



Tips for Leading a Classroom Discussion

Prepare

Think about your teaching style

Do you consider yourself more of a lecturer or facilitator? Creating meaningful and sustainable discussion is vital regardless.

Establish discussion expectations from day one

- Provide (verbally and on the syllabus) clear guidelines for participation. Discuss them beforehand, stick to them, and enforce them during class.
- Think about what active participation means to you and how you plan to assess students.
- Make sure the assigned material is discussed in class. Have specific quotations, questions, or problems from the assigned material ready to go so that even underprepared students will have something to talk about.

Positioning

Make conscious decisions about your physical placement in the classroom. Switch it up as often as your classroom space allows:

- Standing up front
- Walking about
- Podium/no podium
- Sitting in a chair in front, sitting in a chair amongst students
- Desks in a circle/square

Facilitate

- Use open-ended questions and ask students for clarification, examples, and definitions.
- If a student asks you a direct question, pose it to the class for a preliminary answer first.
- Summarize/re-phrase student responses without taking a stand one way or another.
- Encourage students to address one another and not always “go through” you.
- Pause to give students time to reflect on your summaries or others’ comments.
- Use the board or a Google Doc to take notes of main points. Individually or collectively.
- Toward the end of the discussion, review the main ideas, the threads of the discussion, and sketch out some of the conclusions you arrived at together.
- Praise students individually/collectively.

Intervene

When your basic Q&A isn’t working:

- Community blackboard
- Low-stakes writing exercises
- Have students write discussion questions in class
- Group work (give them specific tasks, not just open ended conversation time)
- Refer back to previous class assignments (LATTE posts, Pre-Drafts, etc.)
- Socratic seminar style
- Cold-calling (I am morally opposed to it, but that’s your call).

Students who just won't talk:

- Invite them to your office, try to understand their reticence (usually related to a lack of confidence for a variety of reasons)
- Be up front with your expectations—if they can't bring themselves to talk during class, what are some strategies to break the ice?
 - Set goals (e.g., must speak at least one time per class)
 - Be the first person to speak
 - Any kind of speaking counts (asking a question, asking for clarification, etc.)
 - Prepare questions/answers ahead of time

For everyone:

- Give feedback on participation—the sooner, the better! Offer praise and/or encouragement.
- After an especially successful discussion, send out a brief email to the class offering gratitude.
- Think about how you might address the class if a discussion just doesn't work. Consider taking some of the blame and asking students for their feedback.

Credit: Courtney Pina Miller, Brandeis University Writing Program.