

# Academic discussion protocols

## WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

A list of specific protocols for leading onground and online academic discussions.

## HOW DO I USE IT?

Select the most appropriate type of protocol to use during a planned academic discussion. By holding academic discussions in your class, you are employing active learning techniques. Academic discussions are structured and require planning of pre, during, and post activities. For assistance, [contact CET](https://cet.usc.edu/).

### Considerations for discussions

* Align the discussion to your learning objectives
* Develop questions or prompts (see CET resources on strategic questions)
* Determine the size of the discussion groups such as whole group, pairs, or small groups
* Determine the length of discussion
* Set aside time to debrief the discussion
  + synthesize and summarize the discussion
  + correct inaccurate ideas
  + interject salient points students may have missed

### Protocol options for onground and online discussions

#### Socratic Seminar

The Socratic seminar is a collaborative dialogue facilitated with open-ended questions about a text or data to elicit critical thinking. Students answer freely with the intent that the discussion flows between students as well as between students and instructor. Classroom discussion norms can be revisited to ensure participation by a majority of students.

Examples of questions include:

* What is the author’s purpose or perspective?
* How might this apply to you?
* What is the implication of this data set?
* Do these data have any consequences?

For online discussions, students can be placed in breakout rooms for a specific period of time to discuss the open-ended questions and continue the discussion.

#### Think-pair-share

Think-pair-share is a protocol that scaffolds the discussion to allow students to activate prior knowledge and share ideas about content with their peers. Think-pair-share can be used as a brief way to review material, process new concepts, or check for understanding.

1. Students organize their thoughts individually for 1-2 minutes based on a question or prompt.
2. Students share their ideas with one other student, taking turns speaking and listening.
3. Instructor facilitates the whole-class discussion and asks students to elaborate on their thinking.

Examples include:

* Do you think the protagonist made the right decision? Why or why not?
* Is it necessary to increase lifespans?
* What laws would you abolish, if you could?

For online, synchronous discussions, students can be paired in breakout rooms and then brought back together for a larger discussion.

#### Turn and talk

Turn and talk is a modification of think-pair-share in which the instructor proposes a question and asks students to simply turn to a neighbor and share their ideas. This is a low stakes method to involve all students in the discussion and the instructor doesn’t need to hear all, if any, of the responses. The instructor poses questions and provides 2-3 minutes for students to share their ideas.

Examples include:

* What do you notice about this particular CT of the aortic valve?
* If you could be the CEO of one company, which one would you choose and why?
* Do you think taking care of children is a feminist act? Why or why not?

#### Gallery walk and posters

Gallery walks require the instructor to set up several places in the room where students are asked to stop, gather with others, and discuss the prompt or material at that spot. Discussion prompts or material can be taped to the wall at each station. The instructor tells students when to move to the next station and begin discussing the next prompt.

Posters are used when the instructor gives groups of students an assignment to work on together and display their ideas on chart paper. One person from each group stays with the poster and explains their group's ideas while the others travel from poster to poster, much like a scientific poster session. For online synchronous discussions, students create PowerPoints or slideshows and students can visit breakout rooms to learn from each other.

This method can be adapted to online classes by having one poster in each breakout room, and having students move between breakout rooms to visit the posters.

#### Four Corners

Instructors use this protocol to highlight different perspectives on one issue. The instructor poses a question or prompt, and students must stand in a corner of the room to indicate their position about a statement (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly agree). In the corners, students discuss their opinions about the topic or why they chose that corner. They may move to other corners as new information is provided within the discussion by their peers.

Examples include:

* Gene editing should be allowed for the purpose of guaranteeing health.
* Juveniles should be tried and treated as adults.
* The drinking age should be lowered.

#### Jigsaw

A jigsaw helps students become experts on a particular topic and share their knowledge with fellow students. The instructor divides students into small groups and assigns a specific portion of a text, topic or material. Once the groups study their particular material they become experts and are then re-shuffled to create new groups with representatives from each previous group. In these new groups, each student is responsible for sharing key aspects of their original discussion.

#### Affinity mapping/diagramming

Affinity mapping and diagramming has students work in groups to create broad questions or problems based on course content or readings. Groups exchange questions and individual students in each group start to answer they have been given using sticky notes (one idea per note) or by writing on chart paper. The instructor indicates when to stop generating answers/ideas and start working together to organize or categorize them. Each group then presents a conclusion.

This style of discussion can be done online using white boards and breakout groups, or accomplished with technology that allows students to post virtual notes. To browse a database of such tools, see [USC Rossier’s Instructional Technology Group E-Learning Toolkit](http://rossier-itg.weebly.com/).

#### Fishbowl

A fishbowl is a protocol that allows a small group of students to have a discussion about ideas and concepts while the rest of the class observes and takes notes. The purpose of this type of discussion is to allow all students in the class to witness and participate in a discussion that may include alternative explanations or role plays with a whole class debrief.

#### Open/free

This style of discussion is meant to happen naturally with no particular speaking order for students. The instructor typically pauses a lecture every so often to pose open-ended, content-related questions to the class as a whole. The instructor either plans these questions in advance or comes up with them spontaneously. Any student is free to answer. For online, synchronous discussions, students can post their answers in the chat, raise their hands to answer or unmute themselves to participate in the discussion.