

Discussion At-A-Glance

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 AtAGlance is geared toward facilitating group discussion in your section.

Why should you to facilitate a discussion in your section?

Possible learning goals: Have students practice oral communication skills. Have students to teach and learn from each other. Have students to hear opposing opinions and common misconceptions.

Want to Facilitate a Discussion in Your Section?

How-To Guide (for Section)

Prep	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Arrange the room to allow for easy conversation• Ensure the section has established agreed upon norms for talking and listening• Optional: Break the section into small groups• Set time limits
During	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Present clear, simple, and open ended question(s) for the group to discuss• Actively listen to the conversation to get a sense of what is being discussed• Keep track of time
After	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Give your section time to debrief the discussion and key takeaways

Prep

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.
- If you will have one large group discussion, arrange the chairs in a circle, if possible.
- Essentially, each person in the group should be able to make eye contact and clearly hear the others in his/her group.

Ensure the section has established agreed upon norms for talking and listening.

- Take a few minutes before the activity to create discussion norms for the group. You can list them or have the section generate 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.
- 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 offtopic conversations.
- Use the course content to support ideas.

Optional: Break the section into small groups.

- Depending on the size of your section or the content, you may want to keep your section together. Otherwise you could split the section into duos or trios.

Set time limits.

- It is important to let your section know how long the discussion will go *inadvance*. The larger the group, the more time you must provide to make sure everyone has a chance to participate.

During

Present clear, simple, and openended 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 might have the class create the questions
 - However, this should only happen if the students are able to get at the pertinent questions on their own. If not, be sure to come to class with your questions prepared. When you want students to generate their own questions, they can use protocols such as [The 4 A's](#) or [Peeling the Onion](#).
- 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

Actively listen to the conversation to get a sense of what is being discussed.

- Especially in the beginning, pay close attention to what is being discussed. It allows you to see what grasped the students' attention, and gauge what they do not understand.
- Be a facilitator of the conversation, pushing students' thinking by asking new guiding questions and prompting students to elaborate where appropriate.
- Be ready to interrupt if the conversation goes offcourse or if norms are not being followed. Also, feel free to correct the conversation if a major point is being missed or misrepresented.
- Beyond making corrections and pushing the conversation forward, try to avoid engaging in the conversation; this is their time to process the learning. This is especially true when the students are working in small groups.

Keep track of time.

- You will need to be the timekeeper, especially if students are deeply engaged in the conversation.
- Make sure to give 10 and 5minute warnings, so they can regulate their conversation. This is particularly important when students are working in small groups and may be having discussions at different speeds.
- If you get the sense that the group(s) are still engaged in the discussion and time allows, feel free to give them five to 10 extra minutes.

After

Bring everyone together for a debrief.

- If necessary, make sure everyone ends their independent conversations once the discussion time has ended.
- Ask the section 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.

Written by Lauren BrittElmore
Doctoral Candidate, Higher Education
Harvard Graduate School of Education