

# Facilitating discussions in large enrollment courses without teaching assistants

## WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

This resource provides tips and considerations for instructors in facilitating discussions or activities in large enrollment classes without teaching assistant support.

## HOW DO I USE IT?

This checklist is designed to assist faculty in facilitating various types of large group discussions. For individual help with facilitating discussions, please [contact CET](https://cet.usc.edu/contact-us/).

### Tips for large group discussion facilitation

Consider the following tips when planning for and facilitating discussions in large groups without TA support. [Strategies for teaching large classes](https://cet.usc.edu/teaching-resources/maximize-efficiency-when-teaching-large-classes/) may be different than for smaller classes.

* Clearly communicate how the content discussed aligns with future assessments.
* Tie the discussion to a follow-up task, such as an automatically graded quiz on the LMS.
* Develop [discussion agreements](https://cet.usc.edu/teaching-resources/a-menu-of-discussion-norms/) with students to underscore expectations and goals.
* Consider starting with a brief reflection or writing task, before class or at the start of the discussion, to allow students to gather their thoughts and prepare to participate. Additional [active learning](https://cet.usc.edu/teaching-resources/active-learning-facilitation-process/) activities may also be useful to support broad participation.
* Consider strategies to set inclusive expectations for discussion:
  + “Popcorn” is a process where the student speaking calls on the next person.
  + Name picker apps or shuffled index cards can help randomly call on students
* Identify tools (i.e. chat, collaborative documents) that allow all students to participate.
* Consider whether asynchronous discussion is appropriate for your course. This can be done before, after, or in lieu of in-class discussion. Asynchronous forums like discussion boards can provide all students with an opportunity to participate, and posts can be graded as class work or reviewed by the instructor to support whole-class feedback.

#### Formulate your plan for the discussion

* Consider what [type of discussion](https://cet.usc.edu/teaching-resources/discussion-types/) best suits your course. For example, if your learning objectives call for students to be able to argue or justify, you may wish to plan for a debate-style activity rather than a roundtable discussion.
* Consider how that type of discussion would work in large groups without TA assistance. For example, Debates may have to be group rather than individual debates. Round table discussions may need to be recorded in breakout rooms to be graded at the same time. Strategies to record discussions include:
  + Recordings via online tools like [Zoom](https://cet.usc.edu/teaching-resources/recording-a-lecture-presentation-using-zoom/) or [otter.ai](https://otter.ai/).
  + Ask groups to take notes of their discussion and submit them in outline form.
  + Splitting the class into smaller groups can be done randomly to encourage mingling, or based on student or instructor selected topics.

#### Consider what you will need to do to prepare to facilitate discussion

* Develop strategic [questions and prompts](https://cet.usc.edu/teaching-resources/strategic-questioning-techniques-for-discussion/) in advance to guide the discussion, provide structure, and keep the conversation focused on learning objectives.
* Share with students any [rubrics](https://cet.usc.edu/teaching-resources/selecting-different-rubric-types/) or other criteria you will use to assess the activity.
* Decide on the format of the discussion, including whether discussions will be in-person or virtual, and the strategy for small group formation.
* You can train the students to serve as moderators if you have multiple discussions happening at once, adding another learning opportunity for them.

#### Consider what will need to occur during the discussion

* Determine what student activities will support effective discussion. For example:
  + Ask students to prepare outlines before coming to class.
  + Assign roles to students in small groups (e.g., moderator, note-taker, key stakeholder perspective)
  + Require summaries, lists of points, or follow-up questions resulting from small group discussions that can be part of a whole-class document.
* To keep discussions on track when you cannot be present for all of them at once, you might:
  + Require that a discussion norms checklist be used by the student moderator at set times during the discussion.
  + Determine a limited, appropriate length for discussion tasks so that students stay focused and keep time.
  + Join the breakout rooms in random order so that students know to expect you at any time.
* Plan for how you will facilitate whole group discussion. Will you share or project small group summaries? If you plan to call on students, will you do it randomly in class or will you let students know in advance that they will be asked to share? Will you need to bring materials such as notecards or sticky notes to collect responses?

#### What will you need to do after the discussion has taken place?

* Provide general feedback to the whole class.
* Follow up with the whole class on questions that arose that you could not or did not have time to address in class?
* Assign groups of students part of a whole-class reflection assignment.

#### Consider how you will assess and provide just-in-time feedback on discussions.

* Evaluate how discussions [align](https://cet.usc.edu/teaching-resources/course-alignment-grid/) with your [course learning objectives](https://cet.usc.edu/teaching-resources/writing-learning-objectives/) and focus your feedback on these outcomes.
* Circulate through small groups or online breakout rooms to assess or [critique](https://cet.usc.edu/teaching-resources/critiques/) discussion, or assist students with questions.
  + Record questions or observations so you can provide feedback to the whole class.
  + Solicit responses to student questions from other students, and ask them how they arrived at that answer or how they might find more information.
* After a discussion, provide verbal or written whole-group feedback on what went well and what could be improved upon in future discussions.
* Incorporate polling either before the discussion to activate prior knowledge, or after to allow all students to check their understanding.
* Consider using material covered in the discussion as a prompt for other assessments such as group presentations to incentivize meaningful engagement in the discussion.

#### Plan for effective time management during discussion:

* Explain how much time students have for different parts of the discussion or task.
* Provide time warnings to help students stay on task and complete the work on time.
* Reserve enough time after discussion for sharing of ideas, analysis, or summary.
* Consider shifting didactic experiences to outside of class by sharing lecture videos or reading materials with students via the LMS to make more time for discussion in class.

#### Find ways to support community

* Use small group discussions to foster connection between students and ensure every student has a chance to contribute.
* Whenever possible, refer to students by name and with their preferred pronouns. If this is not feasible in large classes, consider asking students to share their names when contributing to the discussion and to refer to other students by name when responding.
* If possible, use notes to recall student names when referring to their contributions as you summarize key discussion points or ask follow-up questions. If you need to be reminded of what was said, ask the student to repeat their previous point.