

## STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

# 4 Steps to Making Rigorous Discussion a Routine

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*ELA students in a group discussion.* YES Prep Public Schools, Photo credit: Emily Ries

For many of us who are intimidated by the idea of "rigor" and exactly what it means to make our lessons more rigorous, thinking about it as a routine can make it more real and doable for us. Because to really raise rigor and push our students, it's not about anything more that we can teach them, it's about setting up the right environment for them to think critically and engage in analysis and problem solving. Discussion is one fail-safe way to do this, no matter the content area. Our math teacher leaders have really been pushing discussion as a key to rigor. Here are some ways to set up a strong discussion routine in your class.

## Have Official "Discussion Times"

If you're a relatively new teacher, setting aside a specific discussion time each week will help hold you accountable to sticking with it if the kids come to expect it every week. And remember, this is for all content areas, not just ELA.

## Keep Discussion Days Simple

All of your effort preparing for these days should be directed toward coming up with great questions, not toward designing a fancy lesson. When I had discussions in my classroom, the day always ran exactly the same way. This predictability made the prep less stressful, and then the kids could get their minds primed for the kind of thinking they knew would be coming each time. Mine always followed this schedule:

1. A "Do First" that reviewed the content or reading
2. Groups choosing the questions or problems they wanted to discuss
3. Silent writing or work time on the questions
4. Group discussions
5. Whole class discussion

I didn't have a fancy PowerPoint on these days, just a simple handout with the discussion questions and then an anchor chart with the procedure for discussion days. That way, all my planning time went into crafting questions.

## Get Out of the Way

This one was so hard for me! Through a combination of excitement about the content and impatience for my students to make the high-level connections, I sometimes blurted out those connections before they could get there. One solution for me was having them break into small discussion or problem-solving groups as often as possible. When we did whole-class discussion for too long, either I would accidentally do much of the thinking for them, or they would spend the whole time trying to give the answer they thought I wanted to hear. When they worked in groups, I was better able to keep my mouth shut.

## Writing = Thinking

This is a huge truth and a key to *all* students reaching high levels of rigorous thinking. Periodically during discussion and at the end, stop and have students silently write in complete sentences for a few minutes (not just 30 seconds!) about the previous or upcoming questions or problems. This makes sure that all students are processing the discussion so far, not just the students who have been speaking up. Writing often results in students making new connections and coming up with even more ideas to share.

How have you encouraged your classes to have rigorous discussions on a regular basis?

**Source:** [www.edutopia.org/blog/making-rigorous-discussion-routine-petra-claflin](http://www.edutopia.org/blog/making-rigorous-discussion-routine-petra-claflin)

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