

The Dreaded Discussion: Ten Ways to Start

1. Testing goals and values. Ask students in pairs to identify the primary value of the particular text for the day (“Why are we reading this?” “Why now?”). After a few minutes, retrieve some of the responses and reactions; use this as a basis for delving into the text further. Alternate focus: Ask pairs to list relationships (comparisons, contrasts) between this text and another recent one. Be explicit (“Identify three common themes.” “Suggest two obvious differences?” “Which did you like better?—Why?”).

2. Building on concrete images. Ask each student for one concrete image/scene/event/moment that stands out. Post these and examine through discussion (“What themes seem to emerge?” “What connects these images?” “Is there a pattern?” “What’s missing?”).

3. Generating questions. (a) Ask each student ahead of time to prepare one or two questions about the readings. (b) As students enter class ask each one to write down one or two discussable questions about the text. Ask one or two students to select from the collection those for discussion that day. (c) Collect questions as in (b); the teacher or a student then categorizes them for dealing with issues more systematically. (d) Ask each student to write one or two questions and lead a discussion until there has been a satisfactory exploration of the issues. (e) Divide the class into pairs or other subgroups and ask each to decide upon one salient question to put to the whole group. [Etc.]

4. Finding illustrative quotations. Ask each student to find one or two quotations from the text that [select one] best illustrate the thesis of the piece, or that they found difficult to understand, or that suggest the key symbol of the larger text, or that they especially like or dislike. Have quotations read aloud and discussed.

5. Breaking into smaller groups. Discussion in subgroups enables more people to speak and generates more ideas about a text or topic. Students gain confidence in expressing themselves. Give groups explicit instructions regarding focus. Adjust size and composition of groups from time to time. Vary the way subgroups report out to the larger group.

6. Generating truth statements. Ask groups to determine statements known to be true about some particular issue. This process may establish what students know about the topic, as well as what assumptions need to be challenged and what questions demand further study.

7. Forced debate. Require students to select one of the two opposite sides of an issue and then defend that position in a debate.

8. Role-playing. Ask students to play assigned roles in a simulation. Or have them create, develop, and play out characters involved with particular issues, problems, or conflicts.

9. Non-structured scene-setting. At the beginning of class, present students with selected stimuli, such as slides, music, quotations, a recorded speech, a set of words or phrases, several questions or a short agenda of issues—or a combination thereof. Ask them to respond to the stimuli through discussion without involvement of the teacher until a designated time (perhaps the last five minutes of the class).

10. A tenth way to start: A simple invitation. Once the expectation of variety in generating discussion has been established and students have become comfortable in interacting with each other, it’s possible to get underway with a simple invitation or question—for example, hold up the text assigned for that class and ask, “How’d you like it?”