Guidelines for Discussants

The responsibility of the class discussant is an important one. Depending on the effectiveness and effort of the day’s discussant, the 45 minutes devoted to class discussion can either be enlightening or agonizingly slow. Below are some tips to help ensure that the discussions you lead do not fall into the latter category.

1. **Comment on the readings.** This is an essential responsibility of the discussant. The readings constitute common ground for the entire class. The discussion should therefore revolve around them, although it need not concentrate solely on them.

2. **Avoid summaries.** The lectures are designed to describe the arguments and issues of the readings; there is no need to duplicate this task.

3. **Have a plan.** Know what you plan to say in advance, and organize your comments into coherent parts so that they are easy to follow.

4. **Compare.** Note the linkages between past readings and current ones. Did the insights from a previous reading help you understand a later article? Are there prior readings that make more sense in light of current ones? When readings contradict, which ones do you find most compelling?

5. **Evaluate.** What puzzles are identified by the author, and are they important? Did the author overlook an important issue that you think should have been addressed?

6. **Critique.** What problems did you have with the author’s approach to the topic, or with her conclusions? Does the research seem solid, or are there holes? Do you believe the conclusions? How could the research have been improved? Can you think of evidence that contradicts the author’s argument? Critiquing academic research can be difficult at first because all the readings will seem initially compelling. Over time, however, you will train your eye to be more skeptical of what it reads.

7. **Recommend.** What directions does the article suggest for future research? Where would you like to see the research go next? What do you wish the author had told you more (or less) about?

8. **Ask questions.** This is perhaps the most important element of the discussant’s job. *You need to ask questions to get the discussion started.* Don’t just ask “what do you think?” Instead, be more specific. Identify puzzles in the readings and ask other students to offer their own explanations. Make an argument and challenge the class to evaluate it. Or, locate issues that you don’t understand or know very little about and ask others to help you grasp them.