Leading a Discussion

Leading a discussion is very different from delivering a formal speech, because you can’t always predict the direction of the conversation. However, that doesn’t mean that you don’t need to do any preparation. There are three important points to keep in mind when you are leading a discussion: structuring the discussion, getting the audience to talk, and thinking about your delivery style.

**Structuring the Discussion**

Even though you aren’t giving a formal speech, you still have an agenda. Make sure you fulfill it by considering the following:

- Put all of the points you want to talk about in a logical, flowing order. By outlining your points, you can check for clarity and have good notes to use during the discussion.

- Have examples ready for each major point in case the discussion stalls or there is a need for clarification of a point

- The key to leading a discussion is to gently lead, not to force the conversation. Let the discussion flow for a little while before guiding it in a new direction.

- Carefully craft your questions making sure that they are clear and direct. Make sure that you can answer the questions yourself. This may seem obvious, but speakers are often guilty of asking unanswerable questions. Keep in mind, however, that you may hear very different kinds of answers from the audience.

- Remember that not everyone will always agree.
Getting the Audience to Talk

The most effective tool for engaging your audience is to ask them questions. Here are a few guidelines on how to frame the discussion:

- Have audience introduce themselves if they do not already know each other.
- Start asking questions from the beginning. Ask how they feel about the topic, their initial reactions, problems they had with the readings, etc. Be sure the questions are open ended.
- Start with some easy questions and then move to more complicated questions once everyone seems more comfortable with the discussion.
- Even if you don’t agree with an idea, acknowledge it so no one is left out.
- Tie the questions into other class discussions/readings/presentations. Get the audience to make connections. This often makes them feel more confident and might stimulate a good discussion.
- Be prepared to rephrase your questions. This is where your prepared examples may come in handy.
- Follow the ten second rule: when waiting for an answer or a response, wait about ten seconds before trying a different tactic.
- If nothing else is working, give them a small prompt, but try not to answer the question for them.
- Reiterate what a person says or asks to clarify and be sure the rest of the audience heard.
- Have an activity as part of the discussion to really get the audience involved.
- See how everyone feels at the end of the discussion, what they thought etc.
- As always, be conscious of your time limits and how much time you are spending on each topic.

Delivery Style during the Discussion

Delivery when leading a group discussion is usually more informal than a presentation. That doesn’t mean that typical delivery tips don’t apply, however. For more advice on delivery, see the “Delivery” handout. Keep these tips in mind as well:

- Practice your questions and statements ahead of time so that you are familiar with the material. This will decrease stumbling and vocal fillers (“um”, “uh”)
- Maintain good eye contact with the audience
- Make sure that you are paying attention to volume, rate of speech, eye contact, and posture, just as you would in any other speech. It is particularly important that your audience is able to follow your words because you are asking them to respond to your questions.
- Even though you may be sitting down, continue to think about posture. Sit up in your chair and avoid leaning on the table. If you have a chair that rocks or swivels, make sure that you sit still during your discussion. This may seem like a minor point, but all of your nonverbal add to your audience’s assessment of your credibility.
- If possible, have your discussion group sit in a circle, or walk among the audience if in a setting where a circle is not possible.