

Facilitating Class Discussions

Successfully leading a class discussion involves more than simply asking questions. It's important to know your professor's goals in asking you to lead a discussion so that you can adapt accordingly. In general, here are some things you can do to help guide a discussion.

FRAME THE DISCUSSION

Before jumping into your first question, orient the class to your focus for the day. For example, explain how the readings relate to previous class discussions and the topic of the day. In some cases, you may be asked to give a presentation before you lead discussion. If you are not asked to give a presentation, be sure to keep the framing concise.

ACKNOWLEDGE AND USE RESPONSES

People like to feel like they have contributed in a meaningful way. When someone answers a question, don't just say, "Oh, that's interesting," and move on. Take initiative by challenging the student's idea with an opposing piece of evidence, or support the idea by further explaining the response. Properly responding to answers will make the discussion more fluid and natural. You can also use the responses as a transition point for your questions.

ASK A VARIETY OF TYPES OF QUESTIONS

Be careful of asking the same type of question over and over. As you think about the questions you want to ask, they should be asked in a meaningful way. You can use a variety of types of questions to keep things fresh and to probe different parts of the topic. The following table has a list of suggested question types and some examples of what they might sound like. While your topic may be dramatically different than these examples, looking at the root of the question can give you a starting point to create your own.

- Questions that ask for more evidence may sound like: How do you know that? What in our reading supports that view? What would convince someone who is skeptical?
- Questions that ask for clarification may sound like: What's a different way of thinking about X? Can you explain the term you just used?

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- Questions that are open ended may sound like: How does X relate to Y? What does the author mean when she writes...? How does your experience fit with this view?
- Questions that use hypotheticals may sound like: How might your response be different if you were alive at the time of the author? Put yourself in the shoes of the character; how would you react if...?
- Questions that ask about cause and effect may sound like: What factors do you think contributed to X? How might the outcome be different if Y were different?
- Questions that require synthesis and summary may sound like: Taken together, what do these two readings suggest about...? What are your main take-aways from this discussion?

PLAN BUT BE FLEXIBLE

When planning a discussion, organize your questions beforehand by guessing (to the best of your ability) how your peers will respond to your questions. While answering one question, students may present ideas that better relate to further questions that you have. You should be familiar enough with the material (and with your questions) that you can rearrange the order on the fly.

If you are leading the discussion with a classmate (or classmates), you should plan who is going to take responsibility for which part of the questioning. While you can all certainly jump in, you should have a clear sense of what each person will lead so you are not left in the front of the room looking at each other to figure out who is supposed to speak next.

SUMMARIZE

Particularly as the discussion nears its end, re-state the major conclusions and points of agreement and disagreement. Ask if anyone has questions of clarification. End with the main point that you wanted students to take from the day's discussion.