

Notes for Political Science Graduate Students: How to Be a Good Conference Discussant

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This guide is written for graduate students learning the art of serving as a conference discussant. When workshops allow students to take on this role, volunteer early for papers related to your area of expertise. It is a valuable opportunity to learn from work in progress, contribute to research in your field, help another scholar strengthen a project, and demonstrate your analytical skills. More importantly, doing the job well can build your reputation as someone who engages seriously with other scholars' work and improves it through careful comments and practical suggestions. Good comments require time: read the paper more than once, follow up on relevant literature or evidence when necessary, and begin preparing well before the event. Early in graduate school, writing out the discussion can help; with experience, a carefully organized set of notes may be sufficient. Learning to be a good discussant—and later a good reviewer—will also make you more perceptive about the strengths and weaknesses of your own research.

In a nutshell, a discussant should briefly explain the paper's larger importance and reconstruct its argument in your own words. Begin with specific strengths, such as an original insight, valuable data, an inventive method, or an important contribution. Then concentrate on two or three consequential problems and suggest realistic ways to address them, perhaps by clarifying the argument, connecting it to other literature, using the existing evidence differently, or drawing on additional data. Reserve minor corrections for written notes, explain why each major comment matters, and leave room for discussion. At its best, a discussant does more than identify weaknesses: they help the author and audience see the paper—and perhaps the broader research question—in a more productive way.

What the discussant is trying to do

A discussant has three jobs: explain the paper clearly to the room, identify the few issues that most affect its contribution, and start a useful conversation. The goal is not to display how many faults you found. By the end, the audience should understand the paper better and the author should have a clearer sense of what to do next.

When graduate students may volunteer, choose papers close enough to your interests that you can engage seriously with the argument. Done well, the assignment deepens your knowledge of a literature and builds a reputation for taking other people's work seriously. Avoid flattery and avoid announcing whether you "liked" the paper; describe what it accomplishes, where the claim is vulnerable, and how it could improve. (Lo and Renshon 2022)

Prepare over several sittings

First reading	Reconstruct the question, answer, mechanism, evidence, contribution, intended audience, and most important result. Record specific strengths as carefully as problems.
Second reading	Test the links among motivation, concepts, assumptions, hypotheses, measures, design, evidence, and conclusions. Mark passages, figures, and tables you may cite.
After a pause	Ask what persuaded you, what would persuade you further, whether the paper changes how you see the larger question, and where the literature should go.
Final pass	Rank possible comments by consequence and feasibility. Choose two or three. Draft the talk, rehearse with a timer, and cut material rather than speaking faster.

Read and reread. A small amount of additional research can help verify a claim, locate a useful comparison, identify an existing measure, or suggest a feasible data source. Do only the research needed to understand the manuscript or support a credible suggestion; you are not writing a rival paper. If you are inexperienced, write the comments out early. With practice, a disciplined outline may be enough. If you are unsure about substance or tone, ask a faculty member or workshop coordinator to read the comments before the session. (Blattman 2010; Lo and Renshon 2022)

Before you begin making slides

Write a one-page map of the paper:

- the motivating puzzle;
- the answer in one sentence;
- why the answer matters;
- the proposed mechanism;
- the evidence carrying the most weight;
- the claimed contribution;
- the strongest feature to preserve;
- the main vulnerability;
- one feasible path forward; and
- a connection to another paper or literature.

Your oral summary should be brief and organized in your own way, not a compressed replay of the presentation. Begin with the stakes; the importance of the paper may not be obvious to everyone in the room.

Questions to use while reading

This is a preparation checklist, not an agenda for the talk. Use it to discover the two or three matters that deserve public attention. The questions below condense the diagnostic proposed by Lo and Renshon.

Framing and contribution

- What is the paper's argument? Why is it important?
- Which literature or literatures does it enter, and what does it add?
- What motivates the argument: an empirical puzzle, a theoretical puzzle, or both?
- What contribution does the paper claim? Does that claim match what the theory and evidence actually teach us?
- Is the most valuable contribution different from the one emphasized in the introduction?

