

The Goal

The goal of this discussion is three-fold:

1. To create a space for students to externalize their thoughts and assumptions.
2. To create a space in which faulty thoughts and assumptions could be challenged and corrected.
3. To create a space in which students might be able to practice virtue.

General Guidelines

- **Plan the space:** Discussions work best when students are looking at one another. Consider placing the desks or chairs in a circle. Carefully consider whether you want your desk to be a part of that circle or outside of it. If you plan on speaking more during the discussion, put your desk in the circle. If you plan on speaking less during the discussion, which is encouraged, place your desk outside of the circle.
- **Minimize your voice:** During a discussion, teachers are encouraged to minimize their voices as much as possible. Save your thoughts for the end of the discussion when you can debrief the discussion with the whole class. During the discussion itself, try to allow the students to be the ones who speak and give them freedom to shape the discussion. They may choose to take the discussion in a direction you have never considered, which may prove quite valuable. If a student speaks erroneously, carefully consider the degree to which you want to correct. After all, if given the opportunity, another student might say the very thing you were planning to say.
- **Take notes:** Taking notes during the discussion can prove helpful. Your notes could be anything from drawing lines that trace the flow of conversation to capturing specific student quotes that you might want to debrief later. No matter how detailed your notes, be sure to include specific instances of virtuous forms of interaction. Look for students who display humility, compassion, courage, or patience as they talk. Noting this behavior provides a unique opportunity to encourage these students at the end of class when you debrief with them.
- **Get students to write:** Students are more prone to speak well when they have had an opportunity to write their thoughts prior to a discussion. If passing out a prompt, consider giving students class time before beginning the discussion to write their initial responses, or even consider assigning prompts as homework in the prior class session. If possible, offer students an opportunity to plan their thoughts on paper prior to the discussion.

Considerations

This discussion should be handled with care. There are varying degrees of skepticism about the trustworthiness of science. Your students' perception of the trustworthiness of science is likely a complex combination of their experiences at home, in school, and with peers.

The goal of the conversation is not for students to view science as manipulative or untrustworthy. In fact, science is quite a good way of knowing things. Additionally, note that the question, "Can you trust science?" is flawed. Hopefully, as students begin to explore this question, they can discover its limitations.

Science is not a uniform block of findings, but rather a process of investigation, embedded in a complex network of individuals and institutions. Thought of as a process of empirical inquiry designed to maximize the accuracy of findings, "science" can be seen as highly trustworthy. Thought of as a human process that is sometimes funded by particular interests or done hastily, "science" can be seen as quite fallible and deserving of some skepticism. As the initial discussion unfolds, watch for signs of students beginning to make distinctions concerning what they mean by the term "science," and guide the discussion in this direction with a question or two if it seems to be getting locked into simplistic positions.