



British International School Riyadh

The art of thinking on your feet

Here are three situations in which students may find themselves having to think on their feet: a seminar, a job interview, the bank. In each case, you will need to stay cool, be aware of possible hidden agendas behind any questions, and try not to make things up.

The best way to do this is to know what you are talking about before you start talking about it. Think about possible questions that may come up and rehearse good answers. Deep breaths, and relaxation exercises, such as clenching and unclenching muscles, helps too, although keep these subtle. Your questioners may feel threatened if you approach them flexing your biceps.

It is useful to watch other people's body language. That way, you will know whether they genuinely want to find out how you have spent a term's student loan money in two weeks, or actually want you to grovel on the floor begging forgiveness. It is often a good idea to ask for a question to be repeated or clarified so that you have a bit more space to sort out your thoughts.

You can even not say anything for a while, within reason. They won't know that you are using the silence to work out possible escape routes, rather than making a considered assessment of their last point. If you really don't know the answer, say so rather than feeling that if you talk for long enough it will come to you eventually.

But don't feel nervous about attempting a response, even if you haven't entirely worked out what it will be. Go with your instinct, venture an answer, support the answer with relevant information, and then stop. On the other hand, don't make your reply so brief that they have lots of time to ask more questions that you won't be able to answer.

The problem with thinking on your feet is the fear that you will end up putting your feet in your mouth. But it is important to forget this and concentrate on coming across as confident. Thinking on your feet is really all about being able to think of something cleverer and more interesting than "help, I've got to say something clever and interesting".

It is important to speak in a strong voice, use eye contact, and try to structure your answer so that it looks as if you are moving logically from one point to another. Even if you say something stupid, the trick is to pretend you haven't, and move swiftly on. The chances are they haven't noticed, and if they have, they may forget it if you dazzle them with your next point.

Don't forget that whenever you are thinking on your feet, the person trying to trip you up is probably busy worrying about how to stay one step ahead.