Theory

- Are the central concepts defined precisely enough to carry the argument?
- Is the argument internally coherent?
- What assumptions does it require, and are they plausible?
- Do the propositions follow from the assumptions?
- Do the hypotheses follow from the propositions and broader argument?
- What causal relationship is proposed? What mechanism connects the explanatory variable to the outcome?
- What additional observable implications follow from the theory?

Evidence and research design

- Do the measures represent the explanatory and outcome concepts appropriately?
- Do the tests correspond to the theoretical claims they are supposed to evaluate?
- What counterfactual is built into the design? Is it the counterfactual implied by the theory?
- Is the empirical goal causal identification, prediction, description, interpretation, or a combination?
- Does the empirical strategy fit that goal? Is a predictive exercise being used for a causal claim, or vice versa?
- Do the tests repeat one another, or do they examine different parts of the argument? If they are complementary, how?
- Would another test be better suited to the claim?
- Could additional implications be examined through placebo tests, robustness checks, new cases, or different uses of the existing evidence?
- Are the methods appropriate for the question? Explain why; do not merely name a preferred method.
- Which threat to inference matters most for the paper's conclusion?
- What downstream or policy implications follow? Could they be stated or tested more directly?

Begin your notes with at least one specific strength: an original idea, a useful data source, a creative design, a clear theoretical distinction, an important result, or a contribution that should be more prominent. This is not ceremonial praise. Telling the author what works helps identify what should survive revision and clarifies what your later criticism is trying to protect.

Choose comments by consequence, not quantity

Two developed comments are usually more useful than five shallow ones. After your strongest observations, adding weaker points can lower the overall quality of the discussion. Keep minor matters for written notes. (Blattman 2010; Lo and Renshon 2022)

For each major comment, answer three questions:

1. **What is the issue?** Identify the relevant claim, assumption, measure, comparison, or result precisely and fairly.
2. **Why does it matter?** Explain whether it changes the interpretation, scope, identification, contribution, or policy implication. Never assume the consequence is self-evident.
3. **What could the author do?** Offer one or more realistic responses: clarify, narrow, reframe, use the evidence differently, add a test, examine another case, seek another data source, explore heterogeneity, or revise the claim.

A problem without a possible response can be discouraging; a response without a clearly stated problem can sound arbitrary. The useful comment joins diagnosis and remedy while explaining what would be learned from the revision.

What belongs in the room, and what belongs in writing

Say in the room	Put in written notes
A problem that changes the main inference or contribution	Typos, wording, citation additions, and local clarifications
A reframing that helps the audience see the project differently	Secondary checks that do not change the central conclusion
A connection across papers that can generate discussion	Detailed coding or methodological questions requiring private exchange
A feasible suggestion the author can act on	Page-specific edits and optional extensions

Example for a nine-minute discussion

Time	Purpose	What to do
0:00–0:45	Stakes	Name the larger question and why the answer matters.
0:45–1:30	Reconstruction	State the question, answer, logic, and contribution in your own structure.
1:30–2:00	Strength	Identify one feature worth preserving or foregrounding.
2:00–7:30	Two major comments	For each: issue, consequence, and possible response.
7:30–8:30	Reframing or connection	Link the paper to the panel, a wider literature, or an implication not yet developed.
8:30–9:00	Questions	End with one or two questions the author and audience can discuss.

Adjust the schedule to the chair's instructions. In a workshop where everyone has read the paper, even the short reconstruction may be unnecessary. At a conference, it often helps the audience follow your comments.

For a multi-paper panel, shorten the paper-by-paper summaries and reserve time for synthesis. If the papers are connected, begin by explaining the panel's collective contribution. Give every paper fair attention, but avoid repeating the same generic criticism. When an issue cuts across several papers, identify it once and explain how it operates differently in each project.

Slides

Check the venue's norms before preparing a deck. Slides are welcome on most occasions, but practices vary. For example, PolMeth LATAM, where authors do not present their papers, discourages discussants from using slides. At other venues, such as PolMeth US, not using slides would be unusual. Slides are most useful when they clarify a research design, illustrate a causal argument, compare papers, or make the structure of the major comments easier to follow.

For one paper, five slides are usually enough:

1. paper title and your one-sentence takeaway;
2. question, answer, and contribution;
3. one specific feature the paper does especially well;
4. major comment one; and
5. major comment two, followed by questions for the room.

