

Ten Tips (Ideas/Suggestions) for Facilitating Discussion
*(Based on my observations as a Teaching Assistant, Teaching Fellow,
and Assistant Professor at Boston College, 2000-present.)*

1) Know Thy Class

I find it very difficult to lead an effective classroom discussion when I do not know the people in the room with me. Making an effort to learn names within the first two weeks of class helps. I had a student tell me last year that I was the only teacher (out of five courses) who bothered to learn his name. For the first few weeks, I bring index cards so the students can make name-tags. I always start out the semester with an assignment that will help me get to know the students in my course better, something beyond the typical 1st day ice-breaker.

(1) Worldview

(2) Walking Assignment

2) Encourage Interaction Among Your Students

For the first few weeks of class, in both my larger and smaller sections (15-160!), I give students 2 or 3 minutes at the beginning of each class period (especially on discussion days) to introduce themselves to someone in the class they have not yet met. I find discussion begins to flow better when the students can say, "Oh, well, I don't agree with what STEVE just said" Or, "Megan, made a good point, but...." Interaction makes the session begin to feel like a discussion rather than a Q+A session with you as the leader.

3) Make Discussion Count

Obviously if you are a Teaching Assistant in someone else's class, you cannot choose how much the discussion section participation grade is weighted in the final grade. I have noticed, however, that students seem to take discussion sections far more seriously when they count for a SERIOUS portion of their grade. For instance, in my large History Core class (with 2 Teaching Assistants), ACTIVE participation in our weekly discussion sections counts for 25% of the total grade for the course. If students miss three of these weekly discussions over the course of the semester, they receive an 'F' for their discussion grade.

4) Make the Rules Together (and make them CLEAR)

Many students do not understand what 'active participation' in a discussion means, and some feel that simply showing up is adequate. Come up with a clear definition of participation (and ask your class for input). Or, be very clear about how you come up with the participation grade. I weight the grade by # of comments per class with a check -, check, check+ system on the roster.

5) Try making a Reading Guide and handing it out the week before discussion

For every reading we do as a class, I make a reading guide for the students that lists the reading assignment as well as questions for discussion. I do not require students to out write answers to any/all of the questions, but encourage them to take notes on the guide while reading AND during discussion. I find the guides help with focusing the reading as well as helping students who are not as apt to talk prepare something to say. It also ensures that my TA's and I are on the same page. (See Example).

6) and 7) USE TECHNOLOGY (email/web-ct) TO YOUR ADVANTAGE

Sometimes, I will begin a discussion before the class even starts, OR, continue a discussion after a class-period has ended. For example, a day or two before my scheduled discussion, I send a group email to my class and ask that each member of the class develop and email me a question based on the week's reading. I then cut and paste their questions into a worksheet (without names attached) and hand out the questions to the class on the day of discussion. When I do this, I will often ask one of the students to begin the class by asking their question. Every time I do this, I am CONSISTENTLY impressed by the detailed, interesting, and provocative questions they come up with. They are often better than my own. Web-CT can also be an excellent discussion tool. If you have a course web-ct site, you can add in a discussion, and begin the thread with a question or a comment (this is a great way to follow-up a discussion, as it gives students who are less-inclined to speak out in class a chance to share ideas). At different points throughout the semester, I require students to post a question/comment on our class web-ct discussion board AND to respond to/answer another student's posting. If you wish, you can even count this towards class participation. Students are so used to responding by typing (email, texting, instant messaging, etc.) that the on-line forum typically works well.

8) Be willing to *change* your Discussion Plan to adapt to the interests of the Class

I have ruined many a good discussion by wanting to "cover everything" in a 50-minute class period. Sometimes I am so stuck on my own agenda, that I move on to the next question/issue/topic without letting the discussion follow a natural flow. It is sometimes surprising what questions work and what questions flop. For instance, last week, my small discussion section was addressing primary source readings related to the Renaissance. I intended to only spend a few minutes talking about "Genius," but when I asked the students to define "Genius" and to discuss who gets to judge/determine the moniker, I could not call on people fast enough. We ended up spending about 35 minutes on the topic of "Genius" (rather than the 5 minutes I planned), but it was a GREAT discussion.

9) Be Creative/Experiment/Step outside of your Comfort Zone

I often changed my discussion plans based on the “feel” of a classroom on any given day (this was especially true when I was a TA and facilitating 3-4 sections in a row on the same set of readings). If you always run a discussion by sitting at the front of the room, and asking questions, try sitting somewhere else. Put yourself in the circle, in the discussion. If you always do the call and respond style section, mix it up.

Suggestions:

-Quotes on the Board: I’ll ask students to choose any quote from the text we are discussing and then to go and write it on the blackboard (bring extra chalk). I will then invite the students to read their chosen quotes (it’s amazing to me how they almost always, even in a class of 30, choose different quotes) and then facilitate the discussion on the fly—building the questions around their chosen quotes.

-10 Minutes of Writing: I will formulate a question related to the material and print it out on a piece of paper, and ask students to write out a response, using examples from the text as supporting evidence. You can choose to collect and grade, or not. I find these short writing assignments give students a chance to get their thoughts together, and then, after the writing exercise is done, you can call on anyone, as you are not putting them on the spot, because they have ideas written in front of them.

-Theme Brainstorm: I stand at the chalkboard and ask students to rapid-fire yell out themes they found in the reading and would like to discuss over the course of the class-period.

-STRUCTURED Group Work: Groups can work on different questions, presenting their findings to the class after a set amount of time. I always find that coming together as a whole class for at least 10 minutes at the end of group sessions for a “wrap-up” is helpful. Join a different group every time. I sometimes do ‘show and tell’ group work where I ask each student to bring with them to class an image or a document, related to our overall topic of discussion.

-Student-Led Discussions: For whatever reason, students are more likely to “rescue” their peers, than they are to respond to your line of questioning. To this end, student-led discussions (groups, pairs, individuals) often work well, but usually require prior planning (either the group has to meet with you before the session, or you give them a specific set of guidelines). Not a good idea for people who don’t like to relinquish “control” of the classroom!

-Other things I have done: Assigned students roles for plays we have read (ie. Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*); set up debates; sent students out on group explorations (for *Age of Discovery*). Not everything works all of the time, but the experimentation is worth it!

10) SHARE IDEAS WITH COLLEAGUES!