

# Effective Discussions

**Keep in mind these are strategies, not rules. The classroom is dynamic.  
Pay attention to student needs and do whatever works in the moment.**

## 1. Creating a Welcoming Space (Discussion process)

### Establishing Community

*Room Set-up:* Look at the space in your room. Ask yourself what physical space is most conducive to conversation. Circles often work best; everyone can be seen easily. Where are you in the circle? Do you want to remain at the head of the class? Stand near the chalkboard? Move around the room?

*First Day Activities:*

Go Round — Have each student say one sentence about what she would most like to learn from discussion section or what makes her feel most comfortable and excited to participate in group discussion.

Introductions — Pair students and have them talk for five minutes about the most interesting thing they've done. Then have them introduce each other to the rest of the class.

### Establishing Expectation

*Set Ground Rules:* Ask the group to brainstorm what makes a discussion useful, respectful and welcoming. As a group, create a “code of conduct” with guidelines such as “Respond to ideas; refrain from personal comments.”

*Clarify Participation:* Make clear how they'll be evaluated for discussion. Tell them your goals for the class and the ways in which their participation can contribute. How often do you expect them to speak? Is volunteering necessary? Encourage them to take notes; discussion is as meaningful and useful as lecture.

*Offer Varied Options:* On the first day of class, encourage any students who feel uncomfortable speaking in front of the group to contact you in office hours or by email, so that you can discuss alternative ways to engage their participation in class.

### Feedback Cycles

*Verbal:* Especially in the beginning, verbally acknowledge their contributions, let them know you appreciate their participation and thoughtfulness. Appreciate questions as much as statements. Remember to be even-handed, respond supportively to all comments regardless of speaker or point of view. Address inappropriate comments quickly and calmly; remind them of the guidelines they created.

*Non-verbal:* Model attentive behavior; look at the person speaking and limit distracting movements. While it's occasionally necessary to look around and monitor the rest of the class or glance at your watch, try to keep distracting movement to a minimum.

*Respond:* Be aware of students' body language. If they are slumped in their seats or unusually distracted, change your discussion strategy.

### A Balance of Voices

*Managing Dominant Voices:* Interrupt gently; wait for the speaker to pause for breath and then say, “Thank you.” Or begin to reflect and summarize what they've said so far (model brevity). Whatever you do or say, it should be gentle and without negative charge.

*Encouraging Reluctant Voices:* Periodically solicit input from those who haven't yet spoken, either as a group (“Would anyone who hasn't spoken like to contribute?”) or by name. You can also use the

reading responses to ask directed questions: *“Some of you said in your reading responses that you thought the example McDougal used only applied to a nuclear family and might not be true for other kinds of households. Can anyone speak more about that?”*

## 2. Preparation (Exploring the content)

### For Students

*Reading Questions:* Give students questions to think about as they read. They’re more likely to consider these questions if you require them to turn in written responses. You can also ask them to prepare discussion topics or questions.

### For You

*What are your goals for discussion?* Comprehension? Analysis? Connection? What needs to be covered? It will be different for every discussion. Make a list of your goals and material to be covered as well as questions designed to elicit this material. It’s also useful to keep up with their previous reading responses so you know which concepts they find difficult and which they’re interested in.

## 3. Useful kinds of questions

### Comprehension

*Can they reflect the author’s argument in their own words?*

What is Freud’s thesis in this chapter?

How does the id differ from the super-ego?

### Context

*How does the article/theory reflect their personal experience or current events?*

How did you learn your multiplication tables? Was it by rote or experiential?

Does Wolf’s theory accurately describe today’s fashion magazines?

### Connections

*How does the article/theory relate to other class material?*

What would Marx say about Smith’s model of economic behavior?

Would the main character in “Comfort” have objected to teaching a unit on creationism?

### Formal Choices

*How do the formal choices and author’s perspective change your understanding of the material?*

Was the article funny? Did that make you more or less likely to accept its thesis?

What assumptions about human nature does the author make?

**Questions are not the only way to generate conversation.**

**You can use pictures, movies, music and other media/exercises as conversation starters.**

## 4. Your Role as Facilitator

### Moderator

*Track the list of speakers.* Clearly signal students who raise their hand, so they know you’ve acknowledged their desire to speak and can concentrate on listening. Try to list in the order you saw their signals or you can give preference to students who haven’t yet contributed.

*Hold an awareness of time and material that needs to be covered.*

### Translator/Connector

*Reflect.* Frame what students say in the context of the larger questions or in relationship to what has

been said in the discussion so far.

*“So you agree that education should be experiential, but feel that to use this method exclusively would keep you from covering the breadth of material necessary?”*

Be as accurate as possible. These have to be genuine questions or it feels pushy and rhetorical. *Use the Board.* Make active lists and diagrams. Emphasize connections and dichotomies the class has noticed by circling sections or drawing arrows across columns. This is especially important for including visual and kinetic learners.

### **Representing the Text**

It’s okay to “correct” students on textual accuracy; you can ask questions that invite other students to redirect misunderstandings.

*“Did she feel more or less conflicted after meeting her biological father?”*

### **Introducing Multiple Perspectives**

You can and should introduce counter-arguments that the students haven’t surfaced but that are common enough to be important arguments, or you can solicit potential counter-arguments from them.

*“Why might someone object to stem-cell research? What if you believed stem cells could experience distress?”*

## **5. Alternatives to Whole Class Discussion**

### **Varying Group Size (Sliding Groups)**

You can begin discussion by pairing students and, after five or ten minutes, pairing couples to make groups of four. You can vary group size as appropriate during a discussion.

### **Blackboard Discussion Boards**

Blackboard offers a discussion board function that lets you pose questions and have students “post” responses to these questions and each other’s posts. Students can do this anonymously and in their own time.

### **Response Cards**

Students write their responses on index cards that are then mixed and read by you or other students.

## **6. Evaluation**

### **Wrap-up**

A few minutes before the end of class, stop and summarize the major points of discussion. This practice helps students retain the content of discussion and encourages them to understand discussion as a content-generating exercise, similar in importance and relevance to a lecture.

### **Quality vs. Quantity**

In evaluating student participation remember that students have different needs, norms and modes around public discourse. Consider the quality of contribution in the context of discussion goals and personal difficulty.

### **Self-Assessment**

Keep track of which tactics work best for you and your class. Keep a list of activities and questions that generate the most fruitful discussion. In your mid-term evaluation (available on Blackboard) be sure to ask questions about the efficacy of discussion, student comfort level, etc.

For further help/information: [lrutberg@uoregon.edu](mailto:lrutberg@uoregon.edu)

For technology/Blackboard: <http://libweb.uoregon.edu/general/services/techres.html>

