

GUIDELINES FOR RESPONDENTS TO PAPERS

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The primary objective of responding to a paper or presentation is two-fold: 1) to assist the presenter with constructive criticism so that they might thereby improve their paper or project; and 2) to articulate issues and questions that will generate discussion.

1. *Articulate in your own words what you understand to be the paper's primary thesis, including what you think its significance is or might be.* You should do this in no more than 3-5 sentences. If there is a thesis statement that you wish to highlight by quoting, that is fine, but that is not a substitute for putting it in your own words; you must still interpret that thesis statement. (If the thesis is not clear, articulate what you think the general topic is, and then say that you are not sure what the central thesis is.) *Do not summarize the contents of the paper* (unless this has been specifically requested because the rest of the group did not have access to the paper).
2. *Identify the strengths of the paper.* If it's a very strong paper and you find yourself listing more than a half dozen, then limit yourself to the ones that you think are most important to lift up for the group (e.g., ones that get at issues central to the themes of the seminar, ones that you think fulfill the assignment particularly well). If you can find only one strength, then name only one—don't try to force it. For each strength you name, you must give a reason why you think it's a strength. Do not engage in unnecessary or (even worse) insincere flattery.
3. *Identify the weaknesses of the paper.* Your focus here should not be on very small things (e.g. "incorrect spelling of an author's name in note # 2"), but on things that characterize the paper or major sections of the paper (if the author has used inappropriate bibliographic citation throughout, that deserves comment). As with rule #2, any weakness you name should be supported by an argument or examples explaining why you think it's a weakness.
4. *Wherever possible, make constructive and concrete suggestions about how the paper might be improved.* Here you will most likely focus on the paper's weaknesses, but you need not limit your comments to weaknesses. You may also see ways that the author can build on the paper's already existing strengths.
5. *Highlight anything in the substance of the paper that you find to be especially compelling, illuminating or convincing,* as well as points of agreement between yourself and the author of the paper.
6. *Articulate points that you found unconvincing or with which you disagree and, as always, say why.* If you *can't* say why, don't mention it.
7. *Articulate questions.* Questions may serve different purposes. Here are a few examples:
 - a. They may enable you to generate material for discussion that you think will be of general interest to the group.
 - b. They may enable the author (and the group) to see the same issues from another, perhaps better, angle and thus assist the author in improving the paper.

- c. They may signal to the author certain issues or subtopics that are either unclear (and that s/he previously thought were clear) or that need elaboration in order to become cogent and persuasive to future readers.
- 8. *Do not make generalizations about the person (or even the person's academic work) drawn from the paper.* In other words, your job is to critique the paper, not the person.
- 9. *All critical comments—both positive and negative—should use language appropriate to academic discourse and be as substantive and specific as possible.*
 - a. Bad: “Your first example was stupid.”
 - b. Good: “Your first example did not adequately illustrate your point, because....”
- 10. *Respect the time limit, and be deliberate about using the time you are allotted,* so as to be as effective as possible in relation to the primary objective articulated above.