

The Concept: What Distinguishes an “Academic” Discussion

What?

An academic discussion is a more formalized and evidence-based conversation about a topic, text, or issue. Academic discussion involves constructive dialogue grounded in textual evidence in which participants exchange thoughts, ideas, and questions about issues, texts, and topics. Academic discussions can help you deepen your understanding, gain feedback, refine ideas, and revise claims.

Types of Academic Discussions

- **Jigsaw Discussion:** A jigsaw discussion is an academic discussion in which students join “expert” groups to closely and collaboratively examine a topic or text assigned to them. They then bring what they have learned to a “home” group and facilitate an academic discussion on their assigned topic or text.
- **Fishbowl Discussion:** A fishbowl discussion is an academic discussion with a particular organizational and formatting structure. The room is divided so that there is an inner circle for discussion (the fishbowl) and an outer circle for observation of the discussion. Participants divide into two or more groups and take turns being the discussion group and the observation group. The discussion group engages in an academic discussion while the observation group listens, notes key ideas, and sometimes poses questions to the discussion group.
- **Socratic Seminar:** A Socratic Seminar is an academic discussion that provides the opportunity to examine and understand a text’s ideas, issues, and values. The discussion is student-facilitated, and the purpose is not to persuade, rebut, or choose sides; rather, it is to examine questions. The value lies in the exploration, not in finding a single right answer. A Socratic Seminar requires participants to pose open-ended questions, listen, inquire, and respond by building on the thoughts and ideas of others. It provides practice in synthesizing and analyzing different perspectives.

When?

Academic discussions can happen at any point during study. They can be used to discuss text-specific questions as you read and analyze a text; they can happen as you draft claims, paragraphs, and essays throughout a unit; they can occur spontaneously to aid in discussion of an excerpt of text; or they can consist of more formal discussions in which you are evaluated by your teacher.

Why?

Academic discussions allow for a mature exchange of ideas and perspectives. Sharing ideas and building understanding through conversation is a path for self-advocacy, a strategy for argumentation, and an opportunity to synthesize your ideas. Academic discussions present opportunities for you to support your ideas with specific evidence, to use newly acquired

vocabulary, and to consider the ideas of others with respect, objectivity, and curiosity. The academic language used during these discussions also allows for disagreements to be considered in a polite and productive way.

The Process: Preparing for and Conducting Academic Discussions

An academic discussion requires preparation and thoughtful, active participation. To prepare for, participate in, and contribute to a meaningful discussion, consider the following steps:

1. Read the texts, research the topic, form claims based on the questions or prompts, gather evidence, and choose vocabulary or conversation stems you can use during the discussion. Also, be prepared to explain your reasoning and make connections between your claims and evidence. Use your notes and the tools you have been working with to prepare for and support your participation.
2. If relevant, identify or form topic- or text-specific questions that you can use to guide the discussion or would like to hear your peers' opinion on.
3. Determine and understand your role in the discussion: facilitator, speaker, listener, note-taker, etc. This role might change as the conversation progresses, or in accordance with the activity.
4. Review and follow the norms and expectations that have been established by the class or your teacher. See sample Discussion Norms below.
5. During the discussion, support any observations, conclusions, or claims you make by specifically referencing evidence in the text that led you to your thinking.
6. When other participants share their own observations, conclusions, or claims but do not clearly support them, respectfully probe their thinking by asking questions such as, "What in the text led you to your thinking?" Find more Discussion Stems below.
7. Throughout the discussion, participate in a way that emphasizes *inquiry*, thoughtful questioning and a desire to learn, rather than *advocacy*, arguing for and defending your position as the only correct one.
8. After the academic discussion concludes, reflect on what you learned about the topic or text, how your understanding advanced by the ideas of others, and how well you have followed the discussion norms and made constructive contributions to the conversation.

Literacy Toolbox: Tools and Resources to Guide Academic Discussion

Tools

Access and use the following graphic organizers found in the Literacy Toolbox.

Forming Evidence-Based Claims Tool

This tool helps you form evidence-based claims about a text. You can use it to prepare for a discussion in which you will need to support your claims. You can also use it during a discussion to help organize the delivery of your contribution, keep track of claims and evidence shared by others, or add new claims or evidence to your own argument or thinking.

Organizing Evidence Tool

This tool can help you organize claims and evidence as they relate to a central claim, thesis statement, or controlling idea. Similar to the **Forming Evidence-Based Claims Tool**, you can use it to prepare to present and support multiple claims about a text or topic during a discussion or to keep track of others' claims and evidence.

Discussion Tool

Use this guide before a discussion to form or synthesize claims; during a discussion to write down claims, evidence, and explanations; and after a discussion to reflect on and revise claims and your understanding.

Delineating Arguments Tool

Use this tool to prepare for a discussion in which you will talk about the elements and structure of an argument. You might also use this tool during a discussion to track perspectives, positions, claims, and counterclaims presented by peers.

Attending to Details Tool

Use this tool to focus on specific details from a text in order to support or explore a position during a discussion.

Analyzing Relationships Tool

Use this tool to analyze relationships among key details of a text or evaluate the effects of details in a text.

