

# Discussing current events

## WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

This resource provides strategies for integrating current event topics into your course.

## HOW DO I USE IT?

Current events often evoke a range of emotional responses in both students and instructors, which can sometimes find their way into the learning environment. Review this resource to find practical techniques for engaging students in productive conversations about current events. For additional information [contact CET](https://cet.usc.edu/contact-us/) for an individual or group consultation.

### Techniques for incorporating current events in your course.

Consider how the current event topic aligns with your course learning objectives. There may be times when the topic is directly related to your objectives, and an academic discussion is warranted. Other times, the topic may not align with your objectives, but you may want to acknowledge the event, and share campus support services with your students.

#### Considerations if you just want to acknowledge an event or have an academic discussion

* Acknowledge stressful current events, and share campus student support services.
* Remember that traumatic events can affect cognitive functioning. Students may have a difficult time concentrating, meeting deadlines, or staying motivated.
  + You may wish to provide accommodations for the entire class, such as extending an assignment deadline.

#### Considerations for incorporating a current event topic in your course discussions

* Consider anonymous polling to gauge student interest in a class discussion of the topic.
* Create a structure for discussions. Without structure, discussions about topics that evoke emotion can easily become so upsetting they are unproductive.
  + Identify the skills you want students to learn from the discussion experience.
  + Write out learning goals for the discussion to help you
    - Set discussion norms.
    - Identify credible sources of information for students to review.
    - Articulate the guiding reading and discussion questions.
  + Create discussion questions that anchor the discussion to the course content and the learning goals for the discussion, such as questions that ask students to
    - Examine the key facts.
    - Articulate the stated motivations of those involved.
    - Evaluate the evidence that supports and refutes those statements.
    - Examine the dilemmas.
    - Evaluate failed resolutions and propose solutions.
* Consider adding alternative options to provide a bit more distance and safety for students who need it (e.g., students with personal trauma related to the topic).
  + Consider allowing in-person *and* online attendance for the discussion.
  + Consider creating an optional alternative written assignment.
* Teach students the importance of validity in sources of information.
  + Provide a guide to help students evaluate the credibility of their information sources.
  + Consider directing students to credible information sources prior to the discussion.
  + Provide [guiding questions](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://cet.usc.edu/teaching-resources/strategic-questioning-techniques-for-discussion/&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1698432811101481&usg=AOvVaw3-RChp-6EamB_kAEj_kafo) to help students frame key issues before the discussion.
  + Require students to cite their sources to ground discussions in facts, not opinions.
* Create [community agreements](https://cet.usc.edu/teaching-resources/a-menu-of-discussion-norms/) with discussion norms to promote safety and self-regulation.
  + Review or explain norms to the class, and establish consensus to follow them.
  + Provide periodic reminders of the norms during the discussion.
    - For contentious topics, consider reminders with each discussion question.
    - Otherwise, consider reminders halfway through or before challenging topics.
  + Prepare strategies for reminding students of norms when they are not followed.
  + Plan for what you will do if a student refuses to follow the norms.
  + Share your reminder strategy and your policy if norms are not followed.
* Explain your discussion goals. Help students understand what you want to accomplish so they can focus on reaching those goals. An academic focus can create some emotional distance from the most upsetting aspects of the discussion.
* Explain the boundaries for what is outside the scope of the discussion, so that students can monitor their thoughts and contributions and stay on track.
* Avoid asking students familiar with the event to be a resource or educator on the topic. This can be an unfair burden, or call uninvited attention to personal characteristics.
* Consider a de-escalation strategy. Sometimes discussions get off track even with a structure in place. Have a plan to pause and allow a cooling-off period, if needed.
  + Prevention:
    - Before beginning, explain the goals and scope of the discussion.
    - Normalize that students may have an emotional reaction in class.
    - Provide options for students to modulate their emotions. For example,
      * Create a place in your mind where you can go for a 30-second breather.
      * Focus on your breath for 30 seconds.
      * If you need a break, it is okay to leave class and return or not return.
    - Ask students to set a goal for their participation in the discussion.
  + Early Action: If unproductive tension begins to rise, pause the discussion.
    - Take a 10-minute break
    - Ask students to stand and stretch
    - Do a breathing exercise
  + If the tension is too high, pause the discussion for that class period. Take a break, then
    - Discuss the dynamics that upset the class. Brainstorm ideas for changing the dynamics when you continue the discussion in the next class. Or,
    - Acknowledge the tension. Explain the need to cool the heat in the room to ensure a productive discussion. Reassure students the discussion will resume next class. Dismiss for the day or begin an activity on a different topic.
  + If the discussion becomes unmanageable, stop, take a break, then tell students:
    - The discussion has gone as far as it can productively go. Your priority is their learning and well-being. The discussion is no longer contributing to those things.
    - This does not mean productive discussions on these issues are not possible, just not at this particular moment.
    - You have other plans to teach them the same information and skills.
    - Dismiss.
    - In the next class, reiterate that sometimes discussions have too much heat to be productive at a moment in time.
    - Briefly discuss dynamics that made things uncomfortable in the last class.
    - Acknowledge and validate students’ feelings.
    - Brainstorm ideas for adjusting those dynamics for today’s class.
    - Proceed with a new learning activity.
* Encourage self-care.
  + Encourage students to incorporate time to relax and recuperate in their schedules.
  + Suggest mindfulness practices. See this CET resource on [mindfulness in courses](https://cet.usc.edu/teaching-resources/mindfulness-in-courses/).
  + Share information on support from [Student Equity and Inclusion Programs](https://seip.usc.edu/centers/).
  + Normalize the practice of seeking support.
  + Faculty should engage with self-care too!

