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<!-- Col Count:2-->Module:	Communication and Interpersonal Skills
Skill:	Being Assertive

Overview: Being Assertive

Learning how to be assertive, and then putting that learning into practice, will make a positive impact not just on your life as a student, but also in your professional future. Imagine for a moment that you could learn how to be more assertive ... it takes only a few seconds to begin to appreciate how this could help you throughout your time on campus. Some examples – of the many instances in which you could use this skill – will show you just how much it could help you.

In your first year at university, taking an assertive approach will allow you to:

- Express clearly how you feel about new situations, helping others to see you more clearly and respect your viewpoint.
- Listen actively to how others are experiencing life on campus, so that you can more fully appreciate their needs and life view.

- Ensure that, when you are working in a group, your way of approaching the task is not sidelined, and that you are not left doing far too much of the work.
- Live more harmoniously in shared housing, with everyone understanding the best way to live together.
- Socialise in the way that you enjoy, without expecting everyone to join in, but also not being in situations that leave you feeling uncomfortable.

As your study journey continues, you could be assertive in some key situations:

- In high-stakes projects, where every mark could matter to you, being assertive gives you the chance to direct how a project develops.
- In managing your time alongside your fellow students, so that you are not feeling the pressure of continually running out of time.
- As you express your views and beliefs in students' clubs, societies, or publications, giving you the chance to free speech that is persuasive without offending.
- If you are undertaking a final year project, asserting your intellectual position with your academic tutor, supervisor, and mentor, allowing you to shine without alienating your supporters.
- If you feel that you, or a group of which you are part, are being treated unfairly, assertiveness is going to be key to resolving the situation in your favour.

Beyond your life on campus, being assertive pays dividends both now and in the future:

- If you work to earn money whilst studying, you need to guarantee that you are as well paid as you possibly can be for each hour you work.
- If you have to negotiate better working conditions or more flexible hours, assertiveness is the tool you need.
- You may need to negotiate with your university to allow you to carry out paid work (you might, for example, need to swap to another class or seminar group) and this is made easier if you approach it in an assertive way.
- If you want to find a great student placement or internship, you have to make a strong case for yourself and ensure that it will work for you: assertiveness gets you there.
- Once you enter the career marketplace, assertiveness is both attractive to an employer, showing you as an achiever, and also a sure way to enter your professional life on terms that suit both you and your employer.

This sounds like a win-win situation, for everyone involved, and it is – but that does not make it an easy win. Becoming assertive, and maintaining the skill, takes thought, hard work, and determination ... so let's begin.

Suggested Readings

Drenth, A. J. (2017). *The 16 personality types: Profiles, theory, & type development*. Inquire Books.

Kroeger, O., & Thuesen, J. M. (2013). *Type talk: The 16 personality types that determine how we live, love, and work*. Dell.

Sue, D., & Spanierman, L. (2020). *Microaggressions in everyday life*. Wiley.

Kessler, S., & Chrisman, C. (2015). *The 5 personality patterns: Your guide to understanding yourself and others and developing emotional maturity*. Bodhi Tree Press.

Banks, R. (2020). *The keys to being brilliantly confident and more assertive: A vital guide to enhancing your communication skills, getting rid of anxiety, and building assertiveness*. Nxt Level International Llc.

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Heading 2:

Understanding Assertiveness

Topic 2.1: What Does It Mean to Be Assertive?

[Insert scenario 1: explore your options]

Scenario 1

It is probably easiest to think about what it *does not mean* to be assertive. For students, being assertive is not about:

Getting your own way at all times.

Always being group leader might feel like a win, except that you might be leading an increasingly resentful group of your fellow students as word gets around that you like your own way all the time. The assertive student is happy to work by consensus, taking the lead from time to time.

Refusing to listen.

Assuming that you know exactly what people will say next puts up a huge barrier that only listening will bring down. Without it, you could well misunderstand what others are trying to achieve and, as importantly, miss vital information about your studying that they would have shared, given the chance to be heard. Assertive students spend more time listening than speaking, so a revision group, for example, becomes a valuable pool of information and support rather than a chance to impose themselves on the group.

Judging other people.

Anyone who feels judged by you is likely to perceive you as a threat – not a good way to foster productive study relationships. If a brilliant fellow student suffers from social anxiety but you rush to judge that person as too lazy to engage in a seminar, you will be missing the chance to share their insights.

Making enemies.

It is hard to be an enemy of someone who is truly trying to listen to you and trying to understand your viewpoint, as an assertive student would. So much about your study life – from sharing library resources to working together in shared learning spaces – is about productive negotiation. For that to work, you do not need enemies, and you need to be known as the solution-focused fellow student.

Being the only winner.

Too often our society sees ‘winning’ as being better than others, beating others, or simply getting your own way against the wishes of others. Life on campus does not work that way. Try to see through what you might think of as classic winning behaviour (getting the top mark, your choice of group project, the first to present in class, the last to leave the lab) and think more about the real wins of student life (an effective and supportive network, defending the rights and beliefs of others, doing well without doing others down, being known as an excellent, well-rounded student).

People who are assertive:

Know their rights but recognise that other people have rights too.

- Care about other people's feelings.
- Are able to give and take, and can be firm with others.
- Are good at assessing a situation from several angles.
- Take their time to come to the best outcome.

