

[Revised online resource for students, Spring 2023]

Leading Discussions

Leading an effective discussion is an important and practical skill you can develop that is different from doing a presentation. In a presentation you are the star! When you lead a discussion, you are not. You should speak the least and encourage everyone else to participate.

Your goals include

1. Developing deeper understanding of the content
2. Facilitating extended object analysis
3. Posing productive discussion questions
4. Creating a legible digital presentation (where relevant)
5. Encouraging discussion amongst your peers (not just to you)
6. Ensuring equal participation

You can only achieve the above if you are prepared! Meeting with your professor before the facilitation gives you the opportunity to demonstrate your high level of preparation which will include multiple readings of the assigned text, generating possible discussion questions, and providing a draft presentation file.

1. Developing deeper understanding of the content
 - Ensure that your peers understand the central thesis in assigned text
 - Help class identify how the author executed their argument (what methods or comparisons were most useful?)
 - Link the content to prior course material and/or topical events
2. Facilitating extended object analysis
 - provide visual comparisons
 - let your peers do the analysis (do not do it for them)
3. Posing productive discussion questions
 - Make sure they get at the main points of the text and/or object (obscure questions are not helpful)
 - Keep questions simple, short and focused (do not ask multiple questions in one question)
 - Consider providing hard copies of questions in class so that students can easily and simultaneously engage the questions and images of objects
 - Do not answer the questions!
 - Consider dividing the class into small groups to answer questions
4. Creating a legible digital presentation (where relevant)
 - Provide high-quality images (e.g. use ArtStor; select “large” images on Google)
 - Provide ID information
 - Anticipate comparisons and provide those images on the same slide
 - Consider providing color xeroxes which may be easier to see

- MINIMAL (hardly any) text; if you do provide text be prepared to read it out-loud, word for word (people cannot read and listen simultaneously – reading wins, so they will ignore you to read text on the slide)
 - Do not answer your questions on the slides!
5. Encouraging effective discussion and discussion amongst your peers (not just to you)
- Convey your enthusiasm for the topic through preparation, voice loudness and tone, an open body pose (not arms crossed on your chest), eye contact, and engaging with the image/screen (but be sure to speak TO the room, not the screen)
 - Silence is golden. Give your peers time to think about your question; count to ten silently to make sure you're waiting long enough. You may call on someone or rephrase the question if no one responds
 - Consider asking easier (fact-based) questions then progressing to harder open-ended ones
 - Encourage multiple answers/responses to the same question (“what do others think?”)
 - Make connections amongst classmates; recall something a peer said (“your point relates to X’s point about...”)
 - If someone offers a comment that seems unrelated, ask them to either explain its relevance or bring it up later
 - Clarify if something is unclear: ask a follow-up question for further clarification or correct an obvious misunderstanding or ask the class for clarification
 - Check in – periodically ask if people are keeping up or have questions
 - Highlight important points either rhetorically (“this is an important point”) or visually, on the board
 - In general, ask follow up questions to develop a deeper engagement with the topic (“why do you say that?”)
 - Avoid distracting filler words (um, uh, like, you know, etc.)
6. Ensuring equal participation
- Avoid calling on the same people or those who immediately raise their hands
 - Know everyone’s names so you can easily call on people
 - Consider documenting brainstorming sessions on the board
 - Track time to make sure you stay within your allotted amount while also including everyone in the class

Potentially useful phrases you can try

“This relates to last week’s discussion of...”

“Can anyone build on X’s point?”

“How does that relate to...?”

“Can you hold that thought? I want to stick with...”

“This relates to X’s point about...”

“Could you say that again another way?”

“Are you saying that...?”

“Can someone respond to Y?”

“Let me jump in and clarify something. The meaning of that term is...”

“Can someone clarify the meaning of the term...?”

“The key issues today have been...”

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