

# How to Contribute to a Great Books Discussion: A Student's Perspective

By *Sebastian Griego*

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Great Books is a class that requires discussion between students. The class would simply not work if it was a lecture by the professor. The issue many new students face is they do not know how to best contribute to a Seminar discussion. Hopefully, this guide will help relieve doubts from the minds of those students.

## Things to do:

1. Refer back to a point someone else made.
2. Read passages from the text when you contribute.
3. Correct others if they do not realize they are mistaken
4. Make connections to previous authors.
5. Be willing to be wrong. You're paying a lot of money for valid criticism.
6. Focus only on what the text says. Avoid speculating about what the author might think.
7. Talk to your fellow students outside of class.
8. Be confident.
9. Follow the conversation. Do not overthink about how you will contribute to the extent that you lose focus on the conversation.
10. Say something substantial that will contribute to the conversation

You can rarely go wrong if you do these things. They are all good general rules to keep in the back of your mind. Students will find that the discussions feel most productive when these rules are kept in mind.

## Goals for the discussion:

1. Have an intelligent conversation with intelligent people.

2. Understand the text on its own terms.
3. Understand how the text contributes to the Great conversation.
4. Have a fun and heuristic experience.
5. Find new quotes that you can include in your essays

The class discussion serves a purpose. You likely will not be able to get all of these things out of a single class, but you should be able to get something out of every class. Next, here are some quotes from great Seminar students about how they personally like to contribute in discussions:

"I contribute when I believe I've found a key passage....Or when there is one I like. I also am more talkative when I like the authors and readings"

"I contribute when I feel very passionate about something and engaged with the text"

"I tend to talk most in class whenever I see the need to bring up another perspective or emphasize a point that's gone overlooked. I also speak when I'm passionate about something or the professor is wrong"

"I contribute when I have a relevant quote to what someone says"

"I bring up quotes that I don't know how to interpret but seem important"

"I like getting into verbal bouts and disagreeing with people"

"I try to be the first to speak"

"I only contribute when the professor overlooks me"

"I feel comfortable as a quiet student because I have a good understanding of the text"

All of these people were excellent Seminar students who contributed greatly to a rich discussion. There is no single correct way to be a valuable member of the discussion. Everyone in the class benefits from a productive Socratic discussion.

## SEMINAR DISCUSSANTS: TYPES AND TIPS

by Serah Hodson

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In the fall semester of 2021, my section of Great Books III was observed to be a particularly good one. "Good" here means that most students contributed, most contributions were meaningful, and everyone seemed to get something from the time we spent together. In an effort to memorialize and pass on some of this in-class genius, I will discuss some of the conversational dynamics that my classmates and I observed, and attempt to distill from these some tips and tricks for future discussants in any seminar setting. Some students fit one type exclusively; many more may find that their in-class presence is a combination of two or more. At any rate, it is my hope to contribute to a heuristic educational experience for you, the reader.

### DISCUSSANT TYPES

Some students are very talkative in class. Often, this is welcome. There are (at least) three subtypes of talkative students: the Questioner and the Fight-me. The Questioner, as may be guessed, asks a lot of questions. The Fight-me tends to play devil's advocate, questioning everything and everyone. This may be an effort to get at the truth, to piss people off, or a little of both.

The Questioner is a role best held by someone who is confident enough to be habitually wrong, or at least more explicitly confused than the rest of the class. The Questioner often "takes one for the team" by owning the confusion that other students feel but won't vocalize. At other times, the Questioner spurs discussion by making connections or raising queries that other students didn't think of or felt were out of place. The Questioner sparks, maintains, and cross-examines trains of discussion, filling an important void in the class environment.

The Fight-me enjoys raising any point—whether they agree or disagree with it is irrelevant—which contradicts a point made by someone else. Like the Questioner, the Fight-me is often someone who is confident enough to withstand being publicly wrong. Unlike the Questioner, the Fight-me is motivated less by personal curiosity and more by a desire to argue. This is not necessarily because they enjoy others' embarrassment; the

Fight-me, whether intentionally or unintentionally, often helps the class find an aspect of something which they had not considered or forces an existing point to become better supported.

Other, and perhaps a larger proportion of, students tend to talk a lot less. This is not necessarily indicative of their involvement or performance in the class, although students are generally encouraged to contribute to in-class discussions. Non-talkative subtypes include: the Nerves, the Gum-chewer, the Manners, and the Sage.

