Chapter 4
Running a Discussion

Running a good discussion is like writing a good essay: you need a strong opening, a well-organized body, and a coherent ending. Most of this chapter is relevant only to teaching assistants leading discussion sections or teaching introductory (probably non-science) courses. However, these tips will be helpful to anyone running a discussion-oriented class.

Discussions versus Task-Based Participation

Just because sections are often called “discussion sections” does not mean that all the student participation in your classroom will be actual “discussion.” (It seems more obvious that at universities that call sections “recitation sections,” neither you nor the students are spending the whole time reciting.) It is useful to distinguish between two different kinds of student participation: genuine discussion and task-based participation. Both can be very productive learning experiences, and the decision about which to use will depend on your goals for any given class.

In a genuine discussion, you begin with real questions to which you do not have a definitive answer, and you are open to and interested in your students’ responses. You do not have an agenda about exactly what material needs to be covered and how. In other words, your goal for the discussion focuses on having the students think with you about an issue rather than covering predetermined content in a particular sequence.

Sometimes you do have an agenda for what specific material needs to be covered, and you want students to participate in the process of covering that material. Obviously, this is not a “genuine discussion” because you know where you are headed—and your students know you have a destination in mind. But it can be a better learning experience for students to participate rather than simply listen to you lecture. The deadliest “discussions” happen when an instructor frames what is a task-based activity as real, open discussion.

As you prepare your lesson plan, you want to be clear with yourself
about whether your class will be a discussion or task-based participation (or both). You will then be able to be clear with your students about what you have planned and why.

**Arranging the Classroom**

The physical arrangement of the classroom will influence the quality of your discussion. Students who are sitting where they cannot be seen by you or their classmates may not feel expected or encouraged to participate in the discussion. We recommend that you help your students to create a well-formed circle.

*See chapter 3, “Organizing Space,” for more information on organizing classroom space.*

**Initiating Student Participation**

Use your discussion opening to inform students of the topic you have in mind for class and of your expectations for the day’s activities. Remember, you already have spent a great deal of time planning the class; students, however, arrive with no idea of what you have in mind. Your opening orients your students to how your class plan fits within the broader goals of the course. Several ways to introduce your topic and generate student participation are detailed here.

**Make a List**

You can ask a question to the class and generate a list of responses on the board, or you can ask each student to share one idea or item off the top of their head. (If you are not using the board for such an activity, jot down notes to yourself on a piece of paper as students talk.) You then have material with which to begin.

**Examples**

Discussion: “Let’s make two lists here on the board of all the pros and cons you can think of for the use of politically correct language.”

Task-based participation: “The author of the article uses at least four different kinds of evidence to support her argument. When you write your papers, you will also be drawing on these kinds of evidence. So take five minutes in
pairs to identify all the different kinds of evidence you can, and then we’ll go over them together.”

**Freewriting**

Freewriting can help students to formulate their ideas before participating in a full-class activity. Have all the students get out a piece of paper; give them a question and five or ten minutes to answer it. Tell them you will not be collecting the paper; you just want to see their pens moving the full five or ten minutes. Once they have done this, every student has *something* to say, and you can move into your activity from there. After the time for freewriting has ended, you can call on students—or ask students to volunteer—to read part of what they have written.

**Examples**  
**Discussion:** “Take out a piece of paper—I’m going to ask you to write continuously for six minutes. On Monday in lecture we watched a documentary about endangered species in Alaska. Take this time to write about your reactions to the film, whatever they were: questions you had, emotions you felt, whatever comes to mind.”

**Task-based participation:** “Get out a piece of paper—you are not going to have to turn this in. Take the next five minutes and write down as much as you can remember from yesterday’s explanation in lecture of DNA coding. Then we can work together on filling in any holes.”

