



**Institute of World Affairs**

## **Guidelines for Facilitators of World Affairs Discussion Groups**

Institute of World Affairs  
Center for International Education  
University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee  
Garland 138, P.O. Box 413  
Milwaukee, WI 53201-0413

There are too few opportunities to discuss important global issues and U.S. foreign policy and the intent of this guide and accompanying resource packet is to support people in their efforts to talk about these issues. There is no one definition of what constitutes a discussion group; it can be a collection of friends at your house or a coffee shop, a meeting of colleagues at work, or an adult education session at a community organization or place of worship. There is no magic to forming a group and this guide is meant as a list of helpful suggestions.

## 1. Setting up the group

As noted above, a discussion group is a flexible commodity. You will know best who might be interested in such a group and what venue would be most convenient. In putting together a group, consider the following ideas:

- **Purpose:** Ask yourself, “What is the goal of the discussion group I would like to organize? What would I like to accomplish?” Be clear on the purpose of bringing the group together (e.g. exchanging views), your time expectation for the meeting, and the topics you hope to discuss (e.g. an agenda). If the discussion group is to be hosted by an organization with a political or social agenda, this should be made clear to the potential participants especially if it is assumed that the group is to take a certain position. However, in a typical Institute of World Affairs (IWA) discussion group each individual draws his or her own conclusions and takes the action they see fit.
- **Product:** Another important way to clarify your purpose is for people to flesh out the product you hope to produce in the meeting (e.g. consensus, exchange of views, list of ideas, etc.). These discussions should be mostly about exchanging and collecting views. IWA is interested in knowing about your group and a summary of your discussions as we periodically will publish these (anonymously) and/or forward them on to the media or political representatives. You may wish to collect input and make your voice heard as well.
- **Place (convenience):** Try to put together a group during a time and place that are convenient for people. Often this means a time when they might otherwise be together (e.g. a lunch hour, a dinner party, or adult education class).
- **Process:** Before the meeting, you should have an idea of how to structure the discussion (see the section below on running a discussion group).

- **People:** Decide how you are going to invite people to participate in the group – whether to make it an open call to all who are interested, or invite specific people. There is not one opinion about how many people constitute an effective discussion group; however, if the number is too large, you may want to consider breaking up into small groups and then convening as a large group to share the discussions.

## 2. Your role

It can be difficult to both play the role of a facilitator and a full participant in the discussion. However, it usually does not work for someone to only be in the role of facilitator and groups often flounder unless at least one person is acting as a facilitator. So, you should explain your role as a facilitator is to structure, at least initially, the discussion and get it going, but that you also want to participate in the discussion and set the expectation that each person in the discussion should be prepared to step into the facilitator role. This is easier if you explain what that role entails. A facilitator should:

- **Pay attention to the process and time.** Try to keep the group on their agenda and revise it (with group input) if and when needed.
- **Make sure that the ground rules for the discussion (see below) are respected.**
- **Play traffic cop when necessary** – e.g. deciding on an order for people to speak when many want the floor at the same time, keeping comments to a respectable length, etc.

When jumping out of the facilitator role and into the role of a participant, make it explicit and ask someone else to take over as facilitator. Often, if the group is familiar with each other and functioning well, there is not much need for a facilitator.

## 3. Organize Background Materials

It is helpful if participants have some background materials prior to the discussion. You only need to locate the resources, not create them. IWA can assist you with these background materials through its Electronic News Service, issue briefs, television program, and public programs with flexible delivery. Some options available include:

- **Watch the IWA public program with guest speakers** (in person in Milwaukee or via the web).
- **Watch *International Focus***, IWA's weekly television program on Channel 36 available in the Milwaukee area.
- **Read IWA's Electronic News Service** with news stories accompanying *International Focus* program topics for the bi-monthly world affairs round up.

- **Listen to Wisconsin Public Radio** where IWA speakers are often interviewed and interviews are archived on-line.
- **Read IWA Issue Briefs** which complement current programs and provide excellent information on the topic.
- **Choose several news articles or journal pieces for the group to read and share opinions.** For example, you may choose articles from the New York Times and the Washington Post or a piece from Foreign Affairs on which to base your discussion.

This is not an all inclusive list and, of course, participants will have a wide variety of sources on which they base their opinions. However, it is helpful to have some base of common knowledge from which to begin the discussion.

#### 4. Creating Discussion Questions

It will be helpful to decide in advance how you would like to generate questions for group discussions. For example, each participant may wish to prepare one or two discussion questions for the group so that the discussion remains relevant to everyone's interests; however, the facilitator can also serve in this role. If you are preparing the questions as the facilitator, you may want to give two main questions to the participants ahead of time. Some participants may need time to reflect on the questions prior to participating in the discussion. If participants are taking turns facilitating, the acting facilitator may wish to give everyone one or two questions ahead of time to begin the discussion. Your group may prefer to simply bring questions to the group without any advance preparation. The format you wish to use will depend on your group's decision.

When deciding which questions to generate for your discussion, there are several areas you can consider.

- **Epistemological Questions:** These questions get at how the speaker (lecturer, author, or group participant) has come to know that something is true. What are the grounds for their opinions? For example, if the writer of an article or a speaker asserts that the U.S. ought to pull troops out of Iraq, how did the speaker come to that conclusion? What is the speaker's political or philosophical orientation? To what extent are the speaker's opinions grounded in evidence?
- **Experiential Questions:** These questions help us understand what the speaker is saying through our own experiences. How do your personal experiences with the subject connect to what the speaker has said? How do these compare and contrast? Are there ethical issues you would identify as important to address?
- **Communicative Questions:** These questions focus on the style and presentation of the speaker's ideas. How do the speaker's analogies and word choice convey the speaker's ideology? Whose "voices" does the speaker represent?

