

Seminar Discussion Guidelines¹

FOR 081

Everyone:

- Never assume another's beliefs or views. Never assume agreement with your own.
- Seek out differences of opinion—they broaden everyone's thinking.
- Give encouragement and approval to others.

Listeners:

- Listen to everyone's ideas, even if you disagree.
- Even if you have a burning idea, make sure to let the person speaking finish before jumping in.
- If you don't understand a point, try to repeat it in your own words.
- Be willing to tolerate silence.

Speakers:

- Build on / work off of other people's comments.
- Challenge ideas, but not people.
- While it's easy to speak about personal experiences, be sure to have a relevant link to the texts for the day and/or the current discussion topic.
- If you do wish to broach a new topic, make sure everyone has weighed in BEFORE you shift topics, and let the group know you wish to do so.
- Once you speak your piece, try to let at least three other folks speak before you jump in again.

More guidelines for everyone:

- A discussion is not a debate – in a discussion, the purpose is not to defend a point of view, but to deepen one's understanding of the issues / topics being discussed.
- Differences in interpretation are welcomed and make our seminar more effective. We enlarge our own understanding when we have the opportunity to compare what we think with what others think.
- Listening, stating opinions with supporting reasons, inviting the contributions of others, and challenging (without attacking) are all encouraged skills.
- Our discussions will be genuine discussions – the professors have no commitment to leading you to a pre-ordained conclusion, our goal is for you to talk to each other rather than to us.
- After you pose your question, wait at least 7 seconds before fielding responses. Most of us need time to consider the question posed and plan a response before we voice our ideas publicly. Give everyone this time, which will allow everyone to participate thoughtfully in the discussion.
- Address each other by name, build on comments made by classmates and check-in with class before making a comment that jumps to a different topic.

¹ Used by permission from Diane Munroe, ES-401 instructor, Middlebury College, Middlebury, Vermont.

Leading Discussion

Leading discussion should be broadly viewed as an opportunity to lead class for the day. Thus, in addition to posing thought-provoking questions for students to respond to, your leadership role could include any number of other approaches for engaging your classmates and the day's readings. Consider, for example, whether using visual elements might aid discussion, or whether role-playing, debates, or brainstorming for ideas/responses on the board may lead to more enriching interactions among your classmates. Short 2-3 minutes writing exercises can also be used to allow individuals to "get oriented" to the topic and get their ideas flowing before sharing publicly to the class.

Discussion Questions

Productive discussions begin with engaging discussion points/questions. Consider first the aspects of the readings that interested you—perhaps because they were new, perhaps because it confirmed something you already knew, perhaps because it changed your mind, perhaps because you struggled to understand it. Consider also your classmates' discussion interests. Some level of controversy makes a discussion rich and challenges participants to support their positions with evidence. Too much controversy can make people uncomfortable though, and can limit their participation. Remember that in discussions, you are striving to understand the material better, not trying to come to a definitive answer. In fact, in many of our discussions, there simply won't be a right answer.

Avoid asking questions that have **yes/no** answers. Often this only requires a subtle change in your phrasing. For example, "Did you find this quote interesting?" becomes "What do you think this quote says about the author's view on...X.?" Have a list of more questions/discussion points than we are likely to have time to address so that you'll always be ready with a new question if the discussion starts to fade. On the other hand, if the discussion is going strong and is not simply rehashing the same ideas over and over, then let the discussion flow and don't move on to a new topic too quickly. If you don't get to all your questions, that's fine. That's also why it is a good idea to prioritize. If there is something that you think is critical to discuss, start the discussion there so you are sure to get to it.

Discussion Participation

Use your role as discussion leader to moderate the participation of the group. If you notice someone has not participated, gently remind everyone that you'd like to hear everyone's ideas. You might also consider whether you are rushing discussion questions and not providing some folks enough time to think before they respond (7 second rule – i.e. don't be afraid of silence and allow at least seven seconds before jumping back in!). If someone is dominating the discussion, you might "call on" (even if they're not raising hands) other students deliberately or gently remind the group, without naming names, that you'd like everyone to have a chance to participate.