**Pair and Share**

This tried-and-true teaching strategy is a terrific way to get students talking to each other and then moving into a full-class activity. Put students into pairs and give each pair a task or question. Depending on your lesson plan, you may want to give different tasks to each pair or have them all work on the same question. Make the goal clear: for example, as a pair they will tell their classmates about their thoughts on a particular issue; they will share two ideas with the class; they should write a paragraph that they then will give to another pair, and so forth. Pair time allows shyer students to check out their ideas with one other person before sharing them with the group, and it gives all the students a very informal “warm-up” time before a fuller class discussion.
Examples

Discussion: “Find a partner. Together, make a decision about which two diagnoses might be removed or dramatically changed in the next edition of the psychiatric diagnostic manual. Be sure to have a justification for your choices.”

Task-based participation: “Choose a partner and together take five minutes to come up with four examples of ‘abnormal’ behavior that are situationally dependent. At the end of five minutes, I will go around the room and ask you to share your responses with the rest of the class.”

Small Group Activities

Small group activities follow the same format as Pair and Share; give groups a question or task and make the goal clear. Then, have each group integrate their work into a full-class activity. Figure out ahead of time how you are going to make the groups. You can form groups by where students are sitting, which allows friends to talk comfortably with friends but which can also (a) lead to some discussion unrelated to the course and (b) prevent students from meeting other students in the class. You can “number off” around the room and have all the “ones” work together, and so on. You can make groups ahead of time if you want to ensure that you have at least one good talker in each group.

See chapter 6, “Debate: Grouping Strategies,” for more information on putting students into working groups.

Read a Passage from the Text

If you want to talk about a text in class, you can “warm up” by reading and discussing one passage from the text. Reasons to use this strategy:

• It gives students a foothold for discussing the entire text.

• It reminds students what the text is about (remember: students may well have done work for other classes since the time they read this text).

• If some students have not read the entire text, it still engages them in the planned activity for the day.
Pick a passage that highlights whatever theme(s) you want to address first and ask a student to read it aloud. Then, have a series of follow-up questions prepared. If you are trying to encourage students to do close reading, use this as an opportunity to dive into the details of the passage.

See appendix D for an annotated passage with several possible follow-up questions.

**Encouraging Active Student Reading**

You should give your students tips about how they can prepare readings before they come to class. Specifically, college students should be urged to start reading with a pen or pencil in hand. Help your students see the utility of marking noteworthy passages as they read. The most effective way to do this is to have them mark up passages during class so that they get used to the idea of writing in their books and see how this can help them do close readings.

**Example**  
*Task-based participation:* Have students mark all the passive constructions in a lab write-up and then talk about how use of passive constructions affects the tone of the writing.

You also can give students this type of assignment ahead of time, so that they have something to look for while they do the reading.

**Example**  
*Discussion:* “As you’re reading, mark all the passages where you think the material is extraneous—in other words, you don’t see why it’s there. Then together we’ll be able to see if you all agree and talk about why the author may have included this material in the novel.”

**Ask a Question**

The right question to the full class (which is, of course, sitting in a perfect circle) can get a good discussion rolling. See the following for tips on quality questioning.

See chapter 6 for specific structured class plans that end with a discussion.
Effective Discussion Questions

Genuine discussions require effective questions. Asking good discussion questions is a skill that takes experience and preparation. You cannot walk into class and generate a meaningful discussion by asking questions off the top of your head. Instructors who begin by asking, “So what did you think of the reading?” are almost always greeted with painful silence. Students respond well to questions that are specific and interesting, questions that invite original contributions. Students do not respond well to broad, basic, or “fake” questions. In general, focus on asking “how” and “why” questions rather than “what” and “who” questions.

Asking the First Questions

Write out a series of discussion questions as you prepare the lesson plans for the class. These questions should be directly related to your goal(s) for that class. They should be questions that interest you and will interest your students. Be prepared to think up more questions as you go, but it is a nice safety net to have a few written questions beforehand. Also be prepared to play devil’s advocate, to challenge students’ views if no one else will.

