

choices for sustainable living discussion course

OUR VISION

This discussion course is more than just a book; it is designed to inspire action, build community, and transform how we live and interact with our world. This guide provides some essential tips for facilitating discussion courses.

Group discussions are valuable tools for helping people understand difficult topics, explore different perspectives, and learn from one another. When you come together with others to discuss sustainability, you are not only learning but also helping others learn.

In our discussions, you'll be able to:

- Engage in peer-to-peer learning, where everyone is a teacher and a student.
- Experience the power of co-learning, where you learn together, discover

insights, and are inspired in ways that are difficult to find on your own.

- Explore complex topics in a safe space, where you can break down big issues into smaller pieces and talk through them with others.
- Build community by creating a network of shared stories and support.

Facilitation is about creating a space where diverse perspectives can thrive. Your role as a facilitator is not to have all the answers but to keep the conversation flowing, ask thoughtful questions, and encourage meaningful contributions from everyone. Embrace curiosity, seek help when needed, and remember to celebrate the group's successes as you explore ideas together.

Together, we can make a difference.

A Few Tips for Maximizing Our Time Together *Consider printing this out or showing it on a slide for virtual discussions!*

Creating a Welcoming Space
Encouraging Participation
Managing Different Personalities
Navigating Conflict
Additional Tips

A FEW TIPS FOR MAXIMIZING OUR TIME TOGETHER

- **Be Respectful:** Respect each other and the opinions shared.
- **Be Kind:** Avoid negative opinions about politics, religions, cultures, or corporate entities to prevent offending others. Disagree respectfully. Let's learn from one another.
- **Engage Fully:** This is an interactive discussion, not a lecture. Share openly, ask questions, and stay focused on our topic.
- **Share the Space:** Briefly share your thoughts to ensure everyone has a chance to participate. Make space for each other to share.
- **Share Yourself:** When speaking for the first time, please share your name and location for those who haven't met you yet.
- **Minimize Distractions:** Keep your devices on mute during the discussion, and try not to multitask if you are participating virtually.

The following facilitation tips are designed to help you create an inclusive, comfortable, and engaging environment for your group. Whether you're meeting in person or virtually, these suggestions will help you navigate your role as a facilitator with confidence and care.

CREATING A WELCOMING SPACE

- **In-person Meeting Tip:** Greet people as they enter the room and make eye contact. Share information on restrooms, where to get water, and anything else that can make people feel comfortable.
- **Virtual Meeting Tip:** Welcome them as they enter the virtual space. It's also OK to start by acknowledging that online discussions can feel different and encourage people to participate in whatever way feels comfortable, whether through speaking, using the chat, or reacting with emojis. Consider using an icebreaker question to help people feel more relaxed.
- Create a space where people can share their needs.
 - » **You could say...** "If anyone has any accessibility needs that we should be aware of, please let me know by emailing me before we come together for our first meeting." or "Is there anything we can do to make this space more comfortable for everyone? If so, feel free to let me know now or privately in the chat box."

ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION

- Set shared expectations for participation: Start the first meeting by discussing how you will interact. Set shared expectations for having video on or off, silencing cell phones, and giving everyone space to participate.
 - » **You could say...** "Let's set some shared agreements on how we will participate in the discussions. Does anyone have any requests, tips, or ideas (such as silencing cell phones or not dominating the conversation) that would make it easier to participate?" Take notes of any ideas and revisit them if needed in future meetings.
 - Acknowledge that everyone's perspective is valuable:
 - » **You could say...** "We're all here to learn from each other, so please feel free to share your thoughts and experiences, even if they're different from others."
 - Open-Ended Questions: Use the open-ended questions in each session (or use your own) to draw out quieter members and encourage deeper discussion. Avoid "Do you agree?" and use more interesting questions.
 - » **You could say...** "What are your thoughts on the author's statement?" or "What experiences have you had that relate to this?" or "What surprised you most about the reading?" Encourage participants to build on each other's responses by asking, "Does anyone have a different perspective?" or "Does anyone want to add to that?"
 - » **Virtual Meeting Tip:** Be clear about how you want participants to respond.
- Navigating group conversations online can be challenging if it isn't clear how people should respond, as they may just wait and be silent or talk over each other. Create a shared agreement about how to answer (use the chat, raise hands, or just unmute and talk) and remind people of what to do, especially if new people join.
- Active Listening: Demonstrate active listening to help people feel heard and encourage everyone to do the same. Validate the emotions that are expressed by acknowledging and respecting them. Periodically summarize key points to reinforce learning.
 - » **You could say...** "It sounds like you're feeling frustrated about this situation. That's understandable." Or, "I hear your concerns, and I want to assure you that your voice is important in this discussion." Or, "I can see that this topic is bringing up some strong emotions for you. Thank you for being willing to share them with us." or "It's okay to feel however you feel about this topic. We're here to support each other and learn together."
 - » **In-person Meeting Tip:** Make eye contact with the speaker, nod your head to show you are following along, and use verbal cues like "uh-huh" or "I see" to indicate you are listening. Lean in slightly to show interest. Periodically summarize what you hear people saying to ensure you understand them correctly and show that you are listening. For example, "So, it sounds like you're saying..."

