



## Using Scaffolding To Guide Class Discussions

A common challenge in education is getting the most out of discussion when some students have not read the assigned material. In-class discussions produce a higher quality when students actively engage with the readings. These discussions serve to synthesize big picture information and perspectives from students themselves. The question becomes: *How can we provide activities that engage students with the readings prior to class?* This question pinpoints one of the challenges in discussion-based courses both at the undergraduate and graduate levels: Students critical reading and preparation for discussion.

Some strategies and suggestions to support critical reading and note taking on assigned readings:

- **Make the note taking process an active assignment.**

Provide students with a template on how to conduct notes on the various assigned readings as well as an evaluation criterion. Examples of these templates include the following: “Quote Question-Talking Point (QQT)” where students identify an important quotation from the text, a question about the text, and a talking point derived from the text; **Four Squares**, consisting of four boxes, each with a prompt (e.g., “One thing I didn’t really understand. . .,” “An essential principle in this reading was . . . .”) and **Big Three**, a format in which students identify three central concepts from the reading and provide a list of supporting text passages for each. Students will submit these assignments asynchronously in the 24-hour period before class starts. Consider that students may not be accustomed to focusing on big picture ideas to synthesize themes across multiple course materials and texts.



- Randomly assign students into “**reading circles**” in LMS to facilitate pre-class discussions on course material. This virtual groupwork gives structure and direction to build upon the larger ideas of the notes taking process and prepare for discussion.
- Students **transition** from asynchronous small group discussions to in-class discussions.
- **Incorporate student notes** in class discussions to add greater value/diversity of voices to what has been read and to acknowledge that students’ preparation is critical to focused/in-depth discussion. The process illustrates the level of thinking that occurs during note taking.
- Consider the **goals for students’ notetaking** on readings. Quizzes may not be the most effective strategy for students to demonstrate their understanding of the reading. Short pre-class writing assignments provide students with structure to demonstrate their understanding in depth.
- **Explain** to students why you are using this note-taking approach and how it deepens their critical reading and discussion skills and ask for their feedback on this process.

Please let us know what you have found helpful/effective when using readings as a basis for discussion by [emailing](#) your tips to VITAL.

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Adapted from [Raising the Quality of Discussion by Scaffolding Students' Reading](#)

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You will find sample notetaking templates and rubrics in the article.