You may choose to start with a big question that will (you hope!) generate sustained discussion. You may also choose to start with smaller, more discrete questions that can build toward a more substantial question connected to your goal(s) for the class.

Overbroad Questions

DON’T  “What did you think of the reading?”

Do  “If you were a dialect speaker from Tennessee, how do you think you would feel about the author’s description of your dialect?”

“Talking down” Questions

DON’T  “Who is the author?”

Do  “Could you tell anything about the author’s background from the article?” (Be prepared to tell them about the author if you are going to ask a question like this.)
“Read my Mind” Questions

DON’T  “Why is human cloning unethical?”

Do  “Imagine you sit on this university’s ethics panel, and a professor wants to start a human cloning program. What questions would you want to have answered and why?”

Questions with Right and Wrong Answers

DON’T  “What is the author’s point in this essay?”

Do  “Let’s read the first paragraph together. . . . Did it make you want to keep reading? Why or why not?”

“Testing for Reading” Questions

DON’T  “What three facts does the author use to support her contention that teaching assistants should be worshiped?”

Do  (If necessary) “How many of you finished the reading for today? What happened? What are we going to do about this?”

You will notice that some of the “Don’t” examples for discussion questions could legitimately introduce a task-based activity. It helps students when you do not confuse discussions and task-based participation.

Why Students May Not Talk

At times, you may ask the most compelling questions imaginable and still be met with cold silence from your students. Here are a few causes of and solutions to the silent-student syndrome.

Peer Pressure

Peer pressure is at work in every classroom, and students usually are as (or more) concerned with what their peers think of them as they are with what you think of them. They do not want to say something stupid, and they do not want to look like a teacher’s pet. So you will do better asking questions that solicit opinions rather than right/wrong answers because students run less risk of “losing face” with these kinds of answers.
Time to Think

One of the most painful parts of starting a discussion can be the silence. Get used to it. You thought up the question before class, but the students are hearing it for the first time, and they need a minute or two to think about it. Let the silence hang there for longer than you think you can bear (make yourself count to twenty slowly); generally a student will finally step in to fill the void and start the discussion. If you know that you are asking a tough question, tell the class that you will give them some time to think before soliciting answers. This way, the silence is planned rather than awkward.

Very Difficult Material

Even when students are prepared for class, they may not participate if they feel overwhelmed by the difficulty of the material. Sharing with them that you find parts of the material difficult can authorize them to speak about the material as well. It does not diminish your authority to acknowledge that material is difficult. You can say something like: “This is a very challenging reading. I know that I am feeling confused by the first paragraph on p. 12. Why don’t we start here—I am hoping some of you have insights about what this means. Then we can look at places where you felt stumped.”

Lack of Preparation

If no student steps up to break the silence and you cannot bear it any longer, do not ask an easier question: “Okay, who is the author?” Why should any student stoop to answer this question? If you are trying to determine whether or not students did the reading, ask them. They will be surprisingly (often brutally) honest with you.

Class Dynamics

Depending on the makeup of the class, you may find that some students do not feel comfortable volunteering to participate. You need to be particularly aware of the willingness of female students and students in some way representing a minority voice in the classroom to take part in full-class discussions. Be conscious of how often you call on and in other ways involve students of different genders, races, and ages and work to facilitate the participation of the students who seem more reticent to volunteer their opinions in this setting.
Quiet Students

Some very eager and interested students do not feel comfortable participating in full-class discussions. Be sympathetic and be careful about putting these students on the spot.

See “Handling Discussion-Stopping Students: Quiet Students” in this chapter for more information on how to handle quiet students.

Outside Forces

There are times during the term (e.g., midterms, fraternity and sorority rush) when students tend to be tired or stressed or overly busy or distracted. They drag themselves to class, but their presence is merely physical. If you try to start a discussion on one of these days and you find that you are facing exhaustion-induced silence, try stepping back and asking the students directly, and empathetically, what is going on (an activity we call “meta-teaching”). They will appreciate your recognition that they have concerns outside your class. And more importantly, it will start students talking. You then can guide the conversation toward the lesson you have planned.