- **Political Questions:** These questions raise issues about whose interests a speaker's presentation or a writer's work serves. These questions attempt to clarify the values and preferences of the writer. What contribution does the speaker make by presenting? Who sponsors the speaker's writing and does this have an impact on what they are writing?

*(Adapted from Brookfield, S. (1995). Becoming a critically reflective teacher. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass).*

These questions are intended to help generate a healthy discussion about what the speaker is saying, challenge assumptions of participants, and help each participant learn and form opinions on the issue.

## 5. Running a Discussion

Again, how formal or informal you are with a discussion group is up to you and the group to decide. In any event, here are some guidelines that might be helpful:

### **Ground rules**

Even with groups that are familiar with each other (and especially with groups that are not) it is useful to review and post a set of simple guidelines:

- **Respect opinions** that are expressed as an individual's honest perception.
- **Respect time limitations** and the need to allow sufficient time for all to voice their views.
- **There is no need to agree** (unless you decide otherwise).
- **Inquire to learn** what has led someone to think as they do.
- **Listen.**

With groups that work well together, posting ground rules may not be necessary, but often it is a good idea because they are critical when things get tense.

### **When things get tough**

In any discussion, especially when people feel strongly about what is being discussed, the discussion can get tense, out of hand, or it might simply shut down. Here are some techniques to try in that situation:

- **Encourage Inquiry.** Often disagreements or tense exchanges in a group are the result of people talking at very high levels of abstraction and in broad generalizations (e.g. "the liberal/conservative media always..."). In such cases, it is helpful to slow the conversation down and get people to explain more about where their views come from and why they hold them. A few types of questions are useful here: "I hear that you feel (paraphrase their view), can you tell us things you have seen or heard that lead you to

- feel that way?” Or “Can you give us a recent example of what you’re referring to so others can better understand it?” Or “Tell us more about why doing it that way would be a bad idea, what do you fear might happen?” Another technique to break up the cycle of an unproductive argument is simply to tell the participants that they have to ask each other a question (or two) instead of defending their point or attacking the other person’s point.
- **Encourage Listening.** Often disagreements are fueled by one or more people feeling that their perspective has not been understood or unfairly dismissed. In such cases, it can help to (again) slow things down a bit and ask people to state what they heard the speaker say. Give the speaker time to correct anything he/she feels was a misperception of his/her view.
  - **Check in on the process:** at times, the agenda you thought you would cover is not the one that will work for the group, or the discussion has evolved into something different than originally planned. It is helpful to check in with the group about how the process is going and where it should go from here. Often this requires you to call a brief “time out” from the discussion. You should ask the group how they think the process is going. It is also useful to give an observation of the process (e.g. “we have used about half our time and we have only covered one of our four points...and my guess is that if we continue as we are, we will not cover everything...”). Then, ask the group if this is how it wants to proceed or if they want to modify either how they are discussing each point, or to change the agenda.
  - **Call for a break.** Sometimes a five minute break is all that is needed for emotions to calm down and more reflective opinions to be developed.

### ***Troubleshooting suggestions from the Foreign Policy Association***

Also, consider the advice developed by the Foreign Policy Association on some typical challenges and how to handle them, which is contained in their guide to facilitators running discussions on foreign affairs:<sup>1</sup>

- a) ***Dominant individuals:*** It is the discussion leader’s responsibility to restrain dominant individuals. Sometimes it will be necessary to interrupt them gently by saying that you would also like to hear other participants’ opinions on the issue at hand.

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<sup>1</sup> Foreign Policy Associations “Discover, Discuss, Decide. Great Decisions Tips for Discussion Group Leaders” has been used as a major source in developing this guideline. The document is available at [http://www.fpa.org/usr\\_doc/37263.pdf](http://www.fpa.org/usr_doc/37263.pdf).

- b) ***Passive and shy individuals:*** Try to activate/involve passive and shy members to the ongoing discussion without putting them on the spot. Be patient with those members. Some individuals do not dare to speak out spontaneously in front of a group. They need more time to get acquainted with the group and the issue. Try to make them feel comfortable, make permanent eye contact, and try to speak to them informally before and after each session. Once they join the discussions, show them that you appreciate their involvement and encourage them do participate more frequently.
  
- b) ***Losing the Plot:*** It is not always easy to judge a lack of focus in the discussion. The discussion leader should consider how relevant and lively the discussion is. Call the group's attention to the fact that they are discussing off topic and that it might be a good idea to return to the actual theme. In such situations it is recommended to use phrases like "That's very interesting but we should return to our issue of \_\_\_\_\_. Maybe we can talk about this issue another time."
  
- d) ***Personalizing Disagreements:*** Discussion leaders have to deal with this problem promptly and decisively. Remind the group of the basic set of rules for the discussion and enforce them. Ask for support from other group members.
  
- e) ***False or Controversial Information:*** If you know that the articulated/expressed information is false ask other participants if they have any different information. The discussion leader should put forward his/her information if no one speaks out. In case there is controversial information which is essential to the discussion, encourage participants to investigate on this issue and bring it up in the next meeting. But be aware that there may be no generally accepted answer (there may no satisfying answer for all members).

All in all, tailor this guidance to the people and the chemistry of the group you put together. The primary goal is to encourage people to think and talk together about critical global issues that affect our communities, our states, our nation, and our world.

Thank you for putting together a discussion group and making a difference in our society!