

How to Lead an Effective Class Discussion

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As the leader of a discussion of a textbook chapter or other class material, your general objective is to help your classmates better understand that material by facilitating a conversation about concepts and issues expressed in or implied by the reading. 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. For a classroom discussion, the check-in might give people a chance to mention *briefly* things that are on their minds and *relevant to the topic*, such as an item in today’s news, a personal experience that occurred since the last class meeting, 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), 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 or orientation. Keep it brief. Do *not* waste time giving 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. Specify what method of recording you want to use (e.g., whiteboard/blackboard, computer, flip chart, overhead transparency) and be prepared with the proper materials. (It is best that this be arranged prior to class so as not to take time and attention away from the task at hand.)
4. Start the discussion. Guide it, keep it on track. Get members involved. Write out the key questions you plan to ask to stimulate thinking and discussion. Arrange them in a sensible order.

In general, avoid asking yes/no questions and 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.

Questions that make for more interesting and engaging discussion are those that ask people to clarify, interpret, or extend points made in the reading; to exemplify and apply concepts; to compare and contrast; to offer judgments about the accuracy, relevance, or usefulness of the author’s observations; to agree or disagree with positions expressed in the reading or in the discussion; and to suggest theoretical or practical implications.

5. When the discussion has either run its course or run out of time, summarize what you understand to be the group’s major conclusions, the points of agreement and disagreement. Give group members an opportunity to correct or clarify these for the record.
6. (Optional) Conduct a brief “check-out.” Give group members an opportunity to comment on the discussion itself or where this experience leaves them or directs them personally.