

# Student-led discussions for onground and synchronous online classes

## WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

A stepwise procedure for implementing student-led discussions, from syllabus design through classroom facilitation. Also included are tips on promoting a positive classroom environment for student-led discussions. This learning activity is appropriate for classes of all sizes.

## HOW DO I USE IT?

To implement student-led discussions in your course, follow the steps provided. Review the tips that produce actionable responses. For assistance, please contact [CET](http://cet.usc.edu/).

A student-led discussion is an active learning technique in which an individual, or a pair of students, is assessed by the instructor on their ability to conduct a class discussion on an academic topic relevant to the course.

* Clear expectations
* Student-focused
* Academic
* Content-based
* Prepared in advance
* Graded with rubrics

### Facilitation Process

#### PRE

* Instructor models effective discussions.
* Instructor introduces expectations.
* Student leaders prepare.

#### DURING

* Student leaders direct discussion.
* Student audience contributes.
* Instructor facilitates and scores leaders.

#### POST

* Instructor closes and offers comments.
* Instructor provides student leaders feedback and grade

### Options

It is possible for a student-led discussion to have any combination of the following forms and delivery depending on your need, preference, or purpose.

Table 1 Student led discussion options

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Major assignment | Graded class activity |
| Small class | Medium class |
| Individual leaders | Leader pairs |
| Instructor-assigned topic | Student-generated topic |
| Instructor-assigned content | Student-generated content |
| Overview | No overview |
| Student audience graded | Assessed on content |

### Benefits

#### Cognitive

* Scaffold
* Develop skills

#### Personal

* Provide voice
* Build confidence

#### Social

* Increase participation
* Foster interaction

### Sample Rubric

The following generic grading rubric may be adapted/edited to suit the specific requirements of your student-led discussion assignment.

Table 2 Sample rubric

| **Requirement** | **Approaching Mastery** | **Attempting Mastery** | **Needs Improvement** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Introduction** | Leaders included a thorough yet concise, one-minute overview of the topic/reading(s).  (5 points) | Leaders included a one-minute overview of the topic/reading(s).  (4 points) | Leaders did not include an overview of topic/reading(s) or the overview was too long.  (1 point) |
| **Questions** | Leaders prepared a sufficient variety and number of open-ended, on-topic questions to stimulate a full 10-minute discussion. (10 points) | Leaders prepared on-topic questions that stimulated some discussion. (8 points) | Leaders did not prepare questions that stimulated much discussion and/or questions were off-topic. (6 points) |
| **Facilitation and Participation** | Leaders facilitated participation so that most classmates contributed to the discussion, and leaders’ own participation was equal. (10 points) | Leaders facilitated participation so that many classmates contributed to the discussion and/or leaders’ own participation was mostly equal.  (8 points) | Leaders facilitated participation so that only some classmates contributed to the discussion and/or leaders’ own participation was unequal. (6 points) |
| Total: X/25 points (same grade for both leaders)  Comments: | | | |

### 10 recommended steps for student-led discussions (with attention to co-led discussions)

1. In the syllabus, set up discussions as graded assignments required of all students, and indicate how discussions address course objectives.
2. Decide whether leading a discussion will carry more points (as an actual assignment) than participating in one (for just a participation grade).

* If students will be co-leading a discussion, decide if you want both members to receive the same grade, or an individual score.

1. Decide if you will create the weekly discussion topics per course objectives and themes, or if students have the freedom/ability to select their own topics.

* If students select their own topics, make sure you take time to clarify and approve their topics.

1. Have students sign up to be weekly discussion leaders. Guide them to choose a week convenient for their schedules and matching a particular topic of interest for them.

* If students will be co-leading a discussion, leave class time for students to choose a partner and arrange schedules and interests before signing up for their week.
* If you have decided to assign partners and/or weeks, leave class time for the assigned partners to get to know each other and coordinate schedules and roles for preparing their discussion.

1. Establish requirements for expected discussion leader preparation and behavior by using a scoring rubric. Make the rubric available to students before the assignment (i.e. before they lead the discussion).

* If students will be co-leading a discussion and will receive the same grade, make sure the rubric indicates a requirement of demonstrating equal preparation and division of leadership.
* If students have selected their own topics, make sure a requirement on the rubric indicates that the selected topic demonstrated a connection to course objectives and themes.
* Consider making it a requirement on the rubric for discussion leaders to provide 1-3 relevant resources/source in addition to the assigned course readings and existing course materials on the topic.
* Consider making it a requirement on the rubric for discussion leaders to stick to a time limit for the discussion. When the discussion starts, don’t forget to note the time in order to make sure discussion leaders adhere to the time limit requirement.

1. During the first class or week, model discussion-leading for the students by leading a discussion you feel follows the requirements you will be looking for from them.
2. As you listen to the student-led discussion, use the rubric to score discussion leaders. After class, enter the score from the rubric in your gradebook, and provide the completed rubric and your comments to the discussion leaders as their grade.
3. (optional) During the discussion, also keep a tally of which students participate in the discussion in order to enter their participation points in your gradebook.
4. Debrief the discussion directly after by soliciting from students the 3 things the discussion leaders did particularly well, and the 3 things they could improve for next time.
5. Thank the discussion leaders and remind them to post/distribute any additional resources they have contributed.

### 5 Tips for establishing a discussion-based class environment

1. Commit to the student-centered discussion. Allow sufficient time for the discussion to develop. Don’t add-on the discussion as a short afterthought to the class; make the discussion an important part of the learning process. Ensure that students understand that the discussion is a serious academic endeavor, not just a casual conversation.
2. Establish a process to guide students in conducting the discussions. The process should ensure that academic discussions do not degenerate into a rambling conversation. [View process suggestions.](https://spdbv.vital-it.ch/TheMolecularLevel/StdLedDisc.html)
3. Establish a “sanctuary” environment, in which students feel free and safe to explore new ideas and help each other to think through the issues. “There are no debates and no winners or losers.” Deal firmly with behaviors that are contrary to the desired sanctuary environment. \*
4. During the discussion, hold your comments and questions unless severe errors require immediate interruption for correction.
5. After the discussion, offer mentoring feedback on the discussion process. The feedback is intended to help the students to conduct a more productive discussion in the future.

\*Adapted from Jack Byrd, Jr., [Guidebook for Student -Centered Classroom Discussions](https://www.interactivityfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/Guidebook-for-Student-Centered-Classroom-Discussions.pdf), 2008