

Civil Dialogue

How to Prepare for and Participate in Text-Based Discussions in High School and College



By Mike Schmoker

Participating in fair-minded, text-based classroom dialogue has immense benefits. It contributes not only to your learning and academic success but also to your ability to effectively participate in our democracy. Here's how you can prepare for and participate in discussions that will powerfully equip you to listen carefully, learn from your peers, and express yourself with skill and sensitivity.*

Prepare with Purpose

Preparing for a text-based discussion begins with thoughtful analysis of the text(s). Ideally, you would have a compelling purpose for that analysis. It makes reading more engaging and helps you overcome the natural tendency to drift or lose focus.¹

Perhaps the clearest form of such purpose is a guiding question or prompt. For instance, if you are reading about the possible factors that led to a war, epoch, or event, your teacher might ask you to evaluate or rank-order the factors' relative impact or plausibility as you read. This type of prompt stimulates thought

*For a longer, educator-focused version of this article with instructional guidance, see aft.org/ae/summer2023/schmoker.

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and makes you more attentive to important details that you can share and interpret with classmates.

If your teacher doesn't give you a compelling purpose, politely ask for one during class or afterward. Say that you want to be well prepared for dialogue on the text. Even in large college classes, most instructors will appreciate your interest and will welcome the opportunity to help you contribute to the conversation.

But if you aren't given a purpose, you can develop your own.

For nonfiction, you can start by skimming headings and sub-headings.² Does the writer explain the workings and interactions among bodily systems or of chemical qualities, or the application of physical principles? Or does this text invite you to analyze the words, behavior, and contributions of prominent figures?

For fiction, you can't go wrong with a focus on characters: What do we learn from their words, actions, and interactions? Do we admire or disdain them? Or are we ambivalent? How does the author's portrayal of characters help us understand the author's message? And what do the characters' experiences teach us about our own lives or about people in general?

Once you have a workable purpose, you can mark, annotate, and/or take notes with greater confidence and effectiveness. This work will provide you with the text-based information you will need to make a solid contribution to classroom dialogue.

Rehearse for Confidence

It might feel like you're done preparing once you've read the text, but rehearsing will boost your confidence. Start with a brief review of your notes and markings. Select a few items that

strongly resonate with you. Then turn them into sentences. You can do this under your breath or aloud.

If you're like me, you'll notice that you aren't as articulate as you'd like to be at first. So give it another shot as though you are talking to a friend. It can be helpful to use phrases like "That is" or "In other words," which transfer readily to the eventual classroom dialogue. Your ability to be clear, logical, and succinct will improve appreciably with each attempt. You'll be even better prepared if you combine this verbal practice with writing, which has a similarly powerful effect on your ability to speak with precision and economy.

You might also find sentence stems useful. Here are a few to get you started.³

According to the ____ (article/author) ____ (opinion). I agree/have to disagree because.... [or] I think this is only partially true because....

The textbook/article tells us that ____ (person) did/said ____ . I believe this demonstrates that he/she/they.... [or] This implies/convinces me that....

In this ____ (chapter/paragraph) ____ (character) says/does ____ . I think this indicates that he/she/they (description of character or trait).

To elaborate on any of the above, start your thoughts with *That is,...*, *For example,...*, or *Another reason....*

These tips apply to any text-based dialogue. But what about more challenging discussions on issues for which people hold starkly divergent views and passions run high? How can you cultivate your capacity for civil discourse?

Engage in Civil Discourse

When discussing sensitive topics, you deserve the opportunity to read and discuss texts that reflect legitimate views from all sides of an issue. If you haven't been given texts with multiple perspectives, you may want to approach your instructor and suggest or ask for texts that are more balanced. Excellent, free resources on a wide array of controversies can be found on websites like ProCon.org and AllSides.com.

In these polarized times, it is critical that we enter into challenging discussions with the proper spirit. It is imperative



that we listen conscientiously to each other—that we honestly and objectively weigh the evidence and reasons offered by our peers.

But this isn't easy. When we discuss contentious issues, we are prone to think quickly, reflexively, and defensively. When our views are challenged, we naturally want to *debate* rather than *deliberate*.⁴ We default to "fast thinking," which affirms our existing convictions and can be the enemy of "slow" thought—the kind that forces us to more objectively contemplate opposing views.⁵

Careful listening and cool-headed deliberation allow us to refine or even change our views in light of new facts and reasons as we seek common ground and solutions to seemingly intractable problems. It is often said that in a democracy, there are no solutions—only compromises. Being willing to seek sensible, informed compromise may be *the* democratic virtue.

At the right time, there is certainly room for orderly, rational, evidence-based debate. But I'm increasingly convinced that the current moment demands more emphasis on listening and learning through civil discussion—not winning a debate.⁶

To develop and sustain a rational, inquiring disposition, you might consider using sentence stems like the following when you disagree:

I agree with you in this respect..., but it's harder for me to understand or relate to the other point you make....

I see what you're saying. I wonder, however, if you might consider....

I'm thinking out loud here and trying to weigh what you're saying. It seems to me that....

If you engage sincerely in such dialogue, you and your classmates will benefit as effective learners, critical thinkers, communicators, and participants in our democracy. Evidence from numerous programs demonstrate that through such civil interaction, even the most polarized groups and individuals can learn from each other, solve problems, and even forge bonds.⁷

So, start practicing these skills and dispositions! And maybe offer to help your teachers support them in the classroom. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2023/schmoker.