Topic 2.2: Assertiveness, Aggressiveness, Passive-Aggressiveness, and Manipulators

Assertiveness is sometimes confused with other behaviours such as aggressive, passive, manipulative, and passive-aggressive. Let's take a moment to consider each of these:

- Aggressive – my rights count, yours do not. I will win and you may very well lose.
- Passive-aggressive – my rights count, yours should not.
- Passive – my rights do not count, but yours do.
- Assertive – my rights count and so do yours.

This tends to result in:

- Aggressive – I win, you lose.
- Passive-aggressive – Nobody wins.
- Passive – you win, I lose.
- Assertive – we both win.

We need to think about what is meant here by winning in the context of being assertive. A win might not be getting your own way, partly because being assertive relies on skilled listening, so you may well change your mind about what 'your own way' is during the process. It is not about everyone getting their own way either, as life throws up different viewpoints even when you are all engaged in coming to a solution. It is about everyone walking away from the situation feeling happy that they have been heard and content with the outcome; even if it was not their preferred solution, they understand why the outcome was chosen.

If you are to be assertive, it helps to be able to recognise not only the type of person you are now, but also the types of people who you are likely to meet on campus. Look out for some key aspects of behaviour that can give you a clue:

Aggressive people:

- Forcefully impose their needs and wants on others.
- Frequently impose their claims on a situation.
- Often accuse others.
- Struggle to see other people's points of view and rarely apologise.

Passive-aggressive people:

- Punish others by withholding information.

- Are known to be sulkers.
- Sabotage (sometimes for no obvious reason).
- Attack others indirectly (whispering campaigns, for example).

Passive people:

- Feel helpless to change things.
- Are wary of challenging others.
- Struggle to see other people's challenges and experiences.
- Will follow authority.

Assertive people:

- Listen as much as or more than they speak.
- Change their approach to suit the situation.
- See other people's point of view but set firm boundaries and know their rights.
- Recognise a 'good outcome'.

It would be dangerous to overlook one personality type: the manipulator.

Manipulators tend to:

- Use people to satisfy their own needs and desires.
- Are skilled in flattery and (often biased) deal making.
- Assume that others share their value system.
- Have a low opinion of others.

[Insert scenario 2: multiple choice questions]

Scenario 2

To test your knowledge on the behaviours assertive, aggressive, passive, manipulative, and passive-aggressive, imagine that you are trying to take a more assertive approach and think through the following common study situations.

You know that a fellow student is desperate to choose a topic for your upcoming group project. It is not a topic that you particularly relish, so what do you do?

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| Why should I let the student get away with that? This is my degree and so it is my right to work on the topics I choose. I let everyone know that we were going to be working on my choice of topics – everyone seemed happy with that. | Incorrect | Aggressive. You have not considered the rights and preferences of others. If your fellow students seem happy, it might be because they are worried about standing up to you. |
| I talked to the student and learned that she was not as wedded to the topic as I had thought, so we took a vote and were all content with the outcome. | Correct | Assertive. By taking your time and listening to the student, you put yourself in a position to go with the original topic if you judged it the right thing to do, so as to support the student. As it turned out, you were able not just to open the option of other topics, you also brought the team together in a productive way. |
| I knew nobody was likely to listen to me, so I just got on with it. | Incorrect | Passive. Your assumption that nobody would listen to you has led not only to you working on a topic that you probably now dislike, it has also led to you resenting your position in the team. |

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| I didn't want to upset the student, so I asked my friends on the team whether they wanted to work on the topic. We all agreed that it was not for us, so we asked the tutor to change us to another group. | Incorrect | Passive-aggressive. You have not given the student the chance to change the topic, nor have you openly discussed it as a team. You have turned your friends against the student and made what could have been an open conversation into a big deal. The tutor is unlikely to be impressed, or to move you from that team. |
| I explained that it was not really a topic I enjoy, but I will do some of the work. | Incorrect. | Manipulative. You believe that the student who chose the topic will work harder than anyone else and that by saying it is not a good topic for you, you will have to do less. This could work, until you discover that you are being marked not just on your team result, but also on individual engagement in the project. |

A student seems to be ignoring you in class, even though you are contributing some good thoughts. You think others are noticing it and it is making you feel awkward. How do you respond?

<!--Col Count:3--> Answer Choices	Correct or Incorrect?	Feedback
Fine by me. Nobody will notice when I don't turn up,	Incorrect	Manipulative. Those who manipulate a situation, as in this case, are sometimes hiding their hurt.

<!--Col Count:3-- >Answer Choices	Correct or Incorrect?	Feedback
and my friend always likes to show how clever he is so I know he will share his notes.		Rather than trying to join in, they see slights that might not be there and then disengage rather being able to make anything better.
My friend agreed that it was really rude, so we set up an online study group for all of us in the class and 'forgot' to invite that student.	Incorrect	Passive-aggressive. You have not found out why (or even if) this student is ignoring you. When your 'forgetting' is found out, you run the risk of the group turning against you or making a complaint to the tutor about exclusionary behaviour.
I hate it when people are rude and ignore me. I speak over the student whenever I can, to make the point that it was rude to ignore me.	Incorrect	Aggressive. It could be that you have intimidated this student in the past without even realising it, which would explain why you are being ignored. Groups are powerful bodies: you are likely to be pulled back in order either by the reaction of the group or by the tutor.
I ask the student to sit down with me and talk about the situation. That way I will know if there is anything wrong and we will have a	Correct	Assertive. You have shown that this matters to you and that you are prepared to take the time to listen to the student's point of view. This gives either (or both) of you the chance to fix things and move on effectively in that class.

