



Center for Teaching and Learning

Stanford University, Stanford CA



How to Get Students to Talk in Class

Decentralize

- Get them talking to each other, not just to you.
- Literally tell them to address their comments to each other.
- Use the “rotating chair” format in which students call on each other instead of you calling on them.
- Try not to respond to every student comment; instead ask the class what they think about what has just been said.

Share the authority

- Start class with discussion or student facilitators.
- Use mini-lectures interspersed with discussion and active learning.
- Delegate responsibility for bringing in discussion questions to students (use a sign up sheet, grade the questions, work on the art of good question crafting).

Ask open-ended questions

- Try not to use rhetorical questions or “yes/no” “agree/disagree” questions.
- Try not to answer your own questions.
- See the examples of open-ended questions on the back of the next page.

Give them time to think

- Silence is okay, really!
- If they seem to need more time to think, ask them to turn to a classmate and brainstorm some responses to your question for two or three minutes.

Respond to “off target” comments encouragingly

- Even if the comment is completely wrong or “off the wall,” thank the student for sharing their idea and—this is your creative challenge of the day—find a way to link their concept back on the correct track of discussion.
- A repertoire of encouraging comments is useful here: “Thank you for those thoughts on the matter. If you were to approach the concept from a slightly different angle, you might see that...” or, “I’m glad you brought up that idea. It reminds me that one of our concerns here is actually...” or, “With a bit more development, we could turn that idea around to the point that...”
- After class, take the time to talk with the student who made the erroneous comment and discuss the issue with him or her then. This will reinforce that you want people to take risks with their ideas in class, and yet you are committed to helping your students understand the material correctly.

Use strategic body language

- Literally push your chair away from the table during the discussion, signaling that the forum is now theirs.
- Nod your head encouragingly, place your hand over your mouth when a student is speaking (this signals that you are not going to interrupt them; it also helps give the impression of open consideration and reserving judgment).
- Try not to cross your arms or frown when students are speaking; these are discouraging signals.

Take notes when students are speaking

- This shows them that you value what they say and are learning from them.
- Taking notes allows you to remain engaged in the discussion without dominating it; it also helps you ask students questions when you want them to clarify their ideas.
- Taking notes helps you remember what the students said so that you can refer to their comments later, which also shows them that you value their ideas. This will encourage them to speak in the future.

Use Active Learning Strategies:

- *Solo free write*: give them time to jot down some ideas in response to a problem or question before you expect them to have an answer ready.
- *Pair Share*: ask them to turn to the student next to them and discuss the problem or question you have posed; after this, they will have some ideas to share with the class as a whole.
- *Small Groups*: put the class into groups of three or four and have them assign a scribe/spokesperson who will present the ideas they generate. Give them problems to solve or questions to answer or material to analyze from different perspectives.
- *Skills building activities*: help students engage actively with the material through creative exercises that help them build critical skills. (See next page for format suggestions).