Planning Your Discussion Section

*If you don't know where you are going, you'll end up someplace else.*  
- Yogi Berra

**What It Is**
Determining the objectives, activities, and assessments that will accomplish course goals.

**Why It’s Important**
Gives purpose and structure to the session so that:
- Students know where the class is going and what to expect.
- TA feels and appears more confident.
- Course goals are more likely to be accomplished.
- Challenges are anticipated and contingencies built-in.

Plan your discussion section by answering the following three questions:

1. **What is my learning objective?**

Think about what your students need to *know, understand, or be able to do* in order to receive a good grade in the course. Course content will likely be on your mind, but also include skills you may expect the students to bring to class (writing papers, studying for tests, managing their time, etc). Integrating the student skills with the course content into a learning objective helps students practice skills they may be deficient in while simultaneously covering the academic material.

### COURSE CONTENT

- e.g., Understand how transcription is regulated.

### STUDENT SKILLS

- e.g., Develop writing skills.

**Aim for this type of integrated learning objective whenever possible**

- e.g., Write about the regulation of transcription in a free-response test question.

Learning objectives that are just about course content. These get your students remembering key facts and understanding fundamental ideas of the course.

Learning objectives that are just about skills. These get your students working on important study skills such as notetaking, reading, test preparation and analysis.

Learning objectives that integrate course content with the development of skills. These get your students learning course material while at the same time developing skills that can be transferred to other classes.

Now choose one or two of these to be your learning objective(s) for the day. Be sure they are:

- **Addressing course content, or student skills, or an integration of the two** (see above).
- **Relevant to the syllabus**: What graded assignments are coming up soon? How will students be evaluated? What skills or knowledge are most critical in order to successfully complete these requirements?
- **Aligned with the professor’s goals and concerns**: What skills or knowledge have students historically struggled with in this course?
- **Addressing students’ actual needs**: Of all the things the students need to know, understand, or be able to do, which ones are they finding most challenging right now?
More examples of learning objectives:

Math Course Content

Know the product and quotient rule algorithms for derivatives.

Use lecture notes and textbook examples to understand the product and quotient rules.

Be able to read a math textbook.

Student Skills

History Course Content

Understand political, economic, social forces behind the Civil War.

Identify themes/arguments to explain causes of the Civil War.

Be able to construct an argument.

Student Skills

Now work out the details and logistics of how your plan will be implemented in the classroom. What tasks/activities will get all students working toward the learning objective(s) you identified? This is where your creativity really comes into play.

Keep in mind that to be most successful, the activities should have a few important features:

- All students get a chance to use the content/skills you identified in the learning objective(s).
- Students have the opportunity to share their work (with TA/peers).
- Students receive feedback on their performance (from TA/peers).

For activity ideas, please see some of our other handouts (e.g., Small Group Activities, Developing Your Students as Self-Directed Learning, and Facilitating Large Group Discussion).

This is the part of a discussion section that is most often overlooked. You may have planned some great activities that you hope accomplish the learning objective(s) you have set. But if you don’t have a way to assess whether your plan is working, how do you know for sure?

A good assessment will:

- Allow you to understand what worked and what didn’t work, so you can better plan future discussions sections, or alter the trajectory of the current one.
- Help students identify areas for improvement, focus their study efforts, and understand the value of participating in discussion.
- Be another opportunity to use the content/skills or knowledge.

Assessments don’t have to be stand-alone activities. In fact, a particularly well-designed activity will have assessment built in. For ideas on how to assess your students, please refer to our handout on Assessing Learning in the Classroom.

Now what?

Communicate your plan

- Write out your plan (you may want to use our Lesson Plan Template as a guide). Collect your lesson plans throughout the semester for later reference. You never know when they might come in handy.
- Communicate your plan—and the reasoning behind it—to your students. They will be much more likely to participate if they know where they’re going and why.
- Be flexible and allow the plan to unfold naturally. It may not go exactly the way you intended, but stay grounded in your learning objective(s) for the day.
- Take note of what did and didn’t work (you may want to use our Semester Planning Chart as a tool).

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How will I get all students practicing?

3

How will I know if they’re “getting it”?

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