

How to Lead a Class Discussion

TIPS ON LEADING CLASS DISCUSSIONS by Rachel Seidman, Carleton College (With some edits!)

<https://apps.carleton.edu/curricular/history/resources/study/leaddiscussion/>

1. Think about what you want to get across to your students. What is the most important point? What insights do you want to highlight? What other questions do they raise?
2. Once you have decided *what* you want to convey, think about *how* you want to convey it. Think about what method might get your ideas across best. Do you want to divide the class into small groups for discussion? Can you think of a role-playing assignment that would get people to think about different perspectives of an issue? Do you want to give a short introduction and then moderate a large-group discussion?
3. If there is more than one discussion leader, decide how you want to divide up the tasks involved in leading the discussion. Will one person give the introduction, and the other(s) ask questions? Will you each take charge of parts of the class in small groups, then meet as a whole and discuss comparative conclusions the second half of the class time?
4. Things to think about:
 - Try not to spill all the tea at once. A discussion should build gradually, should move forward from point to point. If you explain your whole answer or interpretation at the very beginning, there is nowhere to go. Save some of the good stuff for later!
 - Try not to answer your own questions before you even ask them!
 - Try not asking "yes" or "no" questions; you want to ask open-ended questions that will get people to share their own ideas. Questions that begin with "Do you think" can easily be answered "yes" or "no." Questions that begin with "what, why, and how," generally will spark discussion nicely.
 - It is a good idea to have a general sense of the points you want to be sure to cover, and you can sketch out a general map of how you think the discussion might go, but don't expect it to follow your map exactly--and don't try to force it to do so. Sometimes the best parts of a discussion are the unexpected turns it takes. Having said that, keep it on course by being well-organized.
 - To be well-organized, know what is going to be asked and in what order. Work from organized notes. Do not rely on flipping through your highlighted lecture notes looking for the interesting parts. But be a little bit flexible and allow a few moments here and there for the unexpected turns mentioned in the last point.
 - Finally, think about your "presentation of self." Be confident, upbeat, engaged, and focused. Make eye contact, speak clearly, and don't rush. Regarding rushing: if you find that you cannot fit all the points you want to make into the discussion, it will not end the world if you omit some of them. More is gained by everyone if you cover the interesting points thoroughly than if you rush through your list of discussion questions.