

### How to Lead an Effective Class Discussion

*Excerpt from: James Helmer, Oral Communication Center, Hamilton College*

As the leader of a discussion of a textbook chapter or other class material, your general objective is to help your classmates better understand that material by facilitating a conversation about concepts and issues expressed in or implied by the reading. You should create a plan. Below are suggested elements of the plan.

1. (Optional) Plan a brief “check-in” period. Give each group member an opportunity to speak. For a classroom discussion, the check-in might give people a chance to mention *briefly* things that are on their minds and *relevant to the topic*, such as an item in today’s news, a personal experience that occurred since the last class meeting, an issue that came up in another class, a general reaction to the assigned reading (e.g., it was difficult to read, the language was evocative, it sounded like another writer you’ve read), etc. Allow individuals only 20-30 seconds each to make these comments, and use this time as a way to let them get engaged and “warmed up” to talking about the reading. Some of the comments might be used as a bridge to the main part of the discussion.

2. State the objective of the discussion and provide any needed background or orientation.

Keep it brief. Do *not* waste time giving a complete overview and summary of the reading. Assume that group members have done the assigned reading. If they haven’t, your summary probably won’t be sufficient to produce a very satisfying discussion anyway.

3. Start the discussion. Guide it, keep it on track. Get members involved. Write out the key questions you plan to ask to stimulate thinking and discussion. Arrange them in a sensible order.

In general, avoid asking yes/no questions and questions that simply ask members to recite or recall a detail from the reading as a check on whether anyone actually read it.

Questions that make for more interesting and engaging discussion are those that ask people to clarify, interpret, or extend points made in the reading; to exemplify and apply concepts; to compare and contrast; to offer judgments about the accuracy, relevance, or usefulness of the author’s observations; to agree or disagree with positions expressed in the reading or in the discussion; and to suggest theoretical or practical implications.

4. When the discussion has either run its course or run out of time, summarize what you

understand to be the group's major conclusions, the points of agreement and disagreement. Give group members an opportunity to correct or clarify these for the record.

5. (Optional) Conduct a brief "check-out." Give group members an opportunity to comment on the discussion itself or where this experience leaves them or directs them personally.