

Group Discussion

Group discussion skills will help you participate effectively in college and in a career. Through discussion you will learn the meaning of freedom of speech and the responsibilities that go with it. You will discover that persons with differing views can disagree in an atmosphere of mutual respect and can work together for the common good without abandoning their beliefs.

Even when discussion does not result in a solution, the time spent is seldom wasted because the participants may perceive the extent of a problem more clearly by exchanging opinions and may become more willing to compromise.

1. Types of group discussion

There are four kinds of group discussion.

Social conversation is private, unplanned, and touches lightly on many topics. It requires no leader, although a host or hostess may occasionally steer it. Its aim is enjoyment, persuasion, or instruction.

Informal group discussion resembles social conversation except that it is usually more purposeful and deals with a single topic or a limited number of topics decided beforehand by the participants. An informal group, such as a small committee, may or may not be guided by a discussion leader.

Formal group discussion is public and planned. It considers many aspects of a single topic. It is directed and summarized by a discussion leader. Its aim is to reach an agreement, solve a problem, or start an action.

A *debate* is public and planned, like formal group discussion, but considers only two sides of a question. The supporters of one side attempt to defeat their opponents by arguments. The victor is determined by a judge or group judges.

A debate may grow out of a group discussion. The numerous solutions developed in a discussion may be narrowed to one, which is then offered to a wider public for acceptance or rejection.

A. The characteristics of the various forms of group discussion.

The *round table* is a group discussion in which the participants exchange views around a table (not necessarily round) under the guidance of a discussion leader. The number of people usually does not exceed a dozen. The discussion is informal. There is no audience.

The most common example of a round-table discussion is the committee meeting. Most organizations conduct a large part of their business through committees. A committee considers matters referred to it and reports its finding and recommendations to the entire organization.

A *forum* is any type of speaking program that is followed by audience participation. For example, a lecture followed by questions from the audience is a forum. A forum is most successful when the audience is small; otherwise, people are reluctant to stand up and speak their minds.

A *symposium* consists of prepared talks by several speakers on different aspects of a single topic. When all the speakers have finished their presentations, the discussion leader invites the audience to ask questions, contribute additional information, or express agreement or disagreement with the speakers' views.

A *panel discussion* is like an overheard conversation. It consists of a leader and from four to eight participants seated, usually in semicircle, before an audience. The participants remain seated during the discussion. They speak in conversational style, generally not longer than one or two minutes at a time. They express opinions, disagree with and question one another. The leader acts as a moderator, stimulating, directing, and summarizing the discussion. After a while the audience joins in the conversation. The leader summarizes the discussion before bringing it to an end.

2. Preparation for group discussion

A. Select a topic that lends itself to profitable group discussion.

Before selecting a topic for discussion, ask:

1. Is it worthwhile?
2. Is it timely?
3. Is it related to the needs, experience, and interests of listeners and speakers?
4. Is it stimulating?
5. Is it many-sided?

What are good sources of topics for group discussion? Your own experience may suggest some; for example, "Trends in popular music", or "Choosing a career". Your school courses may suggest others; for instance, "Why study mathematics and science?" or "The most valuable subject in the curriculum". Books, newspapers, magazine articles, movies, and television programs can often stimulate discussion. Current events, especially controversial matters, can also capture and hold an audience's attention.

A discussion topic should be a question of policy rather than a question of fact. "Do we have a supply of gasoline?" is a question of fact, and the only appropriate reply is a direct, factual answer. "Should we stop using gasoline to power cars?" is a question of policy that stirs discussion.

Topics that are trivial or timeworn, have no audience appeal, do not evoke strong differences of opinion, or can be answered by *yes* or *no* are not suitable.

Select an up-to-date controversial topic.

EXAMPLES.

What's wrong with today's economy?

How can we prevent food shortages?

Who should pay for college?

B. Prepare for the group discussion by thinking, talking, and reading about the topic.

Many discussions fail because of insufficient preparation by the participants.

To prepare for a discussion, everyone must think, talk, and read about the topic before the discussion takes place. When the topic is announced:

1. **Think about it.** What is your opinion? On what evidence is it based?
2. **Talk to others about it.** Discuss it with your friends and parents. Discuss it with someone who is an authority on the subject. Be ready to modify your previous opinion in the light of your new knowledge.
3. **Consult reference books, recent publications, magazine articles, and editorials.** Inform yourself as thoroughly as you can about the topic. Keep the open mind while you are learning.

C. The duties of the discussion leader.

In addition to thinking and learning about the topic before the discussion, a discussion leader is responsible for knowing the backgrounds and special interest of each speaker. If possible, a preliminary meeting of all speakers should be arranged to go over the topic and procedure of the discussion.

When the discussion begins, the leader should make a brief introductory statement focusing on the purpose of the discussion. The discussion leader both introduces each speaker to the audience and mentions something about each speaker's background or interests.

