

Want to Facilitate a Discussion in *Your* Lecture Class?

Discussion is a group of people talking through a common question or problem for the purpose of gaining new insights and generating new questions. The power of discussion comes from participants engaging with the course content, with each other, and with their own understanding of the material. This At-A-Glance is geared toward crafting small group discussion within a larger class.*

Discussion At-A-Glance	
Prep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ensure the class has established agreed-upon norms for talking and listening. ● Break the class into small groups. ● Arrange the room to allow for easy conversation. ● Set time limits.
During	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Introduce clear, simple, and open-ended question(s) for the group to discuss. ● Walk around the class to get a sense of what’s being discussed. ● Keep track of time.
After	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Bring groups back together for a whole-class debrief.

Prep

Ensure that the class has established agreed-upon norms for talking and listening.

- Take a few minutes before the activity to create discussion norms for the groups. This can be done in many ways: you can list them, have the whole class generate them, or give time for the small groups to create them. If you use discussion frequently enough, these norms do not have to be created every time. However, it is useful to revisit them occasionally to make sure they are still working for the groups.
- Common norms include:
 - Be conscious of airtime; do not dominate the conversation.
 - Everyone should participate.
 - Disagree about ideas, not people; avoid personal attacks.
 - Comments should build upon each other; pay attention to what’s being said (aka “active listening”).
 - Stay focused on the prompt; avoid off-topic conversations.
 - Use the course content to support ideas.

Break the class into small groups.

- Depending on the size of the class, the size of the groups can vary. They shouldn’t be larger than 10 people, and not smaller than four people.

Arrange the room to allow for easy conversation as best you can.

- This may simply mean allowing students turn around, move seats, or even leave their seats to sit in different parts of the room.
- Essentially, each person in the group should be able to make eye contact and clearly hear the others in his/her group.

Set time limits.

- It is important to let groups know how much time they have in advance. Depending on the depth of the questions and the size of the groups, time can vary from 10 to 30 minutes. The larger the groups, the more time you must provide to make sure everyone has a chance to participate.

During

Present clear, simple, and open-ended question(s) for the group to discuss.

- For the first few times, it is recommended that you craft one or two topics for the groups to discuss. Once they are used to the practice, you can have the class create the questions.
- Some possible prompts include:
 - What is the argument being presented? Do you agree or disagree with it?
 - How does the content apply to your experience in a particular context?
 - How does the content apply to what has been presented in class thus far?
- When you want students to generate their own questions, they can use protocols such as [The 4 A's](#) or [Peeling the Onion](#).

Float among groups to get a sense of what is being discussed.

- Especially in the beginning, walk around the space and noticeably, but silently, listen to the conversations. This communicates to the groups you are holding them accountable to stay on task and follow the norms. It also gives you an understanding of what parts of the content grasp the attention of the students.

Keep track of time.

- You will need to be the timekeeper, especially if students are engaged in the conversation.
- Make sure to give 10- and 5-minute warnings, so they regulate their conversation.
- If you get the sense that groups are still engaged in the discussion, and time allows, feel free to give groups five to 10 minutes extra.

After

Bring the groups back together for a whole class debrief.

- Once the discussion time is over, make sure everyone ends their independent conversations and returns to the whole class space.
- Ask the class to share one or two major takeaways from the discussions. Document the main ideas in some way. Alternatively you can ask students to silently summarize key ideas through a written reflection, which could either be passed in or kept for themselves.
- Ask students about the process of the small-group discussion. What was good about it? How could it be improved? Document students' suggestions and try to incorporate them for the next time.

* This At-a-Glance focuses on small group discussions because research shows they are more effective at engaging all students. However, many of the strategies from this At-a-Glance can be applied to full class discussions.

Written by Lauren Britt-Elmore
Doctoral Candidate, Higher Education
Harvard Graduate School of Education