<!--Col Count:3-- >Answer Choices	Correct or Incorrect?	Feedback
chance to fix it together.		
This is typical of how seminars and classes work: people like me get ignored. I am used to it.	Incorrect.	Passive. Did you come to the class expecting to be ignored? Perhaps you did not prepare for it because you expected to be silent. This is unlikely to have much impact on anyone else, but it could well affect your learning outcomes.

You really need a book from the library that was taken out by a fellow student who has not returned it even though you are sure the student has finished using it. It is not available online, so how do you get your hands on it?

<!--Col Count:3-- >Answer Choices	Correct or Incorrect?	Feedback
I talk to the student after class to confirm that it is no longer needed, and then we walk to the library together, swap the book over to my library account, and have a coffee.	Correct	Assertive. By being assertive you have gone beyond just asserting your reasonable request for access to the book. You have made sure that your request really is reasonable, you have guaranteed that you get the book before anyone else, and you may have made a new friend.
I go to the student's room and ask to borrow it just for the evening.	Incorrect	Manipulative. The 'just' in your answer suggests that you persuaded the student to part with the book without considering whether it was still needed or not. You have also made the

<!--Col Count:3-- >Answer Choices	Correct or Incorrect?	Feedback
		other student responsible for returning the book that you have just used.
I don't even really know the student so there is not much I can do about it.	Incorrect	Passive. Sometimes people are passive because they are anxious about approaching others. In this case, your essay may suffer, whereas you could have found another way to approach the situation (emailing the student, putting a hold/reservation on the book in the library) which would have served you better.
There is not much I can do about gaining access to the book, so I take a proactive approach. I make a note on my essay to explain to the marker that my fellow student kept hold of the book I needed, so I have not been able to submit my best work.	Incorrect	Passive-aggressive. This will not work well for you. No marker will award you extra marks on the basis that you were unable to access just one book, and by naming the student you are likely to appear petty (and also, perhaps, make for an uncomfortable situation if the student finds out).
The student should return the book as soon as	Incorrect	Aggressive. Although feeling strongly about your right to access course materials is not

<!--Col Count:3--> Answer Choices	Correct or Incorrect?	Feedback
<p>possible, so I have no qualms about saying that to the student's face, as I insist that the book be returned. This is my course and I need that book – it is as simple as that.</p>		<p>wrong, this answer does not take into account the reality of the situation (has the student really finished with the book?) or the damage that you could cause by your aggression. You might have upset the student and there may well be witnesses to the altercation, most of whom will not want to work with you in future.</p>

[End scenario 2: multiple choice questions]

Topic 2.3: Why You Might Struggle to Be Assertive

Learning to be assertive can be straightforward, but for many of us it is a difficult process, and maintaining an assertive approach can be hard. You might want to look for signs of this as you develop your skills in assertiveness by asking yourself these questions:

- Do I dread the moment when I might need to be assertive?
- Do I often miss out steps in the process just to get to the end?
- Do I regularly forget to be assertive?
- Do I often realise after the process that I failed to be assertive?
- Do I struggle to break old habits of negotiation?
- Do I find assertiveness tiring?

If you answer yes to any of these questions, you are probably trying to move from entrenched ways of thinking and behaving and you are not finding the move easy. This is perfectly understandable: since your earliest childhood, you have been developing patterns of behaviour and what seem like totally instinctive responses. But every instinctive response starts somewhere.

In nature, we recognise the 'fight or flight' response: either running like the wind to escape the woolly mammoth that is chasing you, or standing firm and spearing it.

[insert Woolly_mammoth_model.jpg here]

A picture shows a woolly mammoth standing on a rocky platform.<!--Capture as a alt-text-->

Source: IJReid on Wikimedia Commons.

Both of these responses are instinctive, and both will depend on need (you ate a considerable portion of a woolly mammoth yesterday – you are not that fussed and let this one stroll off; or, your family is starving and depending on you in an area with few woolly mammoths – you stand and fight). They also depend on context (you are in an area with plenty of woolly mammoths – you run away this time because this mammoth looks huge and hungry; or, you have not seen a woolly mammoth for days so this one is not going to get away). Some theorists would add ‘freeze’ as a third possible instinctive response, but this tends not to rely so much on need (you would freeze regardless of hunger) or context (the only effect of the woolly mammoth being huge is how much you would crane your neck to stare it in the eye as you stood, frozen to the spot).

So, might your response also depend on personality type? It could work – the aggressive person is hungry and so expects everyone to chase the woolly mammoth, the passive-aggressive person fails to mention the woolly mammoth even if everyone else is hungry, the passive person avoids woolly mammoth conflict, and the assertive person gathers the views of others, makes a plan to which everyone can agree (or at least recognise and respect) and then ensures that everyone sticks to the plan.

This demonstrates one key potential problem to being assertive: you might spend so long talking it through that the woolly mammoth has wandered off by the time you go out to get it. You need quick wins with assertiveness – modifying sometimes quite minor aspects of your instinctive behaviour patterns to introduce productive assertiveness as a way of life.

That brings us back to where your behaviour patterns come from and why they feel so instinctive. You will have been raised to fall largely into the patterns of behaviour that were described under one of the personality types above. This may be because of the way your early caring environment operated, or because one carer in your childhood particularly influenced how you saw the world and yourself. You will see this around you, with friends saying that they were brought up to be ‘people pleasers’ or to ‘fight for their place’. It might simply be down to the circumstances you have lived through since your early formative years. Watch the video for a deeper discussion of other barriers to acting assertively.

