener also benefits.

**W**HILE STRUGGLING with the question of how a society may be justly governed, the eighteenth-century French writer Jean Jacques Rousseau, whose thought contributed to the dissatisfaction which formed the French Revolution, wrote *The Social Contract* (1762). In those brief pages he powerfully provided the reasons for our preference to live together in groups, in society, a course which is chosen by all but a very few of us. Only a handful of individuals, such as Julian of Norwich, chose a life of contemplative solitude.

News about people and events is part of the glue of social life. The Media, apart from its role in a political audit, helps meet this need. That is why people so regularly update on news and on gossip column content, although reports in *Sunday Sport* that Hitler escaped from the Berlin bunker and travelled to Mars in a B52 bomber and that a correspondent's friend was eaten by a brussels sprout belong to comical fiction. And students when they are not in class readily resort to what some call gossip and some call chat, and few would question that in general gossip and chat, about sport or relationships or whatever, is wholesome.

## Turning talking and listening to advantage

A work-obsessive student, so often with head in books, is likely to be inefficient with study. This is not advocated but talking and listening about the subject of your study with a classmate, or with anyone with whom you share the course and with whom you have some rapport, outside the formality of class will help you make large strides towards higher-grade work.

Your tasks as a student include the absorption of much information. At the end, the extent of your success as a History student is assessed by what you write - in assignments, essays or exam. In between, information has to be assessed, ordered, analysed, ideas tested and judgements made. In Chapter 3 (Working on information) I suggested some activities for this middle stage of work. Talking and listening is another.

Discussions with fellow students, sometimes almost casual and sometimes brief, sometimes more protracted, in which your ideas are put into words and explained, your theories, assessments and judgements tested against the critically constructive response of the listener, will help to clarify and shape your thought and sharpen and improve expression. We can think in our head and get away with muddle but once words are spoken confused thought, incoherence and nonsense is audible.

You spend a good deal of time as a student as a receiver of information and ideas from books and talks. The main time you deliver, not receive, is when you write course assignments and exam answers. So there is an imbalance between 'taking in' and 'giving out'. Discussion is one way to increase the 'giving out', but it requires a lot less effort than writing. Even if informal discussion does not require the precision and rigour of written work, it does further clarity of thought and understanding.

Of course, most discussion between two students will have a rough balance between talking and listening, but in any case the listener is not a loser. The listener has the opportunity to hear the other students' views and ideas, ideas to which they will probably readily relate, and listening and seeking to see sense in what is said will further the listener's own familiarity with the topic, help towards their own sorting out and improve their own clarity of thought. Above all, discussion adds energy and interest for your work.

## Talking and listening in class discussions

Class discussion is a forum for talking and listening in a formal

setting. The worst discussions are those in which students sit in awkward silence while the poor old teacher gamely tries to engender discussion.

To benefit from formal discussion you need to have some grounding in the topic. This you will have if you have completed at least your preliminary reading (see Chapter 2, Hunting for information) and thereby have a foundation for discussion. After that, the success of the discussion (for you) will depend on your (and other students') willingness to contribute. Students with bottle and verve are not overawed by teachers, tutors or other students. Discussions can be especially useful because, although the most tedious side of study is the acquisition of information by reading, the most helpful/valuable side is the ideas, theories and arguments, and the discussion is an occasion when these are raised and discussed. Even an incorrect theory or a flawed argument, in so far as it encourages you to think, is useful to you and your group members. That is why all can contribute once they have a grounding on a topic. If you discuss your ideas with your friends, as recommended earlier in this chapter, you will find it easier to contribute to formal discussions and you will gain more from them. Of course, an argument, in discussion or in an essay, is only as good as the evidence upon which it is based and the soundness of the reasoning used.