

STATISTICS IN THE REAL WORLD: DISCUSSION GUIDELINES¹
Jo Hardin Fall 2018

Goals for everyone

Much of our class time this semester will be devoted to class discussions. When you participate in any sort of discussion or meeting, you should have goals. What do you hope to get out of the experience? I suggest these goals:

- Learn something new from someone else.
- Discover some new way in which you have been wrong.
- Bring out the best in the other people in the room.

Here are some non-goals:

- Persuade someone else of your point of view.
- Share your expertise with the whole room.

These non-goals are good things when they happen in the natural course of discussion, but they should not be *goals*. They begin with the hidden assumption that you are right and others are not right, which is not necessarily a healthy assumption. Turn them around:

- Be persuaded of someone else's point of view.
- Share in someone else's expertise.

You don't have to agree with everyone. Identify areas of disagreement, and seek out common ground.

Preparing for the Discussion

When reading the text, keep the following questions in mind:

- What is the author's main thesis?
- How does the author support their thesis?
- Which arguments seem solid to you? Which seem problematic?

Take notes while reading. Then come to the class discussion and learn from everyone else.

Prepare a discussion question

Everyone is required to come up with a discussion question for every class reading. Post your question to the Sakai wiki **by midnight the night before**. (The discussion leader is exempted from this task.)

¹with thanks to Vin De Silva and Gizem Karaali for the suggestions herein

Taking Notes During Discussion

Do not expect to be taking extensive notes during the in-class discussions. Your attention should be on the ongoing conversation and your intellectual effort should be spent mostly on the ideas entertained by the group. You are also each individually responsible with making an effort to keep the conversation going in a constructive and productive direction. These tasks are all-consuming and do not leave much time for note-taking. The idea is that you are in the present and you are thinking and interacting.

Thus you may each have a piece of paper in front of you to jot down a few words here and there if and when it seems absolutely necessary, but other than that, you should not expect to take notes. In particular **students will NOT use a notepad, a laptop, or a different note-taking device.** If you are the summarizer for the day, it would be best for you to take notes on paper. If you truly prefer taking notes on a computer, you may do that only on your summarizing day.

Duties of the Discussion Team

The discussion team members have several tasks to focus on. They need to:

- **context** Set up the larger picture for the discussion. Provide outside information that was not available in the readings. Add the context to the day's Sakai wiki.
- **discussion** Prepare a list of discussion questions / topics. Lead the entire course discussion on the day's readings. Leading the discussion will involve three tasks:
 - Prepare a set of discussion questions in advance.
 - In consultation with the professor, determine a few possible paths through the questions for the day's discussion.
 - Facilitate a good conversation.
 - The discussion leader is required to make an appointment and come talk to me **no later than the day before** the discussion.
- **summary** Write a summary of the discussion (major ideas as well as interesting insight) within one week of the discussion. The report should **not** be written during the discussion. Despite being responsible for the content of the discussion, the summarizer should **aim to participate in the discussion in a natural way.**

Good discussion questions are those which lead to a good discussion. Questions with yes/no answers are usually not good questions. Questions which invite people to share their own experiences can be good, but ensure that students stay on track and make connections with the readings.

You should be prepared to step in from time to time. Redirect the conversation if it seems to be drifting; in particular ensure that students are not simply sharing opinions and experiences but are trying to connect these with the specific readings for the day. Introduce a new question when the previous one seems played out.

Duties of Other Students

Prepare a discussion question. Everyone is required to come up with a discussion question for every discussion. Post this on the appropriate Sakai wiki page. (The discussion team is exempt from this task.)

Be mindful of who is taking space in the discussion and who is not. Aim to work toward equity in this regard by moderating your own behavior.