

2

The Structure, or Moves, of a Discussion

Discussions, especially open discussions, may seem to have little or no structure, as if anyone or everyone is talking at the same time or in no order. Although it may appear there is no organization, there is some overarching structure to the discussion. This structure is often unfamiliar to or overlooked by participants, which becomes rapidly apparent when students do not use the proper phrasing or do not say anything at all. When the moves are missing, a discussion may not proceed as well as it could have, and participants may feel disappointed after the discussion. It is important to (1) be familiar with the parts and (2) to know the language—verbal and non-verbal—you should use as

you progress from part to part. A leader moves a discussion through six moves. The six moves are:

1. Starting the Discussion
↓
2. Getting All Participants Involved
↑
3. Managing Participants and Controlling Content
↑
4. Keeping the Discussion Going
↑
5. Clarifying and Confirming Consensus
↑
6. Summarizing and Closing

Note where the arrows between each move point both ways. Why? As much as we would like for discussions to neatly move from one step to another, the process is more fluid and often depends on the factors. After the leader starts the discussion, maybe Move 2 is not needed because there are only four people and it is a closed discussion in which each person will have a turn. Maybe the leader will have to repeat Move 3 if there is one participant who has not talked much and needs to be called on and later there is another participant who is talking too much. Move 5 may occur more than once, especially if the discussion has more than one purpose or goal. You will see how this can happen as we learn about each of the six moves.

Move 1: Starting the Discussion

Calling to Order

You would think that Move 1 is the first thing to happen. That is true to a degree. The actual discussion does not always formally begin. Be aware that there is sometimes talking before the actual discussion. As people enter the room, there are greetings and perhaps even some small talk. If there is coffee or refreshments, people may ask about other classes, how your weekend was, or even offer a compliment as they are getting a drink or some food. You can review some social interaction language to help you participate in conversations before the official discussion, such as greetings, introductions, complimenting, and small talk.

You will notice that Move 1 is at the top of the moves and has only an arrow pointing downward. Move 1 must happen first to “officially” start the discussion. A leader will say something like:

Is everyone ready to get started?

Are we ready to begin?

Let's get started.

Everyone, we'd better get busy.

In more formal situations, a leader might execute Move 1 with:

I'd like to call this meeting to order.

We need to begin.

It's 3:00. Time for us to begin.

My watch says it's time to get started.

We don't have much time today, so we'd better start.

Providing Scope or Focus

Once the leader has the attention of the participants and everyone is situated (around the table, in their chairs, etc.) and settled (has their coffee and notebooks/computers), there is usually a short pause or silence. The leader can then proceed to the second part of move 1—giving the scope or focus. This part of the move focuses the participants. When possible, the leader:

- specifies (or reviews) the topic and purpose of the discussion:
 - Topic: *Today we need to discuss The Great Gatsby that everyone was assigned to read for our English class.*
 - Purpose: *The instructor asked that we discuss what made this novel an American classic.*
- narrows the topic if necessary:
 - *Since there are many reasons why this novel has made its mark in U.S. literature, I thought maybe we can focus on themes.*
- offers a starting question or springboard (avoid yes/no questions or questions with one-word answers and avoid unanswerable or overwhelming open-ended questions):
 - *In what ways does Fitzgerald convey the theme of [love, wealth, isolation, the American Dream, mortality] as seen in The Great Gatsby?*

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- maintains a list of questions, arguments, or topics that arise and/or can be used if the discussion lags:
 - *We've talked a lot about the theme of [mortality], what about the theme of [wealth]? Which characters exemplify wealth?*
 - *We've talked a lot about the theme of wealth, what other themes do you think Fitzgerald includes?*
 - *Can someone who is not from a wealthy background really be accepted or blend in with the old money crowd in the novel? Why or why not?*
- brings participants “into the know” so that everyone has the background they need (if they don't have it or if you'd like to prepare more):
 - *I have copies of the first chapter if we need them.*
 - *I prepared a slide with the main themes critics agree Fitzgerald covers. Maybe we can pick one of these to kick off our discussion.*
 - *I wrote a list of the key criticisms levied at the novel.*

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- outlines any constraints or concerns (time limits, sensitive topics, respect for others' opinions, keeping the discussion fair and polite):
 - *We only have an hour today.*
 - *Critics sometimes disagree on [a point], so let's make sure we respect everyone's opinions today.*

TASK 4

Answer these questions.

What would you do if:

1. you were starting a meeting at a business?
2. you were starting a study group?
3. you were starting a discussion about a book, article, or case study?
4. you were starting a discussion about a team project?
5. everyone was talking and it was loud?
6. everyone was already seated and ready?

So You Want to Lead a Discussion

Walk through the steps a good leader follows to prepare for a discussion. Use the example for the discussion about a novel to guide you. Can you develop a topic of your choice as necessary to be a strong leader?

Topic:

Purpose (goal or objective of discussion):

Narrowed Topic:

Starting Question:

Extra Questions (2–5):

Background Knowledge for Participants:

Constraints or Concerns:

Move 2: Getting All Participants Involved

After starting the discussion, the next move is to actually get the participants to speak. Notice the bi-directional arrow between this move and Moves 1 and 3. A leader may have to do this several times, such as opening the floor at the beginning or re-focusing when the topic has strayed off course or a new topic or subtopic is starting.

Sometimes the leader will want to open the floor to for anyone to start. There are certain words or phrases that open discussions. Use something like this to open the floor.

So, who would like to start?

Does anyone want to comment on [the article we were assigned]?

What did everyone think of [the book]?

Who has an idea [for our project]?

What do you all think caused [the results we got in the lab]?

Let's list some ideas [for conference abstracts].

Once the original discussion is started, a leader might begin mentioning people specifically by name or bring up a specific point.

Who wants to add on to what Abdoul said?

What do you think about Miguel's point?

Does anyone have any other answers to the question?

Can anyone answer Jeena's question?

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TASK 5

Discuss these questions with a partner or small group.

1. How do you feel when a leader opens the discussion to anyone? Do you speak first? Do you defer to someone else?
2. How do you feel when a leader mentions someone by name? How do you feel if you are the person named?

So You Want to Lead a Discussion

- What can you do if no one begins after you open the floor?
- How can you learn everyone's names? What strategies can you use?
- What factors should you consider when calling people by name?