

## ■ DISCUSSION SECTIONS

At their best, discussions make every student feel like a vital part of the intellectual fabric of the class. They are a means for students to learn and practice skills, generate ideas, solve problems, consolidate knowledge, criticize arguments, develop insight, and gain confidence in handling new concepts. Good discussions also allow students to formulate the principles of the subject in their own words. Ideally discussions provide a structured setting for students—and the instructor—to work through the core concepts or problems raised by readings and lectures. Sometimes the process allows students to converge toward a consensus (e.g., where there *is* something like an answer or solution); at other times the process allows for ideas to diverge (e.g., where the goal of the discussion is to highlight a range of approaches to a concept or the genuine messiness of a thinker's ideas).

Leading discussion sections effectively requires a lot more listening than speaking, and the speaking done by the instructor comes, in large part, through questions.

Running an effective discussion section is never as straightforward as asking a series of questions, and any given section is liable to raise questions in the face of everyday obstacles, e.g., How does one interrupt politely? Praise a valuable contribution? Ensure that various points of view are heard? Energize a low-energy room? Encourage reticent students? Regain the discussion from domination by a few? Solutions to these common problems can—and has—filled entire bookshelves (see [“Resources”](#) at the end of this section for more advice on leading discussions).

Leading discussion sections effectively requires a lot more listening than speaking, and the speaking done by the instructor comes, in large part, through questions. There are many types of questions you can use to guide discussion, and the following is a taxonomy of common types.

### TYPES OF DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

#### Setting the context and gauging the room

- **Check in.** (Where's everyone's energy level at today? Is anyone taking midterms this week?)
- **Take stock of the course.** (What are our upcoming deadlines? Does anyone have any questions about course-related business?)
- **Pivot from the last meeting.** (How does today's topic or theme build on what we discussed in our last section?)
- **Set goals for the discussion.** This may or may not come in the form of questions. If you have concrete goals in mind, go ahead and let your students know—making them “guess what's in your head” at this point in the discussion might not be a good use of time or energy.

### Laying a foundation

- **Find out where students are.** (Which of the study questions did you find most provocative or most difficult to answer?)
- **Ask for summary.** (What two or three key lessons have we learned about how cognitive biases affect human judgment?)
- **Gather information.** (What was the gross national product of France last year? In what year was photography invented?)
- **Encourage personal responses.** (What are your reactions to the story? What aspects of this case were most interesting to you?)
- **Prompt students to analyze.** (What is your analysis of the problem? What conclusions did you draw from this data?)

### Building toward analysis and evaluation

- **Challenge and test.** (Why do you believe that? What arguments might there be to counter that view?)
- **Interrogate priority and sequence.** (Which of the two things you've mentioned is more relevant to Faulkner's narrative form? Given the state's limited resources, what is the first step to be taken?)
- **Ask for predictions.** (What will be the result of a heavy increase in lobbying against this proposed legislation?)
- **Hypothesize.** (What might have happened if Elizabeth I had remained in power for ten more years? In what ways would this play be different if it was set in the American South?)

### Promoting application and self-reflection

- **Elicit action.** (What would you do in order to implement the government's plan?)
- **Extrapolate.** (What implications might this observation about early childhood development have for how we see adolescents?)
- **Interrelate.** (How might your observations relate to what Jane said about Hindu belief structures?)
- **Generalize.** (Based on your study of the computer and telecommunications industries, what do you consider to be the major forces that enhance technological innovation?)
- **Connect on a personal level.** (How does our complication of Singer's proposal impact your own calculus of altruistic behavior?)

## ■ STRATEGIES FOR LEADING DISCUSSION SECTIONS

### PLANNING DISCUSSIONS

- **Consider background knowledge.** First, think about the material in light of your students' knowledge and experiences. The sorts of questions you start with should meet students where they are.
- **Plan your questions.** Think of lines of questioning that will—whether they arrive at answers or just more questions—get students thinking their way from where they are toward the concrete objectives of the section (e.g., helping them process or apply a new concept, preparing them for an upcoming assignment, or introducing a set of unresolved questions that will take up the next few weeks of the course).
- **Share concrete objectives.** Whether you lay out the objectives in an email before section or write them on the board at the start of class, it's important that students have a clear sense of what the goals of the section are, and why.



