

Round Table Expectations for the Harkness Discussion

adapted from "Some Thoughts About the Harkness Table" by Ralph Sneed and Cindy Adams' guidelines for Socratic Seminar

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

- Guidelines for the Discussion

- **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 open. When appropriate, be prepared to cite specifics in the language of the text 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.