

The Harkness Discussion & “Round Table” Guidelines

The Harkness Discussion is a method of conducting and evaluating group discussion. The teacher acts as little as possible, serving mostly as an observer. The students participate in the discussion as a team: ***this is not a competition.***

Discussion Expectations:

Everyone is expected to contribute in such ways as the following:

- organizing, leading
- summarizing, restating, clarifying
- offering examples from the text
- asking questions
- commenting or giving an opinion
- making a suggestion
- asking for clarification
- reacting to comments
- analyzing the text, a comment, or the discussion itself
- restarting the discussion
- filling in a hole
- arguing a point
- asking for new information
- asking for comments or reactions
- making connections with other texts, situations, or discussions

Assessment:

Students will be assessed on the following standards:

S - Collaborative Discussion	I do not add anything new to the discussion.	I participate several times during the discussion. I have knowledge of the topic being discussed.	I participate throughout the discussion. I can initiate and participate effectively in a collaborative discussion on various topics, building on others’ ideas and expressing my ideas clearly and persuasively.	Additionally, I can make original connections between topics.
------------------------------	--	---	---	---

H - Respect	I am mostly disrespectful	I am generally respectful of others.	I am respectful towards others.	Additionally, I help to ensure a respectful and safe learning environment.
-------------	---------------------------	--------------------------------------	--	--

During the Harkness discussion, the teacher may choose to simply sit and make notes on the dynamics of the discussion. The teacher may pause the discussion at various intervals for a “reality check” by asking the class to self-assess. How are we doing? What do we need to do differently during the next five or ten minutes to make this a better discussion. Alternatively, the teacher may choose to assign one or more students as process observers and ask them to give feedback to the group at specified intervals.

A discussion for which everyone would receive a 3 or 4 would look like this:

- The loud do not dominate; the shy are encouraged. Everyone is clearly understood.
- Everyone participates, and more or less equally.
- The pace allows for clarity and thoughtfulness, but not sleep.
- There is a sense of balance and order: focus in on one speaker and one idea at a time.
- There is an attempt to resolve questions and issues before moving on to new ones.
- Students are animated, sincere, and helpful.
- When the process is not working, the group adjusts. Those unhappy with the process say so.
- Students take risks and dig for new meanings.
- Students back up what they say with examples, quotations, etc.
- All students come well-prepared.
- The text [or document/resource], if there is one, is referred to often.

“Round Table” Guidelines

- **Listen carefully.**
- **Don’t address everything to the instructor.** Make eye contact with the person whose points you are addressing. Look *around*; let people know that they’re included.
- **Stick close to the text in discussion.** Keep the text/source open. When appropriate, be prepared to cite specifics in the language of the text/source to support, challenge or question. The discussion is not a test of memory.
- **Collaborate, don’t compete. It is not a debate, but a discussion.** Discussion is collaborative: multiple sides work toward shared understanding. Debate is oppositional: opposing sides try to prove each other wrong.
- **Take turns speaking.** It is OK to “pass” occasionally if asked directly to contribute.
- **Affirm comments made by other students.** Encourage others to clarify or expand ideas that might be foggy. Ask for more information or further explanation. Don’t hesitate to summarize. Discuss ideas rather than one another’s opinions.
- **Challenge *politely* if you disagree.** Let any student finish phrasing a question or developing an idea before you jump in. Clarify a difference of opinion first.
- **Be sure that the class is content with the exploration of one topic before heading off into new territory.** In moments of silence, determine whether the group is wrestling with an idea or passage, or whether to pursue a new line of inquiry. Ask each other: Can we summarize the discussion so far? Did we take it as far as it could go? Are we content?
- **You are responsible for the success of the discussion.** Prepare and participate thoughtfully. Don’t BS if you don’t know; admit it and move on.
- **If you’re not a reluctant participant, and suspect that you might have a dominant presence at the table, police your own frequency of involvement.** Don’t answer every question; don’t jump in at every opportunity. Pull your weight, but not everybody else’s.

“Round Table” Guidelines adapted from “*Some Thoughts About the Harkness Table*” by Ralph Sneed and Cindy Adams’ guidelines for Socratic Seminar