



MEMBER TIPS

LEADING A DISCUSSION

Preparing to Lead a Discussion

Your primary goal as a discussion leader is to facilitate a thoughtful discussion of the subject. One of the key components to achieving this goal is sound preparation on the subject area prior to the discussion. Study group members do not expect you to be an expert on the subject area, but they do expect you to be well prepared.

Know Your Material, Plan and Share

Read the discussion materials thoroughly several times prior to the week in which you will be the discussion leader. Identify the major concepts and begin writing questions that will stimulate active discussions on those concepts. Open-ended questions are ideal because they can add depth and breadth to discussions that cannot be achieved by simply asking for names, dates, lists, etc.

Once you are familiar with the subject and any assigned materials, consider if there are additional resources you might want to use as part of the discussion. Would an especially good map or photographs enhance the discussion? If the assigned readings are from one author, are there other resources that can enhance or challenge that author's positions?

Speak with all your study groups' coordinators. Share with them the questions you have written and any additional resources you want to use in the discussion. This allows all the coordinators the opportunity to make suggestions on your questions and additional resources, and to help you with any technology needs.

Your study group members will appreciate your preparation and are rooting for you. Your success is also their success.

Research Assistance

Online LibGuides can be accessed online. They are ready-made subject guides and useful research tools.

Libguide Directory:
libguides.northwestern.edu

Olli Specific Libguide:
libguides.northwestern.edu/OLLI_Libguide

Need help finding resources for your study group, or have questions about other library-related matters?

Email Tracy Coyne:
tracy-coyne@northwestern.edu

Additional information:
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Leading a Discussion

The primary goal of a discussion leader is to facilitate a thoughtful discussion of the subject. In addition to preparation, the other key components to achieving this goal are managing the study group discussion and creating a stimulating discussion. Here are a few, simple things you can do to achieve this.

Manage Discussion Flow

Be an active listener. You need to carefully hear and understand what participants say if you are to guide the discussion effectively. Are there misunderstandings or disagreements that need to be addressed? Is there an aspect of the topic that captures the group's interest that can be explored more thoroughly? Active listening also sets a good example for the group members and, if you are the discussion leader, it can help lessen any tension you might feel.

Stay on topic. Active discussions can move away from the topic. While it might not be necessary to rigidly follow only the prepared discussion questions, do not allow the discussion to drift off point. If you sense topic drift, a simple "Let's get back to the discussion question" or "That might be a topic for another day" can often bring participants back into focus.

Draw out participants. Everyone participates differently: some are eager to comment and others are more reserved. No one should be forced to speak. Be sensitive to ways in which to engage the quieter members of the study group and draw out different perspectives. For example, it may be easier for a reserved person to respond to a more specific follow-up question rather than the bigger lead question on a topic. **If a group member prefers not to enter into the discussion at all, please honor that decision.**

Pauses and silences. Don't be afraid of silence after a question is asked. People need time to look through their notes and readings and form their response. If you are uncomfortable with a silence, try counting slowly and silently to 10. You'll usually find the silence breaks before you reach 10. Discussion leaders who fear silence may find themselves dominating the discussion and losing group participation.

Use disagreement productively. Don't try to avoid disagreement but keep it focused on the issue at hand. Participants should feel comfortable giving their true opinion even if it varies from those of the author or another participant. Opinions should be respected and disagreements should not be personalized. Consensus is not necessarily the goal of or a sign of a good discussion.

Stay neutral. As discussion leader, you will have power with the group. Avoid expressing strong opinions. Your job is to facilitate discussion.

Difficult situations. Occasionally there are behaviors in discussions that are disrespectful of the opinion of others or limit the opportunity for all members to share in the discussion. Your Coordinator will assist you with any difficult situations that may arise.

Guidelines for Creating a Stimulating Discussion

Use open-ended questions. Questions that lead to stimulating discussions are sometimes called open-ended questions, since the answers are more complex than stating facts and can lead to further comments and questions. Open-ended questions ask participants to pause, think and reflect. They may challenge facts or assumptions in the material, ask for evaluation and/or interpretation of information, and elicit a variety of opinions. They send a message to study group participants as they prepare for discussion: “There may be no ‘correct’ answer, so let’s explore!”

Here are some examples:

- **Tell us about** the opening passages of *Bleak House* and how they set the tone of the novel.
- **Discuss** Pope Francis’ role in brokering the US/Cuba diplomatic détente.
- **Explain** why you agree/disagree with the author’s theory on climate change.
- **Describe** the emotions evoked from the poem, “*O Captain! My Captain!*” by Walt Whitman.
- **Compare and contrast** the political philosophies of Jefferson and Hamilton.
- **Identify and evaluate** the principal arguments used by some to explain their support for a smaller federal government.
- **Identify and illustrate** the various techniques which Hitchcock used to build suspense in *Vertigo*.

Make a Statement. Another approach is to make a statement and then ask people to consider its validity, for example, or to illustrate (or challenge) the statement.

Here are some examples:

- Walt Whitman has been called “The First American Poet”. Do you agree or disagree? Support your position.
- Prince André and Pierre are the principal male characters in *War and Peace*. In what ways does each reflect Tolstoy himself?

Open-ended questions,

which may technically be requests, may begin with such words or phrases as:

- Tell us about
- Discuss
- Explain
- Describe
- Compare and contrast
- Identify and evaluate
- Identify and illustrate

Follow-up Probes. To enrich and deepen discussions it is helpful to ask follow-up questions to encourage further exploration of issues. These follow-up probes not only enhance the content of the discussion but, more importantly, allow for further engagement of all participants in the study group. Some effective techniques for follow-up probes are:

Clarifying probes:

- Can you clarify which lines in Walt Whitman's poem evoked the greatest emotion for you?
- Help me to understand more fully what led you to this conclusion about climate change?

Restatement:

- It has just been stated that... What further ideas does anyone have to either support or offer a different position?

Summarizing:

- Let's review where we are right now... Does anyone have any additional points to make?
- Would someone like to summarize the key ideas that have been discussed thus far? Are there any others?

Remember:

A lively and respectful discussion is crucial to the success of any OLLI study group.

Other Techniques for Encouraging and Managing Discussion

Silence. Resist the urge to answer your own questions. A good rule of thumb is to slowly and silently count to 10 before breaking the silence.

Non-Verbal Cues. Be aware that nodding, good eye contact, facial expression, and body posture can suggest openness to the speaker's contribution.

Managing Contributions. Allow others to make their points. Hear them out. Bring closure as needed if the conversation wanders or repeats.