

## **How to Create good Discussion Questions for your Tutorial or Seminar**

- 1) Good discussion questions are not answered by "yes" or "no." Instead they lead to higher order thinking (analysis, synthesis, comparison, evaluation) about the work and the issues it raises.
- 2) Good discussion questions call for more than simply recalling facts or guessing what the teacher already wants to know, but are open-ended, leading to a variety of responses.
- 3) Good questions recognise that readers will have different perspectives and interpretations and such questions attempt to engage readers in dialogue with each other.
- 4) Good discussion questions depend on a careful reading of the text. They often cite particular scenes or passage and ask people to look at them closely and draw connections between these passages and the rest of the work.
- 5) Good discussion questions are simply and clearly stated. They do not need to be repeated or reworded to be understood.
- 6) Good discussion questions are useful to the students. Good questions can help to clarify passages or issues students may find difficult. They help students understand cultural differences that influence their reading. They invite personal responses and connections.
- 7) Good discussion questions make (and challenge) connections between the text at issue and other works, and the themes and issues of the course.
- 8) Ask small, detailed questions (like "what's the argument for this conclusion?") before large, abstract questions (like "how does this compare with what so-and-so said?").
- 9) Ask interpretative questions (like "what does the author mean here?") before evaluative questions (like "is the author right about this?"). Let your earlier questions lay a foundation for your later questions.
- 10) Be flexible about your list of questions. If the discussion is going well, go with the flow, but always be ready to bring it back into line when it wanders away from the discipline, or becomes pointless.
- 11) Be respectful and appreciative at all times, but don't be afraid to disagree with a comment. At the same time, try to avoid getting into a 2-way argument. Be ready to ask, "What do other people think about this?"

## How to Ensure that your Discussion/Tutorial/Seminar is Effective

- 1) Don't assume that discussions lead themselves, or that your fascinating subject matter guarantees success.
- 2) Do not simply ask questions and hope that someone answers them.
- 3) Plan the discussion. What topics do you want to cover? In what order? What will you do if nobody says anything?
- 4) Use your own experience in good and bad discussions as a guide.
- 5) What tends to silence people? What kinds of questions are intimidating, off-putting, unanswerable, patronizing? What kinds invite good discussion? How do you build on previous comments and help the class to do so?
- 6) You need not have answers to every question you raise, but you should raise good questions, know where in the text to look for answers, and have a plan for leading a discussion that might discover answers.
- 7) Don't limit the discussion to questions on which you have answers. Use the discussion as an occasion to inquire jointly with other prepared students into questions you find interesting and important.
- 8) Be creative! Do something different. Make it interesting. Use small groups, use the board, use a computer, use props, and use dramatization. Use your imagination. There's lots of room for creativity in this assignment. (Try to make sure that your innovations enhance, or at least don't detract from, the content.)
- 9) It's hard to discuss conclusions, but it's easy (and fun and useful) to discuss arguments for conclusions.
- 10) You don't have to be experts who lecture or who have all the answers. If after a while you feel under pressure to expound or expatiate, then something has gone wrong. Back out of it rather than give in to it. This should be a discussion.
- 11) Remember all the bad discussions you've had to sit through. Don't repeat their mistakes!
- 12) In both the presentation and discussion portions of the hour, address the class, not me.
- 13) The presentation and discussion slots will be filled first-come first-served. Warning! Think ahead and select early, because you will want time to prepare. You may also want to present in one week rather than another based on our reading for that week or your workload for other courses.
- 14) I will not instantly bail out a bad discussion. There is some instruction in living with the consequences of poor preparation, backing out of a bad question, or dealing spontaneously with a tired or unmotivated class. I will try not to intervene unless I think we have already taken the benefit of that instruction and are wasting time.
- 15) Make a few notes during the discussion, so that you can competently summarize what has been said at the end of the seminar.