

Successful classroom discussions require intentional planning and practice. These strategies can help you focus your planning to ensure effective discussions that maximize student engagement and learning.

- Get to know students and form a classroom community. Learn students' names and help them learn each other's names. Early in the semester facilitate low bar of entry discussions that are designed primarily to help everyone get to know one another. Ensure each student has an opportunity to speak aloud early in the class so they can get into the habit of exercising their voices.
- Use the physical space of the room to support discussion. If the furniture is movable, rearrange desks, chairs, and tables to support the discussion you want (full group in a circle, small groups in clusters, etc.). From time to time, break up existing seating habits by having students move around, change seating arrangements, and so forth. If your room has limitations (bolted-in seats, bad acoustics, etc.) plan strategies for be successful despite the circumstances.
- Establish clear expectations for successful and respectful discussion. Have an early discussion with students about discussion: why is discussion important, what makes it successful or unsuccessful, etc. With students' input, work out ground rules for inclusive and respectful participation in discussion (being critical of ideas but not people, restating others' points to encourage careful listening and to highlight misunderstandings, tolerating opposing viewpoints and suspending judgment, and so forth). If you will be evaluating students' participation in discussion, be clear from the outset about your criteria for success.
- Emphasize the role of silence and listening. Thinking—students' and your own—takes time and consideration. Don't be afraid of silent thinking time, and help students expect this as normal (otherwise, some eager students may try to jump into every silence to "save" you and thereby make it more difficult for their peers who need more time to speak to contribute). Let them see you take time to consider your own responses and to think aloud. Likewise, emphasize that discussion is as much about listening as about talking. Practice listening actively and give students opportunity to practice this as well. If you are evaluating students' discussion participation, make listening part of the evaluation.
- Expect that you may have some students who are shy, who have a disability that makes it difficult for them to engage in traditional classroom discussion, who struggle with spoken English, and so forth. Have a plan in advance for how you will include those students in ways that capitalize on their strengths and encourage their learning. Avoid situations that accidentally penalize students for qualities related to personality, language and culture, and/or ability, and find ways for these students to participate without forcing them into situations where their discomfort impedes their motivation and learning. On the flip side, plan how you will encourage talkative (especially dominating) students to practice and value active listening.
- Plan your general structure, questions, prompts, discussion-priming activities, etc. for each class period. Good discussions are rarely spontaneous, and your facilitation will be more successful with planning and practice.