

Classroom discussions benefit from a variety of activities, from quiet writing and reflection to small group discussion to various structured full group activities. Varying activities and changing the pace can help keep students engaged, inject life into stalled discussions, and get wayward discussions back on track. Try some of the following strategies to help spark successful discussions.

- Ask specific rather than abstract questions. For instance, asking something concrete about a specific passage of text is more likely to get students talking than asking merely, “what did you think of the reading?”
- Resist the urge to answer your own questions or to talk too much. If students get used to you filling silences or providing what they perceive as the “right” answer, they will be less inclined to talk themselves. Let students respond to one another, not always back and forth with you. Use the silences as space for everyone to think.
- Give a short (5-7 minute) writing exercise to help students gather their thoughts and prime the discussion. Students who have rehearsed their ideas in writing are usually more confident speaking these ideas aloud.
- Use think-pair-share to ease students into a larger group discussion. Ask a question, give students time to think about their response, then have them discuss with one or two partners, then share with the whole group. The small group discussion gives all students a chance to practice speaking aloud, and the ability to share responses from a group helps take the pressure off individual students who might be anxious about sharing their ideas with the whole class.
- Assign ongoing, brief assignments, such as a weekly discussion question, commonplace book, reading response, or blog post, which can help spark discussion. Such assignments help students take responsibility for having questions, arguments, and ideas when they walk into class, which allows them to invest in the class and to engage more deeply in discussion.
- Particularly toward the beginning of the semester, have lower stakes discussions to build community and help students practice speaking up. For instance, ask students to pose the “dumbest question” they can think of about the course material. Not only does this help minimize students’ fears of saying something foolish or irrelevant, it can also give them practice thinking about and discussing what makes questions more or less useful.
- Physically rearrange and restructure the class. If you can move chairs around, do so. If students have mostly been working as a full group, have them work in teams. If they’ve been working in teams, vary the size and composition of the teams. Ask students to sit in new places, to get out of their comfort zones a little bit, and to interact differently with the class.