Evaluating Ideas Tool

Use this tool if your goal is to explain how the perspective, tone, or structure of a text, or the claims and evidence in it, influence your evaluation of the author's position, argument, or credibility.

Extending Understanding Tool

Use this tool during or after a discussion to refine your ideas and positions on a text or topic or to consider additional questions or texts.

Resources

Use the following resources to help you prepare for academic discussions. They can also keep you on track while engaging in an academic discussion.

Discussion Norms

Use this chart as a starting point for establishing a shared set of class *norms*, adopted agreements or rules, for academic discussions. Determine which norms you want to focus on in any given discussion, including ones your class or teacher might add to the list.

Discussion Checklist

Use this reflection tool, or one like it developed by your teacher or peers, to assess your own or other students' participation in an academic discussion.

Discussion Stems

Use this chart to help you plan for and engage in a discussion, particularly if you are new to academic discussions.

Discussion Norms

Norms help establish a shared set of agreements or rules for a discussion. Determine which norms you want to focus on in any given discussion, including ones from your peers or teacher.

Norm	Description
Be Prepared	Come to discussions prepared, with a claim formed and evidence gathered.
Demonstrate Understanding	Support your ideas by referring to research or evidence from texts.
Take Notes	Write down the claims, reasons, and evidence presented by other participants. Summarize points of agreement and disagreement. Take note of how to support or refine your own claims.
Communicate Effectively	Use clear and respectful language and reference academic concepts and vocabulary as you present ideas and ask questions.
Engage Actively	Pay attention to who is and is not speaking. Invite others to speak so that each person can contribute to a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.
Listen	Pay attention to and acknowledge others. Listen to others' positions, and consider their ideas before you form a response.
Continue the Discussion	Address your peers directly. Build on or examine the thoughts of others by posing and responding to questions that make connections among ideas.
Remain Open	Be open to expanding your ideas or perspective based on new, credible information.
Refine and Revise	Revisit, refine, and revise your understanding and knowledge based on the discussion. Resolve contradictions when possible and determine when additional information or research is required.
Reflect Critically	Evaluate the success of the discussion, specifically how well you and your peers succeeded at following the norms.

Discussion Checklist

Use this checklist, or a similar one developed by your teacher or peers, to monitor and assess your own or other students' participation in an academic discussion.

Academic Discussion: Skills and Habits	E	M	B
How well did I prepare for the discussion?			
How well did I follow the norms we set for the conversation?			
How well did I present claims and ideas, and support them with textual evidence?			
When asked, how well did I explain ideas further to make them clearer to others?			
How well did I use academic language and vocabulary?			
How well did I listen and pay attention to, respect, and work with all other participants in the discussion?			
How well did I pose questions that were centered on the text or topic and helped us think more deeply?			
How well did I add to or respectfully challenge ideas presented by others?			
How well did I make valid and thoughtful connections and comparisons to the ideas of others?			
How well did I maintain a spirit of <i>inquiry</i> , thoughtful questioning and a desire to learn, rather than <i>advocacy</i> , arguing for and defending a position as the only correct one?			

E	Exceeds Expectations	M	Meets Expectations	B	Below Expectations
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Discussion Stems

Identify discussion stems that you can use based on your role in the discussion.

When exploring a topic, opinion, or argument:

- I think _____ because _____.
- It seems to me that _____ because _____.
- How did you come to that idea?
- How did you arrive at your claim?
- I started out thinking _____ and now I think _____ because _____.

To encourage others to share their thoughts:

- What did you think about _____?
- We haven't heard you share yet. Do you agree or disagree with _____?
- Can you share what you think about _____?
- How did you arrive at _____?
- Do you agree with _____? Why or why not?

When asking for or providing clarification:

- What details in the text make you think that?
- Where in the text does it support your point?
- How does that statement from the text support your claim?
- The text states _____, and this supports my claim because _____.
- If you look on page/at paragraph X, the author states _____. This supports my idea because _____.
- I don't understand when you say _____.
- Can you explain further?

When agreeing or disagreeing:

- I see it similarly (or differently) because _____.
- I agree (or disagree) with X's view of _____ because in the text it states _____.
- On the one hand, I agree with X that _____, but on the other hand _____.
- The point is important (or flawed) because _____.
- I agree that _____, but we also have to consider _____.
- While it is true that _____, it does not necessarily follow that _____.
- I took a different approach, namely _____.

Discussion Stems (continued)

Identify discussion stems that you can use based on your role in the discussion.

When paraphrasing another speaker's point to show understanding:

- In other words, you think _____.
- What I hear you saying is _____.
- Are you saying _____?
- Do you mean _____?
- Am I understanding you correctly?

To build on the ideas of others:

- My idea (or argument) is similar because _____.
- My idea builds on X's idea because _____.
- I agree and would like to add _____.
- Have you considered _____?

When summarizing your own point or a group's point:

- Overall, what I am trying to say is _____.
- Overall, what I am hearing is _____.
- We all agree that _____. We still disagree about _____.
- It seems that most people think _____.
- We decided that _____.

When affirming the ideas of others:

- Your argument made me see _____ differently because _____.
- That's an interesting idea because _____.
- I understood that passage very differently until you _____.
- I see what you mean because the text says ____.