See chapter 9, “Meta-teaching,” for more details on talking to your students about the class.

Facilitating Discussion

One of the most important elements of a successful classroom discussion is a good balance of voices, including your own.

Your Role as the Teacher

Navigating your role in a full-class discussion is one of the most difficult parts of learning to teach. Do not become frustrated with yourself if you are feeling less than stellar in this area; it can and will take years to get comfortable as a discussion leader.

The crucial element is to think of yourself as a facilitator: you are helping the students talk about a particular topic, and what they say may or may not surprise you. Be prepared to let the discussion follow its natural course as long as it is not moving too far away from your goals for the class. As long as the discussion is germane to the topic, it is most important that students are talking about issues that they find intriguing. You do not have to know all the answers along the way, and
you should feel free to look to them for their expertise. You will find that they often will be able to answer each other’s questions; and they can find it empowering to be able to do so.

As a discussion facilitator, you should keep in mind some overarching goals.

Help students participate.

Don’t  Embarrass a student for any comment. You never want a student to be sorry they spoke.

Do    Take all comments seriously and help students find what is most important, interesting, or accurate in what they are saying.

        Regularly provide positive feedback to students for their contributions (e.g., “Great question” or “You know, I never thought about that before”).

        Encourage equal participation by students of different genders, races, and ages.

Help students speak and respond to each other.

Don’t  Respond to every student comment yourself. Students may then speak only to you, and discussions may become stilted as students wait for your intervention after each comment.

Do    Encourage student responses: “How do the rest of you feel about Harriet’s comment that no one version of a country’s history is better than another?”

        Encourage students to respond to each other directly (without raising hands, if possible). Step in to summarize or redirect the discussion when necessary.

Help students explore a variety of viewpoints.

Don’t  Weigh in with your own opinion too quickly. Students are often looking for “canned” or simple answers to difficult questions, and they may adopt your opinion as “truth.”
Do Solicit a variety of opinions; ask students to come up with counterpoints to their own and each other’s arguments.

Help keep discussion moving.

DON’T Let the discussion get stuck because an interesting topic has been exhausted.

Do Summarize the content of the discussion when it is beginning to wind down. Help students consider a fresh but related topic.

Help keep the discussion on track.

DON’T Let students stray too far from your goals for the class.

Do Step in when you sense a serious detour. Explain that while this is an interesting line of thought, it will take you too far afield.

Help students see gaps in their understanding.

DON’T Tell students that they are wrong or that they missed the point.

Do Acknowledge that this is a confusing issue or problem, gently correct the misunderstanding or error, and point out where the student is on the right track.

Help students see connections and the bigger picture.

DON’T Let the discussion jump freely from topic to topic.

Do Tie together various students’ comments on one topic, explicitly stating connections (e.g., “Karen, your question brings us back to Jared’s earlier comment”).

Summarize points and counterpoints or dilemmas with which students are struggling. Taking notes on students’ comments as the discussion progresses will help you here.
Handling Sensitive Material

At times, your course may call for the discussion of a sensitive topic. Questions involving issues of gender, race, culture, class, sexual orientation, or any other “political” topic will make the task of running a free-flowing, balanced, and thoughtful discussion more challenging than usual.

Lay Some Ground Rules

Acknowledge from the outset that you are discussing a sensitive topic. Make it clear to your students that you expect them to treat each other with respect. Encourage them to be respectful of each other’s opinions and to question the quality of the arguments offered, not the validity of each other’s personal beliefs.

Example  “Over the weekend you read about the debate over affirmative action. I suspect that this is an area where many of you have strong personal feelings. The fact that this is a sensitive topic makes it all the more important that we are able to discuss it in a forum like this. We want to explore all sides of this issue, so don’t feel that the points you raise have to match your personal beliefs. By the same token, we must remember that we are evaluating arguments, not the people who raise them. This is going to be a very challenging issue to discuss, but I think that we can do it well. I know that you all can deal with this topic and each other in a sensitive way.”