If you feel a student, colleague, or you need additional support dealing with a current event, reach out to USC [Trojans Care 4 Trojans (TC4T)](https://campussupport.usc.edu/trojans-care-4-trojans/).

### 3 activities to engage students in discussing current events.

#### Journaling.

Consider asking students to take time for self-reflection and journal before a discussion takes place. This provides an outlet for emotion before the discussion. Prompts may include:

* How does this make me feel?
* When else have I felt this way?
* What might be an ideal outcome?
* What advice might I give to someone in this situation?

#### Research Moment

Create small groups of students and provide them with research aspects of the current event. Give groups 10 minutes to research:

* What happened.
* Why it happened.
* Who is involved.
* How it has affected those involved.
* Additional questions or clarifications that are needed.

Ask groups to present their findings as a group presentation, brief video, collage, meme, poster, or other product.

#### Open the Front Door (OTFD)

Communication frameworks may help provide structure and empower students to contribute when discussing current events. OTFD stands for “Open the Front Door” to communication. It also stands for:

* **Observation** - State what you observed, heard, or saw in concrete and behavioral terms.
* **Think** - Share your thoughts or solicit thoughts from others about what was observed.
* **Feel** - Describe your emotions, or solicit these from others, about the situation.
* **Desire** - State your desired outcome or what you want to happen in order to resolve the situation.

More information about OTFD may be found in this article:

Moore, R. (2023, October 11). [How to respond: Facilitating Productive Discussions about Current Events](https://ctl.wustl.edu/how-to-respond-facilitating-productive-discussions-about-current-events/). Washington University in St. Louis. Center for Teaching and Learning.

### Additional resources

#### Teaching Controversy

CET Resource in Collaboration with USC Dornsife Center for the Political Future. [Discussing controversial political issues](https://cet.usc.edu/teaching-resources/discussing-controversial-political-issues/).

Teaching Controversies. [Teaching Controversial Issues: A Framework for Reflective Practice](https://teachingcontroversies.com/framework/#6.guidediscussion).

Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning. [Teaching Controversial Topics](https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/teaching/ideas-teaching/teaching-controversial-topics).