

TIPS FOR STUDENT COMMENTS, PAPERS OR PRESENTATIONS

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Halfway through the semester, there are certain things that I need to get off my chest. A few rather direct words of advice, which you may imagine not only to have been accumulating over time, but also to have been triggered by recent experience. Harsh words? Better now than later.

(1) NEVER MAKE EXCUSES OF ANY KIND

Never ever say things like: "I am not sure, but..."

Or "of course I may be wrong, but..."

Or "please correct me if I'm wrong, but..."

Or "I don't really feel prepared, but..."

Or "I don't know if I can say all this in my limited time, but..."

Or "I don't know if I can meet the same high standards set by previous speakers, but..."

Ultimately, all this comes under self-pity.

And also on soliciting pity and mercy from your audience.

If you are really time-conscious, don't waste a single minute confessing your sins.

It is entirely your problem if you are not organized.

Don't try to pass it off to your listeners.

Don't hedge. Don't cringe. Don't be defensive.

The alternative is not to be pretentious, to show off, to be cocksure.

Don't ornament. Don't embellish. Be simple and modest.

Just say what you have to say.

As clearly, as succinctly, and as precisely as possible.

(2) NEVER ENGAGE IN FALSE MODESTY

Making small talk with your friends is one thing.

Speaking up in class is another.

In any academic context —

Never ever say (or write) things like: "In my view..."

Or "in my opinion..."

Or (worse) "in my personal opinion..."

Or (the ultimate) "according to me..."

Of course it is your opinion.

Who else might it belong to?

Are you several people?

Is somebody invisible hiding behind you?

Apart from the logical absurdity, this is actually another way of hedging.
Of distancing yourself from what you are about to say.
Because you don't have enough confidence in your conclusions.
Hence you are subconsciously taking precautions.
You are subjectivizing and relativizing yourself beforehand.
If contradicted or criticized, this is your implied fallback.
Your last line of defence: "Well, it was just my view."
You can be braver than that.

As for "according to...", this is a formula that you absolutely cannot use for yourself.
You can use it only for others.
You can say "according to Keynes," for example.
Or "according to Ernest Gellner." Or "according to Michel Foucault."
Or "according to Einstein." Or "according to Adam Smith."
But you cannot translate the Turkish bana göre into "according to me."
The English phrase is not made for that.
It can also backfire in unexpected ways.
You may have used it in modesty (or false modesty).
But it can turn into the very opposite.
It may actually sound like you are pontificating.
That you are taking yourself too seriously.
That you are quoting yourself as an authority.
One way or the other, it can immediately ruin, before you have even started, everything else that you have to say.