

TA Training ~ Handout:
Facilitating Discussions
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Leading Discussions

By the end of this training session, TAs should be able to:

1. *Identify* approaches to discussion that have/have not worked well in the past
2. *Generate* ideas for leading effective discussions in your own sections.
3. *Create* a discipline specific question that you can use in a discussion section.
4. *Articulate* general strategies for fostering online discussion.

This document provides information regarding the different types of questions you may ask to stimulate or lead a discussion. It also provides several strategies for starting and maintaining a discussion, as well as a “What to do if...?” quick guide that you may use when problems come up during actual discussions.

Andrews’ “High Mileage” Question Types

This is a list of types of questions known to elicit student response. [This list has been adapted from Nilson’s *Teaching at its best: A research-based resource for college instructors*, p. 116. Questions are direct quotes.]

- *Playground questions* (5.1 responses per question) – Students develop their own themes for exploring material. This encourages students to explore, analyze, and interpret course topics or concepts on their own.

Sample playground questions:

“What do you think the author is saying in this particular passage?”

“What underlying assumptions about human nature must this theorist have?”

Beware: This type of questioning can send a discussion in another direction.

- *Focal questions* (4.9 responses per question) – Students choose one viewpoint from many possible viewpoints and support the view with evidence. In this case, students may present their own views or opposing views.

Sample focal questions:

“To what extent is Ivan Illich a victim of his own decisions or of society?”

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“Is the society in *Brave New World* a utopia, a nightmare of moral degeneration, or something between the two?”

Beware: Since there is a tendency for the group facilitator or students to play devil’s advocate in a situation like this, it is best that the devil’s advocate let others know that is what s/he is doing beforehand.

- Brainstorm questions (4.3 responses per question) – Students come up with many ideas on a topic or solutions to a problem. This can be done as a group, with answers recorded on the board by a facilitator (i.e. the TA), and then discussed and organized after the brainstorm session.

Sample brainstorm questions:

“How might the public be made to care about ecological imbalances?”

“What trends starting in the 1960s may have negatively impacted American public education?”

Beware: There is not usually one correct way to group responses, so it is best to allow the students to do so on their own, if even at a later date.

Andrews’ “Low Mileage” Questions, AKA how *NOT* to ask

This is a list of questions known to stifle student discussion, from the same source above.

- Analytic convergent questions (2 responses per question) – Questions to which there is only one correct (and complex) answer.
- Programmed-answer questions – Questions to which there may be more than one answer, but the facilitator expects only one. This elicits frustration since no one can read minds!
- Rhetorical questions – Questions that have an obvious answer, which can be insulting to students, who in turn are likely not to respond.
- Quiz show questions (1.5 responses per question) – These questions only utilize factual recall, and typically have a one- or two- word correct answer (a name, a date, a title).
- Dead-end questions – Questions with a yes or no answer.
- Fuzzy questions – Questions that are vague, poorly worded, or unfocused, leaving students lost.

Examples:

“Does everyone understand this?”

“Who else knows what falls into this category?”

- *Chameleon and shotgun questions* (2.3 responses per question) – A series of questions fired off in rapid succession at students, with the hopes that one will be of interest. Chameleon questions often begin in one topic area, and end in a completely different, confusing area. Shotgun questions usually leave the facilitator looking like a bad aim!
- *Put-down and ego-stroking questions* – Put-down questions imply that students should know the answer to something and don't. Ego-stroking questions require the student to assume the facilitator's approach. This stifles student creativity and implies that one answer (the facilitator's) is superior to others.

Possible Strategies to use in a Discussion Section

- 1) In the beginning of a session, have students ask their questions while you write each on the board. After each is listed, go through the list one by one as a group. By listing the questions first, you can make sure that you cover the most unclear and important material first. You may want to ask students to prepare questions before class.
- 2) Count to 10 after you ask a question or a student speaks to allow time for an answer. Sometimes people need more time to think about what has been said. If no one replies, call on a different student to rephrase the last comment made – this will make sure students pay attention and actually understand what others are saying.
- 3) Give yourself the role of note taker. Let the class know that for x amount of time, you will be taking notes about the discussion, and not be involved in the discussion.
- 4) Don't ask yes/no questions. These tend to stifle discussion, whereas open-ended questions with many possible answers tend to get more response.
- 5) A major part of a good education is knowing how to learn. To that end, answering questions with questions can be helpful. Some examples:

“That is an interesting point” (rephrase the question) “can anyone answer this question?”

“If you were alone in a library, how do you think you could arrive at an answer to that question?”

“How did you arrive at that question? Does the knowledge you have that lead to the question also help answer the question?”

- 6) If someone asks a question to which you don't know the answer, admit it and turn the question to others in the group. No one at any level knows all of the answers, and by capitalizing on the knowledge of the group, you are showing respect for the students.
- 7) Discussions are hard to lead and can be discouraging at times. The best thing a facilitator can do is prepare ahead with carefully worded questions to pose to the group when discussion is slow. And you only get better with practice.

What if....this happens in a Discussion Section?

What if.....	Try this
<p>The students are silent or unprepared.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Count to 10 to allow time for students to process the question. • Ask students to take 5 minutes and review a piece of the text that you think is especially important to work through. • Have students take a few minutes to remember the reading and brainstorm some questions that they had while reading. • Take a moment to have students ask questions, and write them on the board so that you can cover the most important material first.
<p>Students rely too much on the facilitator to lead the discussion.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give yourself the role of note taker, and let the class know that for x amount of time, you will be taking notes about the discussion and not be involved in the discussion.
<p>Students rely too much on the facilitator to answer tough questions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Answer their questions with questions. Examples are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “That is an interesting point” (rephrase the question) ○ “Can anyone answer this question?” ○ “If you were alone in a library, how do you think you could arrive at an answer to that question?” ○ “How did you arrive at that question? Does the knowledge you have that lead to the question also help answer the question?”
<p>Students make negative comments about another student’s question or comment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let the students know that everyone has different opinions and there is no one right answer. • Also, let them know that there is no room in the discussion for negative comments, and that they should reform their comments as a proper disagreement with the point of view, or not make any comment at all. • Let the “picked on” student know that the question was not stupid. Try to turn the discussion around to that topic if it applied to the discussion, or let that student know that you will be happy to talk with him outside of class if the question is not related to the discussion.