



Center for Writing and Speaking

P NO. 17 IN THE CENTER FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING HANDOUT SERIES

Leading a Discussion

Leading a discussion is very different from delivering a formal speech because you can't 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 get to it by considering the following:

- Put all of the points you want to be talked about in a logical, flowing order.
- Have examples ready for each major point in case the discussion stalls or there is a need for clarification of a point.
- 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.

Getting Your 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:

- Start asking questions from the beginning. Ask how they feel about the topic, their initial reactions, problems that they had with the readings, etc.
- Start with some easy questions and then move to more complicated questions once everyone seems more comfortable with the discussion.
- 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.
- Tie the questions into other class discussions/readings/presentations in order to 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 can 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.
- As always, be conscious of your time limits and how much time you are spending on each topic.

(continued on reverse)

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Leading a Discussion, Continued

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. Keep these in mind:

- 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, try to sit still. This may seem like a minor point, but all of your nonverbal cues add to your audience's assessment of your credibility.

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