

How to be a good discussant

Adeline Lo, Jonathan Renshon

October 6, 2022

1 Overview

Where discussant opportunities exist in workshops, graduate students should sign up early to comment for speakers who work in their area of specialty. This is an opportunity to engage deeply with work-in-progress in your area, make an impact on research in the field, and make a good impression on a scholar in your field. Plan to spend a fair amount of time reading and rereading the paper as you prepare your comments; additional research might also be required. Early on, it makes sense to write out your comments—as you develop more experience, you may end up just having some notes for the oral presentation.

The comments you make during workshop should help spark discussion and improve the paper. An ideal set of comments focuses on constructive feedback. Start by highlighting some of the strengths of the paper, insights you thought were particularly innovative, methods or data you thought were particularly interesting, or important contributions to the literature. Then consider some problems you found with the paper (e.g., some concept or discussion was unclear, the author could relate this to work by X, the empirics did not match the theory, some aspect of the empirics was not compelling). Finally, try to come up with ways that the author might address some or all of those problems, either by leveraging their empirics differently or by collecting or using additional data sources you might be aware of. *The ideal comment should be an effort to help improve research, not just an exercise in identifying weaknesses.* Here's what you're expected to come up with:

1. A 5-10 minute 'mini-talk' following the author's presentation
⇒ in some workshops or subfields, norms may include slides. Check with faculty coordinator.
2. Written comments to send to the author following the workshop. These comments can be more expansive and include the more nit-picky things you don't want to bombard them with during your presentation.

Advice in this guide is geared towards discussing papers in department workshops but translates easily to serving as a discussant at conferences.

2 Verbal Comments During Seminar

- One common set of suggestions focuses on beginning your comments by **summarizing the strengths and contributions** of the piece as you see it. Be specific if you do that, as one way to think about this is that you are giving them constructive advice on how to improve the “front-end” of their paper.
⇒ Whether or not you summarize is related to norms in a given venue. Check with workshop coordinator if you're unsure.
- The bulk of your comments ought to be in the form of identifying potential issues and providing possible solutions; i.e., they should be constructive. One without the other is not particularly helpful.
- Focus on 2-3 big points. If you really go into detail on identifying issues, thinking through implications and solutions, then even 3 points will stretch a 10 minute limit.
- You have several goals here: obviously you want to do a good job and show off your skills, but a broader and more important goal is to generate a **reputation** for yourself as somebody who takes other peoples' work seriously and improves it through thoughtful comments and suggestions.

- *Avoid opinions*: whether or not you liked it, for example, is much less important than what it does well (or not), what contribution it's making and how it can be improved.
- If you are nervous at all, we highly recommend you put your comments together as early as possible and schedule time to talk with faculty (the workshop coordinator is an obvious candidate) before presenting them formally.

3 Suggestions for Questions/Topics

Finally, some ideas for questions that might guide you if you're reading a paper and stuck about what to talk about or discuss:

Overall framing and motivation:

- What is the argument? Why is it important?
- To what literature does it contribute and how?
- Overall, what is the motivation (or puzzle) that sets the stage for author's argument? Is it empirical, theoretical, some combination, etc.
- What is the contribution that the paper claims? Does it match what we learn from the theory/empirics?

Theory:

- What concepts are introduced and are they defined precisely?
- Is the theory sound?
- What are the assumptions?
- Do the propositions follow logically from the assumptions?
- Do the hypotheses follow logically from the propositions and the theory/argument?
- What is the causal argument being made, and what mechanism drives the relationship between the IV and the DV?

Empirics and Implications:

- Are the IV and DV operationalized appropriately?
- Do the empirical tests match the theory?
- What is the counterfactual in the empirical design? Does it match counterfactual in the theory?
- If there is an object of empirical interest, is it causal or predictive in nature? (e.g., it might be a causal effect that we want to identify, or an outcome we want to predict)
 - ⇒ is the empirical strategy appropriate towards that goal? (are we predicting things and assessing prediction, when we want to get a causal effect or vice versa?)
- Do the different empirical tests overlap or test different parts of the theory? Are they complementary? If so, how?
- Are there other empirical tests that might have been more appropriate?
- Can you think of other implications that result from the theory that are not tested but could be? (sometimes these are good robustness checks or placebo checks)
- Are methods used appropriate to the questions being asked? If so, how?
- How serious are any threats to causal inference?
- What are implications of the theory on downstream (perhaps policy) outcomes? Can you help flesh those out if they aren't clear already?