Create a Safe Space

Ask your students to listen to each other and not to judge anyone else too quickly. If they disagree, they should speak up to try to show their classmate(s) where they think they are wrong. Stewing in silent indignation is not fair and does not help others learn.

Tell Students to Beware of “Us” and “Them”

Remind your students they cannot tell much by looking at each other. In many cases, they will not know if one of their classmates is HIV pos-
itive, a member of a racial or religious minority, a communist, a welfare recipient, or anything else unless that classmate chooses to volunteer the information. Students should discuss the topic at hand with these possibilities in mind.

Question Carefully

You can encourage students to think about material in a thoughtful (as opposed to reactive) way by directing their thinking with your questions. It often helps to start the discussion in an “objective” way, asking about what arguments exist on either side of an issue or what relevant ideas students have heard. In this way, you are not directly soliciting students’ personal opinions, thus creating a safer space.

Example  "What political influences tend to bring about welfare reforms? What ulterior motives for these reforms exist on both sides of the congressional aisle?"

See chapter 6, “Debate” and “Pros and Cons,” for specific class plans that work well for handling sensitive or controversial issues.

Be the Devil’s Advocate

Discussions of sensitive material can become lopsided for any number of reasons. Students may be hesitant to say anything that does not sound politically correct, a variety of views may not be present in the classroom, or students may feel reluctant to challenge each other’s thinking. If the discussion is not well rounded, you need to offer the underrepresented position, regardless of your personal feelings on the matter.

Example  "But one could argue (and people do) that people on welfare don’t want to work. What evidence possibly supports this argument?"

Handling Discussion-Stopping Students

At times, students will behave in a way that can potentially stifle even the most promising discussion. This can happen because the students are misbehaving or not doing anything at all. Never allow yourself to become visibly angry with them or with the entire class. Expressing anger with students is a no-win situation for you. It displays a loss of
control and professional demeanor, which is more likely to exacerbate the students’ behavior than improve it. Instead, try these techniques.

**Quiet Students**

In every class, there will be quieter students who do not feel as (or at all) comfortable participating in a full-class discussion. One of the benefits of the Pair and Share activity or small group activities is that they provide these students with more of a voice. Once you have identified who these students are, you should think carefully about when you want to call on them in class. Make eye contact with them during a discussion to see if they might want to voice an opinion.

**DON’T** Put quiet students on the spot by calling on them in a full-class discussion—it will only make speaking in class more frightening.

**DO** Call on quiet students after a freewriting exercise when you know that they have something already prepared or after they have been discussing an issue in a pair.

Do not hesitate to say something to these quieter students in a one-on-one setting. If one of these students spoke up in class, you can reinforce their participation by writing about it in an e-mail or in your comments on a returned paper.

**EXAMPLE** “Thanks for making your classmates reconsider their opinions by asking about the consequences of banning cigarettes. I hope we’ll continue to hear your voice in class—you have lots of good things to contribute.”

You also can remind students in a midterm conference that participation is part of their final grade and that if they do not feel comfortable talking in a full-class setting, you need to see them making a real effort in small groups or talking to you on e-mail or during office hours. There are many ways to participate.

**Disruptive Students**

Disruptive students are not necessarily loud and obnoxious. Rather, they are students who choose, often in subtle ways, not to participate in
the class or who encourage other students not to participate. They are often the students who look or act like they do not want to be in your class.

Do not teach to disruptive students. They are the squeaky wheels, and you will often find yourself bending over backward to please them or get them interested in class.

DON’T Screw up a good discussion by trying to force a recalcitrant student to participate.

Do Keep your radar focused on all the students and recognize that there may be some students who are not going to immerse themselves in the classroom activities.

