

How to Lead an Effective Class Discussion
Hamilton College Oral Communication Center

In leading a discussion of an essay, research report, story or other material, your general objective is to help your group better understand, appreciate, or evaluate that material by facilitating a conversation about its substance, form, or style. You should plan a brief agenda that will help the group achieve this goal. Below are suggested elements of the agenda.

1. (Optional) Plan a brief “check-in” period. Give each group member an opportunity to speak. The check-in might give people a chance to mention *briefly* things that are on their minds and *relevant to the topic*, such as a news item, a personal experience, an issue that came up in another class, a general reaction to the assigned reading (e.g., it was difficult to read, the language was evocative, it sounded like another writer you’ve read, it wasn’t very original, it seems to have some methodological problems), etc.

Allow individuals only 20-30 seconds each to make these comments, and use this time as a way to let them get engaged and “warmed up” to talking about the reading. Some of the comments might be used as a bridge to the main part of the discussion.

2. State the objective of the discussion and provide any needed background, orientation, or other framing remarks. Keep it brief. Do give a complete overview and summary of the reading unless you have been asked by your professor to do so. Assume that group members have done the assigned reading. If they haven’t, your summary probably won’t be sufficient to produce a very satisfying discussion anyway.

3. (Optional) Select someone to keep a record of the group’s ideas. Decide on what medium you want to use (e.g., whiteboard/blackboard, document on computer, flip chart) and be prepared with the proper materials.

4. Start the discussion. Guide it, keep it on track. Get members involved.

You may want to have some notes for this. It’s a good idea to write out the key questions you plan to ask and arrange them in a sensible order. Your questions should stimulate thinking and discussion. In general, avoid asking questions that simply ask members to recite or recall a detail from the reading as a check on whether anyone actually read it. Professors sometimes do that, but it’s probably not appropriate to your role. It’s reasonable, though, to ask for specific references to support points.

Questions that generate more interesting and engaging discussion ask people to interpret, apply, or extend the author’s ideas; to compare and contrast; to make critical judgments of the work; to agree or disagree with positions expressed in the reading or in the discussion; and to suggest theoretical, artistic, practical, or other implications.

5. As the discussion nears its end, summarize or ask others to summarize the group’s major conclusions, the points of agreement and disagreement, etc. Participants may want to briefly correct or clarify these for the record.

6. (Optional) Conduct a brief “check-out.” Give group members an opportunity to comment on where the reading or the discussion leaves them or directs them.