

HOW DO I LEAD AN EFFECTIVE AND ENGAGING DISCUSSION?

Discussions provide a structured setting for students—and the instructor—to work through core concepts that arise in readings and lectures. But running an effective discussion is much more complicated than asking a series of questions and waiting for student responses. Use this guide to prepare to lead discussions that are both engaged and engaging and that challenge students to develop their ideas and learn together.

► How can I prepare to lead a discussion?



Clearly articulate your goals for class beyond just “discuss.” Learners are more engaged when they know what they’re learning and why it matters.

Goals can complement the open-endedness of discussion. A discussion might aim to: elicit a range of opinions or responses, share and explore partially formed ideas, engage with or clarify a difficult part of the readings, solve a problem, or review course material and check for comprehension.

It’s okay to deviate from your discussion plan, but consider the directions you’d ideally like the discussion to follow and which topics move away from your explicit goals.

Plan your questions. Think of lines of questioning that will—whether they arrive at answers or just more questions—help students move their thinking towards the concrete objectives of the section.

► How do I start the discussion?

Start by telling students your goals for the discussion. Explain the path the class might take to accomplish these goals. Use the board, and even an email before class, to share the agenda.

Begin every class with an arrival ritual to help students transition into the class mindset:

- Ask students to write a word or question on the board as they enter in response to that day’s reading or assignment
- Read a short quote or poem together
- Play music relevant to the day’s topic
- Bring in outside examples or material objects related to the day’s topic, such as poll results, historical documents, pictures, or anthropological artifacts



Help students prepare by providing discussion questions in advance. You may also ask them to write a short paragraph or response to a prompt or reading. Look at the responses ahead of time so you can plan the discussion based on student input.

► How can I keep discussion going?



Rephrase students' questions or partial answers. Direct them back to the class to keep students talking to each other and help maintain the momentum of a discussion. Avoid a question-and-answer session with the teacher.

Silence is important! Leave sufficient time for students to consider a question before repeating it, rephrasing it, or adding further information.

Have some ready tactics for when discussion isn't flowing:

- *Pair Share or Small Group Discussion.* Ask small groups to discuss topics to provide a low stakes way of generating conversation.
- *Writing.* Ask students to write at the start or during lulls to give them time to process and generate more discussion material.
- *Warm Call or Area Call.* Give a particular student or an area of the room a heads up that you'll be asking them to contribute or respond to a question in a little bit.
- *Freeze Frame.* Pause the discussion; have students reflect on what was just said or how the discussion has progressed thus far.

► How do I wrap up the discussion? What next steps should I take?

Set time at the end of class to debrief the class and prompt students to synthesize takeaways from the discussion as well as to look ahead to upcoming homework, course themes, or major deadlines. This framing can remind students that the progress made in section is in fact progress toward more general goals and milestones within a course.

Collect feedback from students. Provide index cards or an anonymous online form for students to share what went well, what could have been clearer, and what questions or concerns they still have.

Invite students to reach out if they have unresolved questions or concerns, and encourage them to visit your office hours or make an appointment to continue the conversation.

After class, take a few minutes to reflect and make notes while things are fresh: What worked and what didn't? On what topics or with which students will you follow up? What will you keep or change in the next session?

Additional Resources

- The Bok Center has collected a range of strategies for [actively engaging students](#), [prompting discussion through questions](#), and re-establishing [an inclusive and productive learning environment](#), if you encounter barriers to facilitating discussion.
- [Request an observation or video consultation](#) with Bok Center senior staff to reflect on how students might be experiencing your class, to gain more confidence in the classroom, and to expand your repertoire of teaching techniques.
- Find more [tools for leading engaging discussions](#) and [collecting student feedback](#) during the semester from Vanderbilt University.
- Stephen Brookfield talks about planning, conducting, and assessing classroom discussions in his book [Discussion as a Way of Teaching](#).

