

Leading Effective Group Discussions

A short guide designed to provide student speakers with tools to lead group discussions in the classroom.

Prepare for your Discussion

1. Identify the goal(s) you (or your instructor) would like your participants to reach by the end of the discussion.
2. Have several questions prepared to lead discussion. It is okay to go “off-script” during the discussion session and ask questions you may not have prepared beforehand, but be sure to have extra questions ready in case there is a lull in conversation.
3. Be aware of time constraints and consider how long you would like each portion of the conversation or discussion activities to take.
4. Review any related content and be prepared to answer clarifying questions that participants may have so that the flow of conversation will not be interrupted.

While your instructor may have specified the goal(s) for the discussion, in general, your discussion questions or prompts should aim to help participants with one or more of the following:

1. Identify central themes, arguments, or key information from course content
2. Highlight the strengths and weaknesses of a work (i.e. an article, argument, etc.)
3. Address points of conflict or disagreement (i.e. What might some counterarguments to the author’s points be and why?)
4. Connect the topic of discussion to other material covered in class or participants’ personal experiences
5. Increase participants’ curiosity about and/or investment in a given topic

Some Do’s and Don’ts of Discussion Leading

DO NOT ask questions that can be answered simply with “yes” or “no,” unless you are simply trying to get participants to remember information.

DO ask open-ended questions that may begin with “how,” “why,” “if,” etc. but beware of questions that are too broad.

DO NOT start the discussion session by asking questions that may be too difficult for participants to answer without background knowledge.

DO have a goal in mind that identifies what you would like participants to take away from the discussion and take time to gradually lead them to that goal.

DO NOT over-facilitate the conversation such that participants are not able to fully contribute their individual thoughts to the discussion.

DO try to be flexible with the direction that your participants choose to take the conversation while keeping them on topic.

Group Discussion Activities

If you would like to try something different from the traditional lead and response format, consider using one or more of the activities below to make your conversation more engaging!

- **Think-Pair-Share**
Provide your participants with a question and then have them find a partner and discuss the question for a set amount of time. After the specified time has passed, open the discussion up to the full class. This method is especially effective when your participants are feeling apprehensive about speaking in front of the full group as it gives them the opportunity to develop and share their ideas with an individual first.
- **Snowball**
Similar to think-pair-share, except after each person within the pair has had a chance to respond to the question, the pair joins another pair, creating a group of four. The pairs then have a conversation with the pair they just joined. Next, groups of four join together to form groups of eight, and so on, until the whole class is in one large discussion.
- **Breakout Group Discussions**
Divide your participants up into four or five groups and have each group sit together. Give each group a different question or prompt to discuss for a set amount of time. After the time has passed, rotate the questions to the next group and repeat until all groups have had a chance to discuss each prompt. You may want to end by having a full class conversation so that everyone can know what each group discussed.
- **Real-Time Responses (requires technology and some extra planning/coordination)**
If you are showing a video or some sort of media to prompt discussion, have your participants share their questions or reactions in real-time and address them at the end of the media presentation. You may need to create a specific hashtag if you use Twitter for this method. Alternatively, participants may post to a pre-designated online discussion board.
- **Concentric Circles (requires a moderate amount of space)**
Have participants find a partner and choose who will be person A and person B. Arrange everyone into two concentric circles with the A's facing away from the center of the circle and the B's facing in toward the circle. Everyone should be face-to-face with their partner. Then, pose a question to the class and set a time limit for the pairs to discuss their responses with each other. Once time is up, have the outside circle rotate to the left so that everyone has a new partner. Ask a different question, have pairs discuss, rotate and repeat these steps for your remaining questions.

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