[Video 1](#) - Barriers to Acting Assertively

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Download transcript

[insert transcript PDF: V1076010.pdf]

Topic 2.4: Which Personality Type Are You?

However, you got there, knowing the type of person you are will help you to recognise and then address the patterns of behaviour that might stand in the way of you developing an assertive approach. You can do this by answering just one question:

[Insert scenario 1: explore your options]

Scenario 1

You are asked to do something by a fellow student. You want to say ‘no’, either because you think the request itself is unreasonable or because you do not have the time or resources to carry out the request. How do you feel when you say ‘no’?

I will feel dreadful, until I change my mind and say yes – but then I usually feel angry with myself for agreeing.

This is passive behaviour, which could leave you feeling drained and resentful. Worse still, the person asking the favour might have no idea that this is a troublesome task for you, but might assume that you are a bit indecisive and perhaps not going to be too reliable.

I feel angry about even being asked and pleased that I said no. I have a right to my degree and I need time to get on with studying.

This is aggressive behaviour. You have not been able to see the other person's point of view or the benefit of working together as you study. You have also just made it harder on yourself when you next need a favour.

I felt bad at the time, but then I talked it through with my friend and it turns out that she has had the same person ask her to do something similar. We put an anonymous warning on our Facebook group so that nobody else gets put upon like that.

Your behaviour is passive-aggressive. You have not done the favour (and even had you said yes you might have done the favour poorly) and you have tarnished the reputation of the person who asked. You and your friend will feel good for a while – until someone works out who posted it to Facebook.

I ask for some time to think about it, because I know that I am really busy. We talked it through, and I could see that I am not alone in being under pressure, so we agreed to work on it together, bringing in some other friends. Then I persuaded the tutor to give an extension on the deadline. We are on track to complete on time now and I am enjoying working together on a project we all believe in.

This is productive and assertive. By seeing the other person's point of view, you have supported that person even before you restructured the task, altered the deadline, and enlisted a group of students to help out. You will stick to your firm boundaries both on deadline and on how much work you can afford to carry out on the project.

It is not really my thing, so I did not fancy doing it, but on the other hand, this is a friend and also someone who I know will repay a favour. Luckily, two of my housemates are super quick at this sort of task, and they enjoyed doing it to show their skills off to me.

This is manipulative behaviour, which makes you feel that have achieved a short-term win, but which could lead to long-term problems when working with others.

[End scenario 1: explore your options]

Of course, you cannot delve into the complexities of your personality type in just one exercise, but these responses tend to be quite strong and stable in most people, so you will by now have a sense of how you respond in the situation where you have the option to say 'no'. How you responded will help you recognise damaging behaviour that you could address so as to become assertive. This is a long-term process, but putting assertiveness into practice, even in a minor way to begin with, will boost your confidence and help keep you on the path to internalising assertiveness as part of your life strategy.

Topic 2.5: Getting Ready to Be Assertive

Practising assertiveness successfully depends largely on two factors: knowing what you are trying to achieve and being a good communicator. These factors are inextricably linked in assertiveness because this is not just about getting what you want. It is about talking to others and – crucially – listening to them so that you understand the wider picture. This might end up with you realising that you want something a little different from what you had planned, or that you need to compromise, but none of this works until you have a strong sense of where you are and where you want to be.

What do you want to do?

Where do you want to reach (aim)?

What do you want to achieve (objective)?

Once you are at this stage, you will need to think about quality and compromise, especially if you are trying to achieve an outcome that is linked to assessment on your course. So, there are three more questions to ask:

What is my highest aim in terms of quality and output?

Where might I feel able to compromise?

What is my lowest point in terms of quality and output?

When you have firm answers to these questions, you have done the groundwork and you are ready, but reaching this point is also likely to have relied upon communication. Talking to your tutor, professor, lecturer, or course leader to make sure that you understand the brief for the project correctly, perhaps. If your aim is not linked to an assignment, for example, you are setting up a study group, you will be communicating with potential members of the study group to see who is interested and what their aims and objectives are, and maybe also talking to members of staff to see if there is a precedent for how study groups have worked well in the past.

[Insert scenario 1: explore your options]

Scenario 1

Imagine that you are facing a group project, with a specific brief and a set deadline for submission. You will be working alongside other students, who will be communicating throughout the project. You want to be assertive – this project matters to you (and your final grade) and you want to get it right. Which of these statements do you think fits how you feel?

I push myself to do my best and expect those around me to do their best too.

This is a judgement statement and it ignores the *hidden agenda* which is frequently present within any situation and which could hinder you. Unless you understand more about those with whom you are working, you will miss, for example, the fact that one of the team is brilliant but has a deadline 2 days away and so will not be fully present for the team until then. Active and compassionate listening is key to finding hidden agendas so that you do not find yourself trying to be assertive on a false premise.

Once you begin to compromise, you are losing the argument.

This might be true if you are right in the middle of a family argument, or if you are dealing with a manipulative personality type, but compromise – on both sides – is usually a fruitful part of assertiveness. Compromise is not your enemy, but you do need to know exactly how far you can compromise before you walk away from the situation, and then you would need to communicate clearly why you are walking away and whether this is a break from the discussion or a final decision on your part (to join another project group, for instance).

We are all judged on what we deliver, not on how we got there.

This is not always the case for university and college work. You might be marked on participation or your individual contribution to a project; more importantly, you are learning to be assertive within a team, so how you got there will matter to you.

There is a deadline, we just need to get this done.

Taking this as a strong approach risks you overlooking what can be achieved on this part of your study journey. You do need to get it done, but how you get it done will affect not only the outcome, but also your development as an assertive communicator and effective team player.

