

# How to be a Good Discussant

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1. Your oath is that of the physicians down on Foothills Campus: do no harm.
2. Your role as a discussant is to understand your colleague's goal for the paper, to assess how, in some small way, you might be able to help them move closer to that goal, and to communicate this to them. This is what Hegel called *immanent critique* (actually, I have no idea if Hegel said this, but I'm pretty sure the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is a bunch of immanent critiques, and anyway, it's a good idea even if our incomprehensible German friend never said it). You want to think your way into the author's world, take a look around, and make some suggestions from within that world about how to make things even better.
3. The standard advice is keep / throw away / improve – describe one thing the author should definitely keep, one thing the author should discard, and one thing the author should improve. As long as you're not a jerk about the “throw away” part, this is pretty good advice.
4. Never, ever punch down. If you're a PhD student and you're discussing an MA student's paper, you're in a position of real power, so don't use it for evil. As for punching up, well, *audentes fortuna iuvat*, but it takes some skill to ride the line between providing useful but intense critical feedback to your distinguished colleagues and just being annoying. So proceed with caution.
5. Most of the papers that you'll be asked to discuss won't be very good. There are institutional reasons for this: first, the papers you're discussing are drafts, and you're used to reading published articles, so the drafts are bound to be a bit of a letdown. Second, when you're at the beginning of your career, you're unlikely to be asked to be a discussant for, say, the latest paper by André Blais. Incidentally, this means that junior scholars tend to be discussants for *very* junior scholars – the blind leading the blind! – which makes it all the more important that you learn how to do no harm as quickly as possible.

6. Try to index your discussant remarks to how bad the paper is: if there are lots of problems, focus on the biggest problems and ignore the rest. Avoid the “kitchen sink” critique (“unfortunately I think the theory is incoherent and the empirics are totally underdeveloped and the literature review is inadequate...and there are also typos on page four”).
7. It’s not about you. This is hard to remember, because you’re at the front of the room talking and everyone is looking at you, but it’s really not about you. So sure, throw in a joke to keep things fun, but try to stay focused on doing your job.
8. For some reason, there’s a tradition in our discipline where discussants start things off by summarizing each paper – the papers we just heard about from the authors ten minutes ago. This is bizarre and you should never do it. (There is one exception: if the author’s presentation was unclear about something really important and central in the paper, you might help the author out by gently clarifying the argument in your comments so that your audience better understands the value of the paper).
9. As a graduate student you’re likely to hear dramatic stories about how so-and-so tore so-and-so a new a\*\*hole in his discussant remarks. It’s important for you to know that these stories are mostly not true – and when they *are* true, they tend to involve (a) two very established scholars going at each other, clash-of-the-titans style, or (b) some guy who has heard that the other guy has been talking trash about the first guy behind the first guy’s back for years, and has decided that this is the appropriate moment for the first guy to show the second guy what a total idiot the second guy actually is – or in other words, what we might generally call “personal issues.” These stories generally aren’t very funny and they make academic conferences seem like MMA, so try not to tell them, and for god’s sake, never be that guy.
10. Bonus tip for non-discussants. You’re going to hear some really great talks in your life, talks that remind you of what’s possible in social science and inspire you to sprint back to your office and get down to work. But you’re also going to attend lots of terrible talks. And you’re going to be tempted to think to yourself, “ok, this is useless, so I’ll just spend the next twenty minutes daydreaming about the Toronto Maple Leafs.” If you do that once, you’ll probably survive, but if you do it consistently, your work will suffer and you’ll turn into a jerk. When you’re at a bad talk, force yourself to find one thing that’s interesting and useful – a concept, a method, a factoid, anything

– and then express gratitude to the gods of academia that you're sitting here in this talk learning something interesting rather than, you know, working at the coalface like your great-grandfather did.