

Professor Mark Davis of Macalester College created this Useful Flyer of Information (part of a series of “UFIs”), inspired by Reader’s Digest founder Dewitt Wallace.

HOW TO LEAD A DISCUSSION

Know the Purpose of the Discussion. Leading a discussion, and doing it well, is not as easy as it looks. It requires quite a bit of planning and an understanding of group dynamics. The first thing a discussion leader needs to know is the purpose of the discussion. Although discussions in different classes may differ in their specific objectives, most classroom discussions strive to enhance students' understanding of the subject matter. Thus, class discussions are a learning tool used by the instructor to complement other learning tools such as lectures, labs, field trips, papers, and presentations. If you are a leader of a class discussion, you need to know, or decide on, what the class should learn as a result of participating in the discussion. Class members may learn many other things during the course of the discussion as well, but having learning goals is what distinguishes an academic class discussion from a casual chat over lunch.

Preparation. If you will be leading a discussion along with one or more students, you should get together with the other students ahead of time so that you can agree on the learning goals of the discussion. Examples of learning goals include: increasing understanding of specific principles, processes, or ideas; evaluating or reevaluating certain arguments or perspectives; and increasing self-awareness. At this meeting, you should develop a list of questions or statements you can use to promote discussion. By getting together with the other discussion leaders you will also be able to decide how you will share responsibility during the discussion. For example, you might decide that each of you will assume primary responsibility for a specific portion of the discussion.

Initiating Discussion. The primary mistake made by novice discussion leaders is that they talk too much. Remember, your job is not to make an oral presentation but to promote discussion by others. Generally, you will initiate discussion by asking a question, or making a statement and asking for a response. If you are lucky, someone in the class will respond promptly to your questions. But sometimes your question will be met with a long and uncomfortable silence. In fact, this is usually what happens at the outset of the discussion when members do not yet feel at ease. What you do in response to this silence is crucial. Above all, do not answer your own question or begin a presentation of the material. This simply informs the class that they need not respond since you will do that for them. Wait ‘em out! They are uncomfortable too and eventually someone will say something to start the discussion.

Managing the Discussion. Once the discussion is going, you are faced with the delicate but extremely important task of providing periodic direction to the discussion while still giving it considerable autonomy. Discussions rapidly take on a life of their own and it is important that you give the discussion freedom to grow and evolve in its own way. Students will rapidly lose interest in participating if it becomes clear that only certain types of responses are acceptable. At the same time, you need to keep an eye on your learning objectives and prevent the discussion from veering too far away from the subject at hand. Remember, this is an academic class discussion. If the discussion has strayed too far afield, or if you need to move on due to time

constraints, simply interrupt the discussion and announce that you want to bring the focus back to the original topic, or that you need to take up the next issue.

Ending the Discussion. At the end of the discussion, take a minute or two to make a few summary comments regarding the discussion. This is also an excellent time to reemphasize certain points associated with the discussion's learning goals.