The Nerves worries about saying the wrong thing, so they generally stay silent. The Nerves is the functional opposite of the Questioner; where the Questioner pipes up regardless of how they might be perceived, the Nerves thinks primarily of others' perception, and fears being perceived as slow or out of sync with the rest of the class. There may be several Nerveses in any given class, so if you feel called out, know that you are not alone. This is not your final form. Whenever you're ready, know that there is always time to change.

The Manners may overlap with the Nerves, but the defining focus of the Manners is less on others' perception of their competency in the class, and more on how others perceive their personality and role in the social group. The Manners is concerned with how the discussion, especially their own contribution, makes others feel. The Manners may also be accurately nicknamed, "The Mom." If you think you might be a Manners, remember that attacking ideas is not the same as attacking people, and that sometimes talking over your classmates is a way to save them from themselves.

The Sage is almost completely mute at all times. When they speak, they are not very loud. As a matter of fact, when they speak, sometimes it takes you a second to realize they are speaking at all. Once you do realize it, however, you pay very close attention. The Sage is perceived as having information that the rest of the class doesn't know. There's an unspoken acknowledgement that, unlike the Nerves and Manners, the Sage is not anxious or hesitant. In fact, the Sage is following every word carefully, making a mental note of every strength, every

weakness... If the Sage contributes to the class discussion, their classmates know the contribution carries the weight of consideration and reflection. When they don't contribute, their classmates know it's because whatever insight the Sage could have shared is simply too powerful for the rest of them to grasp, and the Sage alone must carry the burden of that knowledge.

Many more students fall somewhere between talkative and non-talkative. One type of student that falls into this category is the Selective. The Selective falls somewhere in between the Sage and the Questioner, being mentally engaged but speaking only sometimes. This student has a finger to the pulse of the conversation. They know exactly the role they play in the class and may feel a pretentiousness as a result of their ability to gauge when and what is best (in their opinion) to contribute. They may decline to speak when they feel an observation or answer is too easy to give, and often wait until a need is especially obvious or difficult to meet before they attempt to fill it. Like some of the non-talkative types, the Selective may be concerned with how they're perceived by the class, but unlike them, the concern is not strong enough to render them completely silent. The Selective may have the class' respect, and even the professor's, due to the fact that they seem to contribute according to their own rules rather than others' preferences.

#### DISCUSSION TIPS

So, how do you decide when to contribute to in-class discussions? First, pay attention to the current discussion. Do you understand what is being discussed? Do you know which quotes are being used? Do you understand them? Second, decide whether you agree or disagree (if relevant) with what is presently being said. Try to determine why. Allow this to change your mind or reinforce your initial belief, as applicable. Third, if you agree, try to find (and share) an angle which has not been brought up yet. If you disagree, raise your objection, with textual evidence to support it. Remember to state the page number.

If you want to contribute more, consider taking leaves out of the books of some of the

discussant types mentioned above. And regardless of the types you do or don't relate to, some general tips are as follows:

- 1) Add as you feel comfortable. Raise questions when you have them. Add your personal experiences when they relate to the text. Are you loud? Use it to get discussions rolling on slow days. Are you quiet? Know that when you do speak, your classmates will be shocked into paying attention.
- 2) Listen to your classmates. Add to their points. Challenge them when you disagree (that's the only way to get closer to the truth). Be ready to define terms or give page numbers when someone could use the help.
- 3) Learn to separate your feelings of proficiency in this one class from your feelings of proficiency in academics. And your feelings of proficiency in general. And your feelings regarding your likeability. It's about the pursuit of knowledge, not the individual egos which are in pursuit.
- 4) Talk to your classmates outside of class, as well as in it. Talk to them before class starts, and after it ends, and over text in a class group chat. Send each other sample essays and relevant memes. It's the way education should be done.
- 5) Don't be afraid to change the subject. Discussion always tends to circle back around.
- 6) Don't be afraid to talk over people, sometimes. As a rule, talk over the ones who talk over others.
- 7) If you disagree with something, ask yourself, "Why?" Learn to recognize your own biases as well as you (will learn to) recognize others'. Understand, don't judge.
- 8) Have fun. Seriously. If your class isn't fun for you, figure out why. And then figure out how to make it fun. Regardless of how well you measure up to your professor's expectations, you will learn if you want to learn—even if what you learn isn't the same as what was in the syllabus.