Use titles that state claims. "Measurement" tells the audience almost nothing; "The proxy measures exposure more directly than the proposed concept" tells them the point. Give each slide one job. Keep the evidence needed for that job and remove the rest. Use readable type (about 24 points or larger for body text), cite the relevant page, figure, or table, and avoid screenshots of dense regression output. Use the same layout for both major comments so the sequence is easy to recognize. Storyboard the slide titles before opening presentation software; if the titles do not tell a coherent story, revise the argument. Carry a PDF backup.

Delivery

Speak as a colleague, not as a judge. Use a short anecdote, story, or personal observation when it helps explain the intellectual point. Say explicitly why each comment matters and what the audience learns from it. A technical objection becomes useful only when listeners understand whether it changes the claim, its scope, its credibility, or its implications. Look for a reframing or new idea, not only another robustness check. Ask what convinced you, what would convince you further, whether the paper changes a larger question, and where the field should go.

Adapt in real time. If the presenter answers a concern before you speak, acknowledge the clarification, decide whether it resolves the issue, and move to the implication or the next point. Do not continue reading a prepared criticism after its premise has changed.

Common failures

- summarizing the whole paper again;
- presenting your own research instead;
- treating one method as the only legitimate method;
- spending public time on typos and citations;
- identifying problems without possible responses;
- reading dense slides or a script;
- using humor at the author's expense;
- announcing that you liked or disliked the paper;
- running over time; and
- ending with criticism but no priority, remedy, or question.

After the session

Send the author written comments soon while the conversation is fresh. The memo can be more expansive than the oral discussion and may include:

- a short statement of the argument and contribution as you understood them;
- the two or three major comments, with fuller reasoning and citations;
- suggested readings, cases, measures, tests, or data sources;
- smaller comments organized by section or page; and
- a closing note about what you found most promising.

If a better idea emerged during the discussion, add it. Preserve the reasoning behind your suggestions rather than sending a list of objections. (Lo and Renshon 2022)

Last check before the panel

- I confirmed the format, time limit, and local norms about slides and summaries.
- I read the paper more than once.
- I can state the question, answer, mechanism, evidence, and contribution concisely.
- I identify at least one specific strength.
- I make no more than two or three major comments.
- Each comment states the issue, why it matters, and a possible response.
- I distinguish causal, predictive, descriptive, and interpretive goals correctly.
- I connect the paper to the panel or a broader literature.
- I end with questions that invite discussion.
- My slides, if any, use claim-based titles and readable type.
- I cite pages, figures, or tables where precision matters.
- I rehearsed aloud and finish with time to spare.
- My detailed written notes are ready to send.
- I coordinated with the chair and any co-discussant.
- I will arrive or log in early and am ready to help if logistics fail.
- My tone is specific, constructive, and collegial.

Recommended readings

- **Chris Blattman, “The Discussant’s Art” (2010).** Brief and especially useful on prioritization, constructive comments, delivery, and reframing. <https://chrisblattman.com/blog/2010/02/22/the-discussants-art/>
- **Adeline Lo and Jonathan Renshon, “How to Be a Good Discussant” (2022).** Covers preparation, oral and written comments, and diagnostic questions for theory and evidence. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a71eff78dd0418fa3dcb980/t/633f0b267fde251ae304a658/1665076006838/How_to_be_a_discussant.pdf
- **Gregory Huber, “How to Present Your Work at Conferences.”** A short Yale handout on core messages, storyboarding, practice, and interaction. <https://huber.research.yale.edu/materials/HowToPresentAtConferences.pdf>
- **American Political Science Association, “Serving as a Discussant.”** See the APSA conference instruction guide for expectations about summaries, evaluation, synthesis, equal time, and questions. <https://connect.apsanet.org/apsa2022/wp-content/uploads/sites/74/2022/08/In-Person-2022-APSA-Instruction-Guide-Final-2.pdf>
- **Midwest Political Science Association, “Discussant Guidelines.”** Practical advice about papers, co-discussants, hybrid participation, feedback, and an absent chair. <https://www.mpsanet.org/conference/presenter-resources/discussant-guidelines/>