



LEADING DISCUSSIONS



Leading Discussions

By engaging students in discussion, instructors can help them think about the subject matter in previously unexplored ways, learn to evaluate their own and others' perspectives, articulate what they've learned or what needs to be clarified, and even provide motivation to study the topic further (McKeachie and Svinicki, 2014).



According to McKeachie and Svinicki (2014),

- a common experience such as a film clip, cartoon, story, anecdote, personal experience, an excerpt from an assigned reading or demonstration that all your students can relate to,
- a controversy that fits with the material you are teaching and will elicit both viewpoints.
- a stimulating question

can be used as *discussion starters*.



The following are some suggestions for leading class discussions:

Summarize the main ideas and write them on the board at suitable moments during the discussion. If you do not do this, students will have difficulty identifying and comprehending the most key aspects from the discussion. Writing on the board is especially beneficial for visual learners.



Integrate student responses into the discussion without making the discussion merely a student-teacher interaction. Ask students to respond directly to one another's ideas. The use of small-group discussions will allow students to become better acquainted and thus facilitate their communication with one another.

Become aware of your facial and body gestures as you ask and answer questions. Making eye contact, listening carefully, smiling, nodding in agreement, and moving around the room are all nonverbal cues that make you seem more approachable and inviting.

Respectfully respond to all questions and comments. Thank students for their contribution. Whether you agree or disagree with your students' arguments, you can emphasize what is valuable about them. Also, you can develop constructive responses to incorrect answers or comments that are not adequately related to the issue being discussed.



Incorporate wait time to allow students to think about their response. Typically, three to five seconds is sufficient; more complex questions may need a longer time.

Interaction increases significantly when students have silent time to formulate an answer.



Generate carefully phrased questions. Avoid using "closed" questions (yes/no questions, questions with a single response, leading questions), and instead ask students to infer conclusions from the readings, gather evidence to support their claims, think about the implications of an argument, and make critical judgments.



Have a plan to incorporate the nonparticipants. There will always be students who tend to be passive during a discussion. Instructors need to help students become participants by establishing an expectation of participation during the first class meeting and creating an atmosphere of familiarity and acceptance (McKeachie and Svinicki, 2014).





Invite students to generate discussion themes and topics. There will be some students who haven't read the assignment. To prevent this common situation from turning into a problem, you may;

- ask students to post questions about the week's reading to an electronic bulletin board, and use them to initiate discussion.
- give students questions at the end of one class period and ask them to look for answers in the reading for the next class.
- have students read the material and write one or two questions about it, which can be turned in at the beginning of the next class.
- use the one-minute paper technique at the beginning of class. Have students write or summarize (in one or two minutes) the main point of the reading, or one or two points that struck them the most.

Develop a classroom contract. Before beginning the discussion, it is important that everyone is aware of the norms. Below are typical rules recommended by the Centers of Teaching and Learning at the University of Michigan, Columbia University, Cornell University, and UC Berkeley;

- Talk to each other, not just to the discussion speaker or teacher.
- Refer to evidence from the text to support your ideas.
- Ask questions if you do not understand what someone has said, or you can paraphrase what another student has said for clarification (“I think you said this; is that right?”).
- Listen actively and don't interrupt (Don't just think about what you are going to say while someone else is talking.).
- Criticize ideas, not individuals.
- Avoid blame, speculation, and inflammatory language.



10 Common Mistakes to Avoid While Leading Discussions

- × Talking too much; answering your own questions or asking more than one question at once.
- × Asking too many questions that are “closed,” or that have only one correct answer.
- × Letting the discussion become a one-on-one conversation or debate with one student.
- × Letting a small number of talkative students dominate the discussion.
- × Assuming that quiet students do not have questions or comments.
- × Assuming that students are able to remember, and understand the most important ideas generated in the discussion.
- × Expecting students who are new to a topic to discuss it at the same level as students who have already studied the topic in depth or who are intellectually more mature.
- × Failing to redirect students back to the ideas at hand when the discussion strays off topic.
- × Asking a student to speak for or represent a group of people, especially if that group is in the minority in the class or at the University.



References

McKeachie, W. J., & Svinicki, M. (2014). *Teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Teaching with Discussions. Washington University in St. Louis. Center for Teaching and Learning. <https://ctl.wustl.edu/resources/teaching-with-discussions/>

What to Do When Class Discussion Stalls. The McGraw Center. Princeton University. <https://mcgraw.princeton.edu/node/1271>.

Leading Discussions. Derek Bok Center, Harvard University. <https://bokcenter.harvard.edu/leading-discussions>

Leading Discussions. Center for Innovation in Teaching & Learning. University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

<https://citl.illinois.edu/citl-101/teaching-learning/resources/teaching-in-specific-contexts/leading-discussions>

Discussion Guidelines. MIT Teaching + Learning Lab. Massachusetts Institute of Technology <https://tll.mit.edu/teaching-resources/inclusive-classroom/discussion-guidelines/>

Creating Discussion Guidelines. (n.d.). UC Berkeley Graduate Student Instructor Teaching & Resource Center. Retrieved October 8, 2020, from <https://gsi.berkeley.edu/gsi-guide-contents/discussion-intro/discussion-guidelines/>.

Guidelines for Discussing Difficult or High-Stakes Topics. (n.d.). *University of Michigan Center for Research on Learning and Teaching*. Retrieved October 8, 2020, from <https://crlt.umich.edu/publinks/generalguidelines>.

Getting Started with Establishing Ground Rules: Center for Teaching Innovation. (n.d.). *Cornell University Center for Teaching Innovation*. Retrieved October 13, 2020, from <https://teaching.cornell.edu/resource/getting-started-establishing-ground-rules>.



Further Readings and Resources

- [Strategies for Leading Discussion Sections. Derek Bok Center, Harvard University.](#)
- [Facilitating Discussion & Engagement by Lauren Davidson and Noelle Lopez. Derek Bok Center, Harvard University.](#)
- How to Lead a Small Group Discussion.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqzGDEvKQLM&ab_channel=PursueGODTraining
- The discussion group-how to create meaningful dialogue: Andrew Hess. TEDx Talks
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xkq8dr_5ofs&ab_channel=TEDxTalks