I will do my best and help everyone else to achieve as well.

This is an excellent approach to take in terms of being a good team player, but it is not enough. You need to know, in detail, how much help others will need within the framework you have set up through your process of assertive planning and communication. You will also need to learn who is best placed to help individual team members at each point of the project.

Compromise is inevitable, especially if you are working in a team.

This is true, but it is not a bad thing. The key to success is always to know where and how you might be able to compromise whilst still producing an excellent outcome. Once this has been agreed, it can be communicated to everyone so that nobody is left feeling concerned that the project is going wrong.

[End scenario 1: explore your options]

Assertiveness, as you can see, rests on effective communication at all stages of the process. We can now look at that process in more detail.

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Topic 3.1: How to Be Assertive – Removing the Judgement

[Insert scenario 1: explore your options]

Scenario 1

Let's visualise a situation together. You are working in a team of six students preparing to give a presentation that is an important part of your course. One member of the team is not joining in and, as you are known to be especially keen on the topic of the presentation, your fellow team members agree that you would be a good person to talk to the problem student so that you can bring that person back on track.

Before we take the next step, note how many judgement-laden and hidden agenda statements there are in the description I have just given you. Do you know why and how they are problematic in this context?

This is a 'presentation that is an important part of your course'

Why is it an important part of the course? Has anyone checked how much of the overall grade depends on this work, and how the marks are divided between elements of the task? What if the 'problem student' has no need to excel in this course?

One member of the team is not 'joining in'

What is meant by 'joining in'? Not producing any material, or not joining in with the social side of the team as the team members meet regularly for a coffee and to chat about the project? Is the 'problem' just shyness? Or not being made to feel welcome?

'...as you are known to be especially keen on the topic of the presentation, your fellow team members agree that you would be a good person...'

Who has told you that you are especially keen on the project? Is this your view of yourself, covering your own hidden agenda that you are a 'better' student than others? If team members 'agreed' to you being the person to talk to the other student, that suggests that you volunteered because you see yourself as the keenest and so best qualified person to take on this problem.

‘so that you can bring that person back on track’

You have not yet decided how – or even if – the student is off track, so that phrase ‘back on track’ rests on a sizeable assumption that is potentially wildly inaccurate.

[End scenario 1: explore your options]

Now that you have recognised just how prejudicial the description of this hypothetical situation was, you will see why it is helpful to write out what you think the situation is, along with your preferred outcomes, before you enter an assertive discussion. That way, you can take an active role in reducing or even eliminating false assumptions and prejudicial judgements calls before you engage in the assertive conversation.

As you write out the situation you aim to address, keep asking yourself these questions:

- Have I made an assumption? If I needed to do this so that I could outline the full situation, I need to mark it up as an assumption, ready to seek clarification.
- I need to move from ‘you’ to ‘I’. I need to say clearly how I think and feel, because that is the only thing I can know for sure; that way, I can then invite the other person to do the same from the other perspective.
- Even if I think I know what someone is going to say next, or that I can offer an instant resolution, I need to make a note of where in particular I will need to listen actively.
- If I have made a generalisation in my prep notes (this is an important project, for example), I need to learn whether this is also true for the other person. The more detail I can set on my own, the clearer the outcome might become.
- Have I included in my prep notes statements implying that I am right? These need to be treated with caution and marked up, to show that I recognise that there is rarely one truth or one version of ‘right’.

Can you imagine having to go through this process for every situation you face in life? It feels impossible because we have to rely in our busy lives on assumptions and judgements so that we can get through each day. This is one of the benefits of being assertive. For now – and perhaps for quite a while – you will only bring this level of scrutiny to bear on situations in which you perceive there to be a problem that needs fixing with an assertive approach. You need do no more than that. However, long term, you will find that your assertive practice starts to feed into all of your interactions. You will become a more active listener, be less likely to rush to judgement, and you will start basing your decisions on clearer grounds.

You could find that working through this preparation process has a profound effect on how you view both the immediate problem and your wider world, so it has benefits beyond the next task, which is to master a step-by-step approach to assertiveness.

Topic 3.2: A Six-Step Approach to Assertiveness

In the previous topic, we examined the implicit assumptions and judgements in a situation where you are in a team of six and one member is not contributing to the group. Once you have taken into account that it includes assumptions and judgements, you are still left with a problem: the project still needs to be completed by the team. You have prepared the ground, so now we can visualise the assertive conversation.

Step 1: Sit Down

This indicates that you are happy to take as long as is needed and that this is a conversation, not a passing chat or a chance for you to bark orders. It also keeps the emotional temperature at the right level: nobody can loom over the other person, or turn as if to walk away, or get too close.

- You might say: ‘Could we sit down to work out the best way forward with the presentation?’ or ‘I want to talk through how we can get to the finish line on our project as smoothly as possible’.

Note that ‘we’ and ‘I’ are used here, rather than ‘you’ and your tone and words are not threatening and non-judgemental.

Step 2: Describe the Problem, and What Is Causing it, and Share How You Think and Feel

Rather than launching into a complicated set of descriptions, trying to fix everything at once (before you know what needs fixing), talk through in straightforward terms what is happening.

You might say: 'We are giving the presentation in two weeks, and we seem to be behind with the project, so I wanted to talk about where you are with it' or 'I am feeling under pressure because the deadline is in two weeks' time, so I wanted to see if you had the material for the presentation'.

You are giving clear information about the deadline and sharing your feelings, without blaming the other person for anything.

