The Harkness Discussion & “Round Table” Guidelines

The Harkness Discussion is a method of conducting and evaluating group discussion which was developed at Phillips Exeter Academy. 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**. 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

Since this is a team effort, there will be a team grade. The whole class will get the same grade, with two exceptions: students who do not participate at all will be marked down; other students who perform truly exceptional group-benefit feats – for example by “saving” or immensely uplifting a discussion that is going bad – will be eligible for independent work credit.

A discussion for which everyone would receive an “A” would look like this:

- 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.
- There is a clear sense of what the group has covered and how.
- The loud do not dominate; the shy are encouraged. Everyone is clearly understood.
- Students are animated, sincere, and helpful.
- The conversation is lively.
- 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.

The class will earn a “B” by doing most of the things on this list, a “C” by doing only half of what’s on the list (half the class is cruising), and a “D” by doing less than half (everyone is cruising.)

During the Harkness discussion, the teacher may choose to simply sit and make notes on the dynamics of the discussion, perhaps by using the list above as a rubric. It is often helpful to pause the discussion at ten or fifteen minute intervals for a “reality check.” The teacher may wish to project a transparency of the rubric onto the board and ask the class to self-assess. How are we doing? What do we need to do differently during the next 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.
The Harkness Discussion & “Round Table” Guidelines

“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 the table; let people know that they’re included. Use names to focus interaction.
● 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.
● Don’t raise hands; 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 Sneeden and Cindy Adams’ guidelines for Socratic Seminar