

How to lead a discussion

1. Why lead a discussion

- to help students:
 - think in terms of the subject matter
 - evaluate the logic of, and evidence for, their own and others' positions
 - gain acceptance for information or theories counter to their previous beliefs
 - formulate applications of principles
 - articulate what they've learned
 - develop motivation for further learning
- for instructors to get prompt feedback on how well objectives are being attained

2. How to ensure participation

- have a mechanism to enforce preparation (quiz, a list of questions students need to answer prior to class-grade randomly, or for completion)
- consider sharing a personal anecdote of a time when you said something foolish; share the strategies that helped you “survive” that moment
- tell students you will randomly pick a student to summarize the class discussion (keeps them all alert)
- at the start of the following class, you can ask students to review the previous class (randomly)
- write good answers on the board
- when you respond, try to incorporate the student's answer, mentioning that student by name
- if you assign group discussions: randomly select groups, and persons within those groups to summarize their main points
- calling on students
 - predetermined order: broad participation, yet a possibly stiff atmosphere; students who already participated might tune out

- by raised hands: relaxed class, but does not really increase participation; uneven and some students monopolize the conversation and might even reinforce discrimination
- cold calling: ensures participation and encourages students to prepare; might produce stress
- at times, it is advisable to allow students not to answer
- pay attention to non-verbal clues (some students' faces might indicate they are ready to answer)
- break the class into groups for shy students to feel safe to participate
- wait until several students seem ready to answer (judging by their facial expressions or raised hands)
- if shy students refuse to participate, do not put them on the spot; maybe ask them to read something aloud
- consider a private approach with shy students
- limit the number of times any student can participate before everyone else has a chance to participate (colorful sticky notes might help keep track of how many times a student participates)
- besides saying "What are others thinking?" or "Who we haven't heard from?" ask the class a question like, "What are you wondering or trying to understand better?"

3. How to raise the quality of discussion

- it may be helpful to write on the board a few questions the discussion will address, and return to those questions periodically
- make your rules clear: what will not be tolerated; how you will react when students will try to sidetrack the conversation
- lead a discussion on what a good discussion is
- reemphasize the importance of hearing different points of view
- make it clear to students discussions will play a big role in their grade (from day one)
- post participation grades throughout the semester
- create a rubric (to help students understand how you grade participation) : raising thoughtful questions, analyzing relevant issues, building on others' ideas, synthesizing across readings

and discussions, expanding the class' perspective, and appropriately challenging assumptions and perspectives

- help students understand what discussions can help them with (exploring unfamiliar ideas, deep learning, critical thinking, problem solving, listening actively, communicating orally, transferring knowledge to new situations, retaining the material)
- make the connections between discussions and the rest of the class evident to students
- evaluate the discussion (What kinds of contributions were and were not helpful? When were and weren't digressions productive? Did everyone who wanted got a chance to speak? If not, why not?)

4. Common mistakes

- asking too many questions at once
- asking a question and answering it yourself
- failing to probe or explore the implications of answers
- asking unconnected questions
- asking yes/no or leading questions
- ignoring or failing to build on answers

5. Physical arrangements of the classroom

- consider changing the focus of the room: not on you, but on the students and their learning
- classrooms can have multiple center points
- if possible, ask students to sit in circles or in half circles
- if teaching in a big room, students can form groups by turning to the students behind them
- walk around the room as much as possible (moving around the classroom discourages possible disrupters from acting up)
- if teaching in a room with multiple rows, and there is enough space, ask students to leave an empty row so that you can walk along it
- if the room allows it, walk in an interior loop
- encourage students to come use the board
- if the classroom has more than one board, consider switching between them

Types of questions

- Clarification
 - Invites rephrasing, elaboration, or an example to make the idea understandable
“What in particular do you identify with in this character?”
- Completeness
 - Asks the student to go beyond the superficial or from the general to the specific
“What else do you like?” or “What other reason did you have?”
- Requesting more evidence
 - Requires the student to defend their position with additional information
“What passage in the text supports that position?”
- Cause and effect
 - Considers causal relationships between ideas, actions, or events
“If X happened, what would happen to Y?”
- Hypothetical
 - Involves creative thinking and prediction of possible scenarios given a fact change
“If this candidate had lost the election instead of winning, what effect would it have had on our state?”
- Linking or extension
 - Encourages students to think about relationships between their responses and those of others
“How does this relate to what was previously said?”
- Summary and synthesis
 - Necessitates review and reflection on the discussion and articulation of key concepts
“What themes have emerged from today’s discussion?” or “What issues remain unresolved?”