Step 3: Ask if the Other Person Agrees With Your Description, Then Listen Productively

This stage is crucial and is your first 'walk away' moment. If the other student says 'Oh, sorry, I forgot to send you my slides and prompts – I will do it on my phone now', the problem is solved and there has been no confrontation.

You might say: as little as is needed. If all is well, a 'great, I am so glad we talked' is a nice, positive way to end the conversation (as long as the material has been emailed to you right there and then by phone). If you find yourself listening to an outpouring of anxiety about what has gone wrong for your fellow student, you might need to do nothing more than nod your head, smile, and show that you understand for quite some time.

This is the time when you are listening, trying not to jump in to fix things, but instead thinking furiously, trying to understand what the problems are, what the implications are for the project, how you can support the student, and what you might need to set up next to fix the problem together. Even if you are saying very little, stick to this routine: ask...describe...clarify.

Step 4: Focus Only on Behaviour, Not Judgement

As you listen, you will recognise a point where you can begin to move towards solutions, but at this point they will be general and firmly aimed at recognising both of your feelings.

You might say: 'I can see that your schedule has been busy until now, so shall we revisit the timeline and rejig it so that we can still complete on time?' or 'Knowing how stressed you are, I can see why this was a difficult timeline for you. Would you like to work through with me how we can get things done on time? I could ask the others to help out'.

You will be sharing your feelings, so it is fine to add in here that the material not arriving on time made you anxious, but this is about the material, not attaching blame (so you would avoid saying 'you not producing the material made me anxious' or 'you have made me anxious'). You can also avoid judgement – acknowledging that the material was slow to arrive is very different from saying 'you were slow in producing the material' or 'you are a bit slow'.

You also have the valid option to say 'no' – indeed, it could be essential that you say no. Your primary goal in this example is to be able to present on time with the right amount of good quality material. You have already considered your compromise bottom line: we can ask for a later presentation date, but I will not use low quality material or poorly produced presentation slides.

You know that you have a reasonable right to gain the highest possible grade and you are prepared to ensure that your rights are respected and met. You also have a firm boundary (I will not delay the presentation date by more than a week because I have exams coming up) and you will assert your right to that reasonable boundary too.

Step 5: Describe Potential Detailed Solutions, Listening Actively All the Time

You might say: 'I think what you are saying is that you cannot complete the work on time if you do it alone, so you would like someone else in the group to produce the final three slides for you' or 'I can hear that you are really anxious at the thought of presenting. If you can produce all the slides that are needed, we could ask the tutor if you could introduce the group and then let us take over for the rest of the presentation'.

This is your second walk-away moment. If you judge that the problem is greater than you thought, or that the solution is going to be complicated, you might need to take a break so that you can set out in writing where you think you have reached. That way, you can both agree before you go back to working through potential solutions. The second example of what you might say, given above, shows how this might work. You both need to walk away until you have checked with the tutor if it is possible for one presenter to do no more than introduce the group.

If you recognise that the student is not in the right place to be involved at all, or has become very distressed or aggressive, you might choose to walk away altogether and seek advice and help from an academic.

If you are talking in a group rather than one-to-one, you would take the opportunity here to ask how everyone else feels about the solutions that are being considered. Keep the group focused tightly on potential solutions – this is not usually the point for everyone to share their feelings of disappointment.

Step 6: Confirm the Solution and Plan of Action, to Everyone Involved

You might say: ‘So we have agreed to take on one extra presentation slide each, so that we meet the deadline, but our fellow student is going to take responsibility for bringing together the reflection piece that we have to produce after the presentation’ or you might write ‘We will all meet on campus next Tuesday from 10 till 4 to finalise all of the material, with slides being sent to me by 4 p.m. on Monday’.

Before you communicate the solution, you will need to consider the implications of that solution for everyone involved in the situation. For example, are you the best-placed person to receive those slides on Monday?

By leaving the discussion with a promise to email everyone later that day with the agreed plan (as in the second solution described above), you are giving yourself the chance to think it through quietly to reassure yourself that you really have come up with a workable plan between you. It also gives you the chance to end with an email that shares your feelings in a positive way: ‘I am so glad we talked that through. I think we have come up with a really good solution, which I am sharing with you here. If it makes you feel uncomfortable or you think it is unrealistic, let me know and we can meet again tomorrow. If you are happy with it, just let me know and I will tell everyone, including you in the email’.

By this stage of the process, you will have a detailed and practical shared agreement, and you will also have a better understanding of your fellow students. You are now on firm ground and ready to succeed.

Topic 3.3: Assertive Body Language

Being assertive is, as we have seen, about preparation, good communication, and a careful, detailed, and thoughtful approach to each situation in which you aim to be assertive. Over time you will develop ‘assertiveness habits’, so that even if you are not consciously preparing for a negotiation, you will still listen actively, share how you think and feel, and work well with others to find solutions that do not infringe your rights or break your boundaries.

However, all of your positive work on assertiveness can be undermined if your body language betrays you, so it is a good idea to spend time working on how others will perceive you as you try to be assertive. Watch the video to see a demonstration of some non-verbal cues that can undermine you being assertive.

[Video 1](#). Avoiding Body Language that Undermines Your Assertiveness

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Topic 4.1: Normalising and Maintaining Assertive Patterns of Behaviour: Reflection

There are two ways to make sure that you continue to be assertive and that you internalise assertive patterns of behaviour into your everyday life: reflection and preparation. The first of these, reflection, is relatively easy to do, but it does take a bit of time and commitment.

