

# How I Became a Baker Scholar

*10 Strategies For Winning the Class Participation  
(and Business Meeting) Game*

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# Overview

- A critical skill to succeed in life, both personally and professionally, is to successfully participate in group discussions such as the classroom, board meetings, meetings at work, family or friend gatherings, etc.
- If you are consistently perceived as a strong contributor, it will have a huge positive impact on your career and life
- This presentation is focused on business settings such as a board meeting or MBA classroom, in which the stakes are high and “airtime” is scarce

# Tip No. 1: Treat Class Participation Seriously

It's an important part of your grade and even if it weren't, it's critical to the learning process - yours as well as your classmates'. So don't even think about raising your hand and using up valuable class time unless you believe that you have something insightful to say that will advance the learning of your classmates and impress the professor.

## Tip No. 2: Speak Up, But Not Too Much

To get the highest class participation grade, you need to speak more than average, but not too much or you will earn the resentment of your classmates and the professor will likely stop calling on you. The right amount will depend on how many students are in each class and how long the classes last. In my experience with 80-person, 90-minute classes, speaking every other class was about right.

## **Tip No. 3: Don't Speak in the First Half of Class (Or Meeting)**

In general, the professor uses the first half of every class to establish the facts of the case, while the real analysis occurs near the end. Let your classmates make “chip shots” that merely demonstrate that they read the case, while you demonstrate sophisticated thinking during the discussion of the meaty issues that takes place in the second half of each class.

## Tip No. 4: Don't Ask or Answer Questions

Air time is precious, so don't waste it asking questions. Even the best question won't impress a professor as much as an insightful piece of analysis, and you can always get the answer later by asking one of your classmates.

As for answering questions, unless you happen to have already prepared the answer, why would you blurt out an unprepared comment?

## Tip No. 5: Prepare Your Comments *in Writing*

You study hard to make the best impression on exams, so why would you prepare any less for classroom participation? Use the first half of the class - remember, you won't be talking anyway - to see where the discussion might be heading, and then outline, in writing, a killer comment to make when the discussion reaches just the right moment.

# Tip No. 6: When You Raise Your Hand, Hold up a Highlighter and Wiggle It a Bit

Have you ever seen the studies that show that the human eye is drawn to color and movement? You want the professor to see that your hand is raised, especially if 20 others have their hands raised as well.

## Tip No. 7: Let It Go!

It's incredibly irritating to work really hard to prepare an insightful comment and then, right before you raise your hand, one of your classmates makes the same point, or the classroom discussion goes in another direction. If this happens, let it go! If not, and you make the comment anyway, you will simply earn the ire of your professor and classmates.

## Tip No. 8: First Impressions Are Lasting Ones

Professors are human. If you make some killer comments early in the semester, they're more likely to think all the rest of your comments are brilliant as well. Building credibility with professors also increases the chances that they will call on you every time you raise your hand (nothing is more annoying than preparing an insightful comment and then not getting called on!).

## Tip No. 9: Get to Know Your Professors

There are many good reasons for this: they are often smart, interesting people, you might develop mentors, and at the very least, it will increase the likelihood that they will call on you and remember your comments during class. Just don't overdo it - everyone hates a brown-noser.

# Tip No. 10: Track and Grade Every Comment

Halfway through a semester, you will want to think about which classes will require more or better class participation over the rest of the semester to earn you the highest grade. But will you really be able to remember all the comments you made in each class? Not likely...

Therefore, it's easy to default to over-participating in your favorite classes and under-participating in other classes. But that's the exact opposite of what you're likely to need to ace every class since you may need top-notch class participation in your less-favorite classes to offset the higher possibility of a weak exam.

To make sure this doesn't happen, you need to track, by course, every comment you make during the semester, and grade each one. I just did it on a sheet of paper and used a simple grading scale: a "1" was a great comment, a "2" was average and a "3" was poor, while a "0" meant no comment.

So at mid-semester, my list for a course might look like this: 2, 0, 2, 1, 0, 3, 0, 0. This means that in the first eight classes, I made four comments - no problem there - but the average score was only a "2," which told me that I had to really prepare extra diligently in that class to bring up my class participation grade.

# Conclusion

- Many of these strategies wouldn't work if everyone followed them - after all, someone has to speak in the first half of a class/meeting and be willing to answer questions that the professor/CEO poses
- But you're reading this and most of your peers aren't, so use that to your advantage!

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