The other students are aware of the disruptive students’ behavior, and they too are often happy to let these nonparticipants sit on the sidelines. Here are some disruptive student Hall of Famers and some suggestions for what you can do.

*The Newspaper Reader*

Class is rolling, and a student is still reading the newspaper. The most effective remedy to this situation is the direct approach: “Joe, this is not the time to read the paper. You can do that after class.” It does not hurt to show students that you do not tolerate blatant displays of inattention, and very few students will continue to read a newspaper after being directly told not to do so.

*The Whisperers*

You are talking to the class or a student is speaking, and there are two students whispering to each other about clearly non-class-related things. You can try the direct approach of asking them to stop talking when others are talking (you can interrupt your own monologue or wait until the other student is finished speaking). You might say something like “When you guys are talking it makes it hard for the rest of us to hear each other; please save it for after class.” You also can walk over to stand near them if you are lecturing (and you are a roving lecturer). Or you can halt the discussion and wait until they notice that their whispers are the only noise in the room. At times, students do whisper to each other about class-related ideas. You can feel free to give students the benefit of the doubt and (kindly) ask them to share their
thoughts with the class. This approach engages interested students and stops non-class chitchat.

*The Discussion Hog*

Every time you ask a question or ask for a volunteer, this student’s hand shoots up or they just begin talking. Very often these students have the best intentions and are friendly, outgoing people; but they are still unfairly monopolizing full-class discussion and your attention. A direct and gentle approach usually works well with these students.

**Example**  “Sylvia, I’ll come back to you shortly; let’s see if someone else wants to grab the floor for a minute.”

If the student persists in monopolizing class time after a few class meetings where you have tried to manage their behavior during class, arrange to meet with the student individually. Reinforce for them that you appreciate their participation in the class but remind them of their responsibility to let others speak.

*The Antagonistic Debater*

This student verbally challenges you or other students on a regular basis. Perhaps they feel that you are too liberal or too conservative in your views, or perhaps they simply enjoy disagreeing with you to see if you’ll get flustered. You must put up with a healthy amount of disagreement in the classroom. You want to encourage students to question their classmates’ and their teachers’ statements as they would any others. But you also have the right to expect these challenging remarks to be phrased appropriately. When the student verbalizes a contradictory opinion, feel free to ask follow-up questions and force them to articulate their ideas. And be sure to answer antagonistic remarks with thoughtful consideration; in this way, you move the discussion out of empty rhetoric and back into intellectual discourse.

**Examples**  “Why is Darwin’s theory of evolution ‘stupid’? (Is ‘stupid’ really the best description, Irene?) What problems does it present, and what do you see as the alternatives?”

“Joe, you say that you think this article is ridiculously biased. How do you think the author could strengthen her argument?”
The Bomb Dropper

Occasionally, you will come across students who use explosive language to express their ideas. Few teachers forget the first time a student makes a comment so offensive that the entire class comes to a halt. Managing this classroom event is a challenge for even the most seasoned instructor. Once you get your jaw off the floor you must do your best to turn the student’s comment into a teachable moment.

Examples

“Steven has proposed that women who are raped want sex but are afraid to ask for it. The tension created by his comment is palpable. Why does his statement cause such an emotional response? Can we pause for a moment and think through how his idea could be engaged in an academic, not a polemical, manner?”

“Mary suggests that white people should be allowed to use the ‘n-word’ freely given that many African Americans now do so. Would the feeling in the room be different right now if Mary had not elected to use the actual word in making her comment? Why? Mary’s idea is an interesting one; can someone raise the same question in a way that gets a fruitful discussion going?”