Put a regular note in your calendar to review your assertiveness level. This might be every week in the early stages of developing this skill.

Think back to two or three situations that you found challenging, situations that you now feel could have been handled with assertiveness, or situations in which you tried to be assertive.

Take the time to write down the points in that situation where you recognise assertiveness techniques, and note down also if you could see that they were working.

Note down what you now see as missed opportunities in that situation, and the effect of those missed chances to be assertive. You will be looking for moments when:

- You needed to take a break to think through what was happening but missed the chance.
- You should have walked away but did not feel that you could. You could ask yourself why this was.
- You failed to say 'no' when your rights and reasonable expectations were being infringed.
- You forgot your boundaries.
- You began from 'you' and not from 'I' (focusing on the other person whilst withholding your own thoughts and feelings).
- You commented negatively on the person and not the behaviour (and so judged the person without enough knowledge).
- You let your knee jerk, instant reaction show rather than thinking first.
- You forgot the bigger picture, so failed to find out if pressure of time or workload – and any other external factors – was the root cause of the problem.
- You let your anger, or your anxiety, get the better of you.
- You came away from the situation with a negative outcome.
- You failed to consider the implications of your decisions on other people.
- You forgot to reaffirm what was decided.

You need to do no more than that. Simply going through the process of reflection will feed into your next assertive interaction and will help embed good habits.

Let it go. Putting yourself and the other person back in that situation will not necessarily be helpful, even if you think you missed a great opportunity to be assertive. It is usually better to wait for a further opportunity to redress the problem, if it arises. If it does not, you will be pleased that you let it go.

Topic 4.2: Normalising and Maintaining Assertive Patterns of Behaviour: Role-Play

Whilst you will be able to reflect on your assertiveness success and challenges alone, preparing for assertiveness might need you to enlist the help of others. Earlier we considered how you might prepare for a real-life assertive discussion by making prep notes. To improve your skills, you can also role-play with fellow students. You can do this in two ways: either create a scenario that is relevant to you or role-play a situation that you know you are about to face. Be careful, though: role-play of real situations can lead to backbiting and negativity around the person to whom you will be talking after the role-play: it can easily become a form of bullying, if the person hears of the role-play.

Fictional situations you might role-play could include:

- Asking your employer for more or fewer hours in your part-time work.
- Asking for more pay in your part-time employment.
- Asking an academic to review a mark you have been given which you think may be a mistake.
- Asking to change to a different seminar or class group.
- Asking a fellow student to be less disruptive (or to leave) a study or revision group.
- Asking your project group to give you more time to complete your share of the work.

Notice that all of these begin with the word 'asking' – this puts you in the right frame of mind. Assertiveness is about explaining your position, understanding others, and coming to a mutually satisfactory outcome.

Work in a group of at least three for this role-play: one person is trying out being assertive, another person is acting as the other member of the discussion, and one (or more) observers are at work.

Set up your role-play as you would for the real situation – make preparation notes, check your judgements and firm up your boundaries, be clear on your aims and objectives; know your 'walk away' moments and your lowest point of compromise.

As you act out the situation, ask the observer(s) to fill out the worksheet, adding in as many comments as they can about whether the assertive steps were followed and how well each step was taken.

Being Assertive Role-Play Worksheet

[Link file: [Being_Assertive_Roleplay.docx](#)]

Many students find this type of role-play affirmative and supportive, and this is in part because the role-play teaches them how to be more effective in their assertiveness, but it is also in part a result of the discussions that take place around the role-play. As your fellow students share their frustrations and successes with their own assertiveness journey, and introduce you to new ways they have learnt to approach situations, you will feel positive – perhaps excited – about what your more assertive future will look like.

Topic 4.3: Learning About Microaggression

Overt aggression is easy to spot, horrible to face, but often swiftly over. Someone is aggressive towards you, your fight/flight/freeze instinct will cut in and you will respond accordingly. If an individual is threatening a group, you will gain comfort from being supported by others. After the event, you can take time to get over an unpleasant experience and decide what to do about it.

Typical examples of this type of aggression are:

- Someone shouting in your face because you have upset them.
- Any physical assault on you.
- Anyone threatening violence against you.
- Someone throwing an object or weapon at you.

Microaggression is much more pervasive in our society and also more insidious. You might come across microaggression directed at you on a daily basis, if you are in a community where it has become common, and you may find it difficult to describe, or even assume that you are imagining it. If you are lucky, it will occur far less often, which will make it a distressing surprise when it does happen to you. Two phrases in that sentence are important: 'distressing surprise'

and 'to you'. Acts of microaggression are, as their name implies, small (sometimes tiny), but they are aggressive nonetheless, and they are something that is done to you, like any act of aggression.

Typical examples of this type of aggression are:

- Regularly repeating a 'funny' (not really funny at all) story about you.
- Always mispronouncing your name.
- Refusing to use your preferred pronoun.
- Assuming that you are not capable of something.
- Blanking you.
- Giving you a look that is aggressive.
- Giving you a nickname that upsets or belittles you.
- Talking behind your back, especially when you are in the room.
- Apologising to you, loudly and lengthily, as if you have taken unreasonable offence.
- Not sitting next to you, in the only chair available, but getting another chair instead.

It would be unusual if you had not experienced any of these microaggressive acts, and they can hurt you. They could leave you feeling that nobody likes you or wants to work with you, or that other people find you difficult, or even that you should not be at college or university at all.

