
Section Objectives:

- Students will be able to respond to diverse perspectives in a group discussion.
- Students will be able to summarize key points in a hypothetical group discussion.
- Students will be able to adjust their own views when necessary in light of new information.

The Blind Man and the Elephant

John Godfrey Saxe

It was six men of Indostan, to learning much inclined,
who went to see the elephant (Though all of them were blind),
that each by observation, might satisfy his mind.

The first approached the elephant, and, happening to fall,
against his broad and sturdy side, at once began to bawl:
“God bless me! but the elephant, is nothing but a wall!”

The second feeling of the tusk, cried: “Ho! what have we here,
so very round and smooth and sharp? To me tis mighty clear,
this wonder of an elephant, is very like a spear!”

The third approached the animal, and, happening to take,
the squirming trunk within his hands, “I see,” quoth he,
the elephant is very like a snake!”

The fourth reached out his eager hand, and felt about the knee:
“What most this wondrous beast is like, is mighty plain,” quoth he;
“Tis clear enough the elephant is very like a tree.”

The fifth, who chanced to touch the ear, Said; “E’en the blindest man
can tell what this resembles most; Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an elephant, is very like a fan!”

The sixth no sooner had begun, about the beast to grope,
than, seizing on the swinging tail, that fell within his scope,
“I see,” quoth he, “the elephant is very like a rope!”

And so these men of Indostan, disputed loud and long,
each in his own opinion, exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong!

So, oft in theologic wars, the disputants, I ween,
tread on in utter ignorance, of what each other mean,
and prate about the elephant, not one of them has seen!

The men in this poem do not put the information they have together to form one picture; instead they all insist that their individual evaluations of what an elephant must be like are true. Had they discussed what they each discovered, they might have been able to understand what an elephant is truly like. One of the benefits of group discussions is the ability to hear and engage with diverse perspectives. Just as with the blind men and the elephant, however, it is important to consider all perspectives in order to have a clearer understanding of a given topic.

During a group discussion, it is possible that you will hear things with which you will disagree or that challenge long-held beliefs. However, it is important for you to evaluate those perspectives before deciding whether to agree or disagree. Equally important is the ability to change your beliefs when new information is presented. Critical thinkers are always willing to allow new information to change long-held opinions.

It can be helpful to summarize the points made during the conversation. You will often find that you and another person agree about more than you think you do. Try to use “I statements”: “I think what you are saying is ... Do I have that right?” If the other person agrees, then summarize your own point by explaining it, starting with “I am saying ...” This will help you to remain focused on the discussion and allow you to understand exactly what the other person is trying to say.

Remember to always differentiate between the person and the words. Do not take statements personally and do not become defensive, sarcastic, or accusatory in your responses. Take the time to consider whether the other person’s statement is true, fair, and backed by evidence. If it is, then it may be time to reconsider your own opinions. If it is not, then you can politely respond that you disagree and offer reasons. Remember also that many times there is no right or wrong answer. For example, some people will read the play *Othello*, by William Shakespeare, and see the main character as a weak man who gets what he deserved, while others will see Othello as a good man who fell victim to Iago’s manipulation. There is no right answer here; both analyses are equally valid.

Below are some phrases to use in a group discussion that will help you respond respectfully to different perspectives:

1. I’m not sure what you mean by that. Can you explain your view a bit more?
2. I’ve never heard of that before. Can you give me an example?
3. I can’t agree with your point because ...

Practice

Look at the image that follows and describe what you see in detail. You should write least five sentences.