The Silent Glarer

Every class meeting, no matter what you are doing or saying, this student is sitting in their chair, arms folded, glaring at you to let you know that they are not going to participate in—let alone enjoy—your class under any circumstances. At times, this student may take a break from their glaring to mutter obviously derogatory comments about you and/or the class to their neighbor. For the first one or two class meetings, try to involve this student as best you can while being fair to the other students: call on them as you would a quiet student or try to put them in a talkative small group. If these efforts don’t succeed, you must waste no time in reaching out to this student. Do not give in to the temptation to ignore the student’s silent protest. Their attitude is deadly to class morale, and their immature behavior can often be addressed effectively with a mature response.

Catch the student after class or drop them an e-mail to let them know that you are aware that the course is not working well for them and to invite them to identify their concerns. With substantive feed-
back, you will have a basis for working with the student to solve the problem. Even if the student ignores your overture, most silent glarers will be better behaved in class once they’ve been approached directly.

**Example**  
“Jonas, I’m sensing that you have some concerns about the class. It would be useful for me to know what they are to see if there’s anything we can do.”

“After teaching a class in which I had ignored a silent glarer for the entire semester, I happened to be enrolled in a class where one of the other students alternated between silent glaring and quiet complaining about the (very competent) instructor! As a fellow student, I was incredibly distracted by ‘who’s-with-me-in-thinking-this-teacher-sucks?’ dynamic created by the student. I was desperate for the instructor to intervene. It made me realize that I should have said something to my own silent glarer.”

**Wrapping up Discussion**

Think of a class as a well-written essay or article. The last paragraph(s) should remind the reader of the question they are to consider or the point they are to remember. It may sound rehearsed to think of your closing statements ahead of time, but the best instructors have as solid an ending as a beginning to their lectures or discussions. If you start the class with a list or story, perhaps you want to return to that. If you start with a passage from the text, perhaps you want to return to that or another passage from the text to finish. You can always return to your goals for the class and remind students why you all did what you did.

Do not end class purely by time.

**Don’t**  
“Oh my gosh, I guess that’s the end of our time. We’ll finish up this discussion at the beginning of the next class. Think about what we’ve discussed!”

**Do**  
Leave yourself enough time to summarize what was discussed, to tie things up, and to provide students with a sense of what they have accomplished that day.

Do not feel you have to give the answer.
DON’T “The price we have paid for technological advances is too high. My research focuses on what we’ve done to the environment, and we cannot possibly justify it.”

DO “You’ve all expressed some very contradictory opinions that show how difficult the question is. There are valid arguments on both sides, and smart people disagree on this issue. The fundamental problem is that it comes down to how we feel about the importance of technology and what we’re willing to sacrifice for progress on this front. Next week, we’ll be talking about water pollution, which will raise many of the same issues, so keep this discussion in mind while you’re doing the reading this week.”

Try to relate this class to those before and after it, as well as to the course goals.

Students benefit if they can understand the progression of the course, how last week’s discussion relates to this week’s debate. In your role as class guide, help students see the progression of the course. They will be better able to engage and discuss specific course material when they know how the material fits into the broader context of the course.

EXAMPLES “Today we have been talking about whether an anthropologist can ever claim to understand another culture. Is observation sufficient for understanding? When you read the article for this week, keep this question in mind as you read about John Gaze’s methodology. Does he have sufficient evidence to make his claims? We’ll start with this issue next time.”

“Last week you all raised the question of whether Shakespeare’s poetry was ever written to be read or only to be heard and how that might change the way in which we analyze the sonnets. Today we’ve been looking at poems clearly meant to be read, poems that lose perhaps their essence if we only hear them. This theme of the oral versus the written nature of poetry is something that we will return to often as we trace a history of poetry.”
Provide positive feedback about what went well in class.

**Example**  “This is an incredibly complex problem set, and at the beginning of class, I said that this would be a difficult review for us to pull off successfully. I am impressed with the way you all stepped up to the challenge.”

Although it sounds like an easy thing to do, bringing a class to a meaningful conclusion is an acquired skill. When you first start teaching, your efforts to bring the class to closure may feel awkward; as you gain experience, you will be able to integrate your conclusion more and more naturally into the flow of the class.

**Further Reading**