Microaggressions can also become contagious. If one person chooses to laugh – too loudly – at one mistake that you made, then others might come to assume that you are always making minor mistakes and might not want to work with you. If your peer group have experienced microaggression from a fellow student who then turns on you, they may be wary of sticking up for you, or join in for fear of becoming the next target.

It is true that some people barely seem to notice acts of microaggression, or shrug them off with a laugh and a clever comment or put-down. They may truly be unaffected by the aggression, or they might have learned that, for them, this is the best way to deal with it. That does not mean that they are not upset or demoralised by the experience.

Topic 4.4: Dealing With Microaggression Assertively

You need to be brave to stand up to microaggression because it is, by its very nature, distressing. However, using techniques of assertiveness will make this less challenging. You will not be able to follow the six-step rule for many of the acts of microaggression you face because, unless they are persistent, it is not possible to discern a pattern that can be tackled, but there are some instances where it can work. If microaggression is making it difficult to work in a group, for example, then you could prepare for an assertive conversation as you would do for any other situation in which assertiveness is needed.

[Insert scenario 1: explore your options]

Scenario 1

For most acts of microaggression, whether or not they are persistent, and whether they are aimed at you or you want to protect someone else, you can use assertiveness techniques to make a difference. Click on each of the techniques to learn more about them and how they can be valuable in dealing with microaggressions.

Stop in the moment

☐ Rather than letting microaggression be a passing moment, make sure that you stop the person so that you have time to express how you feel. For example, in a seminar where a fellow student keeps talking over you, ask everyone to give you a moment to say something.

Express how you feel

☐ 'What you just did upsets me' or 'what you keep saying makes me uncomfortable' (this does not make you the weaker party here – the act of speaking out makes you strong).

Talk of the behaviour, not the person

☐ Avoid statements like 'you always interrupt people!' Rather, use phrases like 'when you interrupt me, I feel that my point of view is not being heard'. This will flip the situation: rather than passing judgement on the other person (you are the sort of person who interrupts others) you are opening up about how you feel, while showing the impact of the behaviour. This is fairer and also more likely to move the situation toward a resolution, as you are asking the person to fix one piece of behaviour, not their personality.

Accept that you might not be right

☐ The person might express genuine concern and regret. Being assertive should not slip into being aggressive, so you let it go once you realise that the behaviour was inadvertent or a bad habit and not intended as aggressive.

Keep an eye on your physical and your mental space

☐ Your boundaries are your own to set. If you feel someone is loitering in your personal space, it is reasonable to explain that it is making you feel uncomfortable to have them so close and asking that they respect your space in future. If you feel that your ideas are being dismissed or that you are being ridiculed, this is also an invasion of your space – your intellectual and emotional space. Being reasonable does not mean putting up with infringements on your rights: it is about working with others as you stand up for your space in the world.

Develop a sense of your fair and reasonable rights in common situations

☐ This is not an easy fix: just as you are expanding intellectually as a student you are also growing as a citizen and a person, so keep checking on how your instincts and sense of self are developing. You are then in a good position to protect yourself and your rights against microaggression.

[End scenario 1: explore your options]

Topic 4.5: When to Let Go

You cannot deal with everything, all of the time. Sometimes it is fine just to let things go. Even when you can see clearly how your skills in assertiveness could pave the way to a far better outcome for you in a situation, you might assert your right simply to let go, to take the more difficult and less productive route for you because it makes life far easier for a friend who is going through a hard time.

What tends not to work is trying to play the long game, trying to make strategic decisions about when you will be assertive. A typical example of this would be choosing not to be assertive against microaggression in a social group because the members with whom you could be assertive are fellow students you would like to study with in future. They are especially good at presenting, and you would really like to be in a presentation group with them. This sounds like a good option, until they invite you into their presentation group because they see you as someone who will do all the hard work for them. You are now left in a situation where you either accept your self-made fate or have to be assertive from a challenging starting point.

Sometimes assertiveness does not produce a concrete outcome beyond the very act of assertion. That is, your wellbeing can be improved by letting someone know that what they did was not respectful of your rights or ignored boundaries that you had set. You will not be asking them to do anything specific, but knowing that they now recognise what they have done can be powerful in itself. That alone is likely to make them modify their future behaviour, even if no immediate outcome was needed.

Video 1. Letting Things Go When Practising Assertiveness

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Assertiveness is a skill that you use as a tool, like any other. Sometimes you will employ it brilliantly to make life fairer and better for you and for others. Sometimes it will stay in your tool kit, kept ready by your reflection and preparation, and more effective each time you use it.

Skill Self-Assessment

1. I am not sure what 'being assertive' means. (maps onto topic 2.1)
2. I do not know whether I tend to be assertive, passive, passive-aggressive, or manipulative. (maps onto topic 2.2)
3. I think I would find being assertive challenging. (maps onto topic 2.3)
4. I am not sure which personality type I am when it comes to assertiveness. (maps onto 2.4)
5. I do not feel that I am ready to be assertive. (maps onto 2.5)
6. I think sometimes I tend to make assumptions about people and situations. (maps onto 3.1)
7. I need a step-by-step guide to being assertive. (maps onto 3.2)
8. I would like to develop assertive body language. (maps onto 3.3)
9. I expect that I will get out of the habit of being assertive. (maps onto 4.1)
10. I would like to practise being assertive to develop my skills. (maps onto 4.2)
11. I am not clear on what microaggression is. (maps onto 4.3)
12. I need help dealing with microaggression. (maps onto 4.4)
13. I am not sure if I need to be assertive all the time. (maps onto 4.5)