- » **Virtual Meeting Tip:** Use the reaction features in your online platform (like thumbs up or clapping emojis) to show you are engaged. Verbally acknowledge participants' comments and questions by speaking up or using the chat box. Since visual cues can be limited online, pay close attention to the speaker's tone of voice and summarize their points to confirm you understood what they meant if you aren't sure.
- Explore a Variety of Formats: Diversifying how you facilitate meetings can add some interest for the group and keep people engaged.
 - » **In-person Meeting Tip:** Divide large groups into smaller groups to discuss a specific question, then bring everyone together to share their insights. Use a talking stick or other fun object people pass to each other to allow everyone to speak without interruption. Incorporate visual aids or short videos to break up the discussion and provide different ways of learning.
 - » **Virtual Meeting Tip:** Utilize breakout rooms for small group discussions. Use polls or quizzes to gauge understanding and encourage interaction. Share your screen to show images or videos related to the discussion topic. Consider using a collaborative online whiteboard where participants can contribute ideas simultaneously.
- Recognize that people learn in different ways. Some people prefer to listen, while others prefer visual or hands-on activities.
 - » **In-person Meeting Tip:** Provide a variety of ways for people to engage with the material. For example, you could have people discuss quotes from the book, draw images representing the reading, break into groups to discuss various perspectives for a light-hearted debate, or play a game that helps people learn the concepts.
 - » **Virtual Meeting Tip:** Use the whiteboard feature to help people draw or map out concepts. You can also use the chat to allow people to share links to songs, poems, or other resources that help them connect with the material in different ways.

MANAGING DIFFERENT PERSONALITIES

- Be Mindful of Differences: Recognize that people have different communication styles and personalities. Some may be naturally more talkative or assertive, while others may be more introverted or prefer to reflect before speaking.
 - » **In-person Meeting Tip:** Observe participants' body language and interactions. Provide opportunities for both verbal and written contributions to accommodate different preferences. For example, you could have a few minutes of quiet reflection before starting the discussion in which people write notes about their thoughts or give them a chance to share in pairs first, then discuss as a group.
 - » **Virtual Meeting Tip:** Pay attention to how participants engage in the chat or through reactions. If someone seems

less comfortable speaking up, you can send them a private message to check in and see if they have any thoughts they'd like to share.

- Gently Guide: If someone dominates the conversation, gently guide them to allow others to participate.
 - » **You could say...** "That's a great point, [person's name], and I'm curious to hear what others think about this as well." Or, you could gently redirect the conversation by saying, "Let's make sure we hear from everyone. [another person's name hasn't been spoken yet] Would you like to add anything?" If you meet virtually, you could try something like, "Thanks for sharing your thoughts, [person's name]. To give everyone a chance to participate, let's try this next question as a poll."

NAVIGATING CONFLICT

- View disagreements as opportunities for learning and growth. Encourage participants to see different perspectives as a chance to expand their understanding.
 - » **You could say...** "It's interesting that we have different perspectives on this. Let's explore these different viewpoints and see what we can learn from each other."
- If debates get heated, encourage participants to express their perspectives respectfully and to listen to opposing viewpoints. Remind participants of the group agreements or ground rules established at the beginning of the discussion. If someone makes a disrespectful comment, you can address it privately through a direct message or after the meeting.
 - » **You could say...** "It's okay to disagree, but let's remember to respect each other's opinions. Please use "I" statements to express your views and avoid interrupting others. We can be tough on ideas but be kind to each other."
- If someone is frustrated because they feel misunderstood or attacked, facilitate constructive dialogue by asking clarifying questions and summarizing key points. Use the chat, a shared document, or a whiteboard to list the main points of the different perspectives. This can help participants visualize the various arguments and identify areas of agreement or disagreement.
 - » **You could say...** "Let's pause and give [person's name] a chance to clarify. [Person's name], can you elaborate on what you meant?" or "It sounds like we have two different perspectives here. Let's see if we can find some common ground by listing people's various perspectives about this."
- If the conversation is heading in an unproductive direction, gently redirect it to maintain a respectful and productive environment.
 - » **You could say...** "I appreciate everyone's passion on this topic. Let's take a break and return in a few minutes." or "Let's take a deep breath and remember our shared goal of learning and growing together. Perhaps we can move on to the next question and revisit this topic later."

ADDITIONAL TIPS

Preparing for the First Meeting

- **Send Reminders:** Remind participants to read the session materials beforehand.
- **In-person Meeting Tip:** Arrive early to set up the space and ensure everything is ready. Have extra copies of the session materials on hand, just in case.
- **Virtual Meeting Tip:** If meeting online, allot extra time at the beginning to familiarize people with the technology. You can also send a brief tutorial video or instructions beforehand to help people prepare.

Share Leadership: Encourage everyone to share leadership by rotating roles for future discussions. Before you leave the session, align on who will be in each role next time, or consider creating a signup sheet at the beginning so people can volunteer for roles.

Time Management: Keep the discussion focused and on time. If things feel like they are getting behind, acknowledge that the discussion is great but that we need to leave a little time for [wrap-up, aligning on the next meeting, etc.]. Start and end the meeting on time. Use a timer to help you stay on track if needed, or ask a volunteer to flag when time is up.

Thank you for taking the lead and engaging folks in this discussion; we hope you feel excited and prepared. If you have questions or would like additional support, please reach out to us at contact@ecochallenge.org. You are making a difference, and we appreciate you!