## ARRIVING AT CLOSURE

- **Leave time** to recognize what students have accomplished during section. Make sure to leave a few minutes at the end of class for debriefing and looking ahead.
- **Gather a summary** of the important points raised during discussion, write them on the board (if you haven't already) and walk through them with students to lend a narrative to the discussion you had.
- **Tie the outcomes of discussion to goals** you set beforehand (Which ones did you meet? What's the gameplan for the ones you didn't meet? Did you meet goals you hadn't imagined at the outset?)
- **Look ahead** to upcoming homework, course themes, or major deadlines. This sort of framing can remind students that the progress made in any given section is in fact progress toward more general goals and milestones within a course.
- **Invite students** to reach out if they have unresolved questions or concerns based on the discussion. If the discussion has gone well, they should!

## GETTING STUDENTS INVOLVED AND KEEPING THE DISCUSSION ON TRACK

- **Clearly identify discussion questions in advance.** Hand out or email to students two or three discussion questions before class so they can prepare. Allow each student to become the “expert” on some aspect of the discussion.
- **Ask students to prepare for discussion** by writing a short paragraph or responding to prompts. Look at the responses ahead of time so you can plan the discussion based on student input. You can do this by having students email their comments to you or by having them post to the course website ahead of time.
- **Develop a joint agenda.** Tell students that you will ask them to suggest topics for discussion before each class (you may want to begin the list with a few topics of your own). Have the group pick the ones they want to discuss or the ones they found most provocative or difficult.
- **Ask students to take a position** on a text or an argument. Students can also pair up or divide into small groups to present different sides in a debate.
- **Encourage study groups.** Explain the virtues of collaborative work and exchanges of information. In many courses, it is appropriate for students to study together, even as they pursue independent efforts.
- **Call on students by name** and encourage them to do them to do the same. They will be gratified to hear that you *think* their ideas are important and that you're creating a more personal discussion environment.
- **Take notes** on what students say (maybe listing the most important points on the board) and use them to refer back to their contributions.
- **Don't fill every silence.** Leave sufficient time for students to consider a question before repeating it, rephrasing it, or adding further information.



### TIP: RESPONDING TO SILENCE

Take up to 15 seconds or so to allow students to consider a question. This may seem long, but the silence will both encourage students to process your question more fully and—without you to bail them out—eventually jump in.

- **Don't bail yourself out** by always calling on the most eager students. Rather, look for students who are obviously thinking, i.e., who might want to speak but seem hesitant, and invite them to weigh in.
- **Rephrase students' questions** and partial answers and direct them back to the students. This can keep students talking to each other and help maintain the momentum of a discussion that is turning into a question-and-answer session with the teacher.
- **Stimulate discussion** with relevant outside examples or material objects, such as poll results, historical documents, pictures, anthropological artifacts, etc.
- **Divide a large section into smaller groups** that will focus on a specific question or topic from a list. You can then visit each group. Leave some time for the class to reassemble so that the groups can report to each other and you can tie up loose ends.



## RESOURCES

### BOOKS ON LEARNING AND TEACHING

- Ambrose, S. A., Bridges, M. W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M. C., & Norman, M. K. (2010). *How Learning Works: Seven Research-based Principles for Smart Teaching*. Chicago, IL: John Wiley & Sons.
- Brookfield, S. D., & Preskill, S. (2012). *Discussion As a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*. Chicago, IL: John Wiley & Sons.
- Brookfield, S. D., & Preskill, S. (2016). *The Discussion Book: 50 Great Ways to Get People Talking*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Brown, P. C., Roediger, H. L., & McDaniel, M. A. (2014). *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning, 1st Edition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lang, J. (2010). *On Course: A Week-by-Week Guide to Your First Semester of College Teaching, 1st Edition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lang, J. (2016). *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Svinicki, M. & McKeachie, W. J. (2013). *McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers, 14th Edition*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.

### BOK CENTER RESOURCES

**Bok Seminars:** Bok seminars can help you prepare for teaching (e.g., *Hit the Ground Running: A Seminar for New TFs* and *Classroom Communication Skills for International TFs*) and they offer a variety of opportunities to focus on a teaching aspect you would like to improve or explore (e.g., *Teaching as Storytelling* and *Designing a Syllabus*). Seminars are targeted toward disciplines (e.g., *Active Learning in the Sciences*), or classroom activities (e.g., *The Art of Discussion Leading* and *Effective Ways to Improve Student Writing*), and learning sciences (e.g., *Make It Stick: Applying the Science of Learning to Your Teaching*). Visit the [Bok Center website](http://bokcenter.harvard.edu) to learn which seminars are being offered each semester to find one that works for you.