



Techniques for Facilitating Group Discussion: Getting Discussion Started

Launch discussion by inviting participants to express their reactions to some preparatory reading or reflection. Here are a few ideas:

1. Use student questions

Starting group discussion with your questions may work well when students are not yet familiar with a subject. But as students get more comfortable with a topic—and with discussion as a learning format—let student ideas and effort originate and fuel discussion. The following prompts may be used:

- Imagine the author of the article/text will be visiting class. What top three questions would you like to ask the author about the work?
- What questions come to mind by any omissions, contradictions, ambiguities, unsupported assumptions, or unacknowledged ethical dilemmas?
- What is the most pressing question that needs to be explored regarding this particular idea or reading?

Students can bring these questions to discussion, share them in small groups and prioritize. You might even have each group post its favorites, then have students walk around room to review the results and notice common themes or categories of questions, as well as any striking differences.

2. Ask students to choose a concrete image

Invite each student to choose a specific image/scene/event/moment that stands out in the text, or that is suggested by something in the reading. There is no need for analysis as students are sharing; just have them provide a brief description. List the images on the board to create a collective impression and visual record. This also creates a backdrop to discussion and prompts further recollections. You may choose to analyze the results once all students have contributed, or later in the discussion.

3. Use a sentence completion exercise

Some examples:

- What most struck me about the text we read to prepare for this discussion was ...
- The idea I most take issue with in the text is ...
- The part of the lecture (or text) that made the most sense to me was ...
- The part of the lecture (or text) that I felt was most confusing was ...

Have students share their results in small groups and select what they most want to talk about.

4. Make a contentious statement

State a controversial position, letting students know it's not necessarily your own point of view. Have students consider the following in small groups: why would someone hold this view? What grounds are there to support this position?

5. Generate "truth statements"

Have students get into small groups and generate three or four statements they believe to be true based on a preparatory reading. Have students present their results, and invite others to raise questions about the statements, or even to refute them. (Note: the point here is not to actually produce undeniable fact but to generate discussion and inquiry.)

6. Find illustrative quotes

Have students get into small groups and identify one or two brief quotes:

- That best illustrates the major thesis of the reading
- That is most difficult to understand
- That students want to challenge (on the basis of it being inaccurate, disagreeable, or contradictory)

Have students share and respond to one another's selections.