While the discussion continues, the leader should ask questions of the speakers. The leader should also try to prevent fruitless digressions and ensure that everyone has a chance to speak.

At the close of the discussion, the leader should summarize the major points and thank the audience and speakers.

D. The duties of speakers in a round table, forum, symposium, or panel discussion.

Speakers invited to a discussion should be able to listen carefully and courteously to others, speak so that everyone can hear, and be sure that the comments they give are directly related to the topic.

E. The duties of members of the audience.

A member of the audience should listen to the speakers with an alert mind, take notes if necessary, and join the discussion when the leader invites questions from the spectators. Questions should, of course, relate directly to the topic under discussion and be spoken with a clear voice that everyone can hear.

3. Taking part in group discussion

You can be more successful in communicating your ideas to others if you learn something about speaking and listening effectively in group discussions.

A group is made up of individuals who are attempting to achieve a common goal. A basketball team, for example, is a group of players who are trying to win a game. A photography club is a group of photographers who might want to organize an exhibition.

Within every group, each individual must accept and work for the group's common goal. An individual however, might have private goals not shared by the group. Psychologists call these private goals a *hidden agenda*. As you enter a group discussion, you should be aware of the difference between the goal of the discussion and the private goals of the individual members. Avoid the impulse of imposing your private intentions on the whole group. Participating in a group discussion depends chiefly upon individual cooperation.

A. How to speak effectively in a group discussion.

1. Think before you speak. Know what you are going to say before you begin. Take a few seconds to organize your ideas before you start talking; clear thinking precedes clear speaking.

2. Keep the other person in mind. Try to understand the other person's point of view. Avoid sarcasm and ridicule; they hurt unnecessarily and are a sign that your own arguments are weak. In the midst of heated discussion, remain calm. Your calmness will show up in your tone of voice, facial expression, and rate of speaking.

3. Be brief. Omit long and unnecessary explanations. Know the point you want to make and go directly to it. Speak simply but naturally and enthusiastically. Listeners like an enthusiastic speaker.

B. How to listen accurately and critically while taking part in group discussion.

In group discussion the interplay of personalities is often so interesting that your attention may wander or you may fail to recognize that a speaker's comments are not relevant to the topic.

You can focus your attention by taking notes. Jotting down the arguments will enable you to see the merits of each point. Follow these principles.

1. Recognize and guard against your own prejudices. Don't let emotions color your thinking. For example, your reactions to a speaker's appearance, accent, or gestures may affect your acceptance or rejection of what you hear. Think fairly and test ideas on rational, not emotional, grounds.

2. Recognize a speaker's bias and take it into account. When a speaker has an ax to grind, a listener must be careful. The arguments may be valid, but they may also be one-sided and rooted in prejudice.

3. Watch for words, phrases, and attitudes that are emotionally loaded. Some words report a fact objectively. They have few emotional overtones, if any. Others are loaded with emotion.

Compare the following pairs of words. Notice how one member of each pair is relatively colorless, while the other arouses feelings.

house	shack	dwelling	mansion
reply	rebuttal	defeat	rout
verse	doggerel	recline	sprawl
farmer	peasant	failure	fiasco
work	drudgery	dog	mongrel

Loaded words carry positive or negative charges. A positively charged word creates a favorable reaction; a negatively charged word, an unfavorable one. Propagandists make use of loaded words to influence listeners. They employ positively charged words to sway you to their way of thinking and negatively charged words to make you reject what they oppose.

4. Evaluation of group discussion

A. Evaluate a group discussion by asking key questions about it.

By considering the merits and faults of a group discussion after it is over, you can learn to improve future discussions. These questions will help you evaluate a group discussion.

1. Was the discussion purposeful? Where the causes of the problem considered? Where various solutions proposed and analyzed? Did the discussion ramble, or did it proceed in an orderly fashion?

2. Where the outcomes worthwhile? A group discussion need not reach a solution or agreement. It may be successful if it brings areas of disagreement into the open.

3. Where the participants thoroughly familiar with the problem? Did they present facts, instances, statements of competent and unbiased authorities, and statistics to support their opinions?

4. Was the discussion lively and general? Was there a give-and-take of opinion in an atmosphere of mutual respect? Did all participate? Did anyone monopolize the meeting, or did everyone speak briefly and to the point?

5. Did the participants reach a solution justified by the evidence? Do you agree with the solution? Why?

6. Where the audience's questions thought-provoking? Did the speakers answer them directly and fully?

7. Was the discussion courteous? Did each speaker exercise self-control by refraining from interrupting when another was speaking? Where statements and objections phrased courteously?

8. Did the discussion leader's introductory remarks arouse interest? Did the discussion avoid valueless digressions? Was everyone encouraged to join in? Was there a summary?