

Questions to Get Group Discussions Going (098 and 150)

QUESTIONS FOR WRITERS:

- What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of this paper?
- What do you want to achieve with this paper? What's your purpose in writing it?
- What are your main concerns about the paper at this point?
- *If the paper isn't yet finished:* Describe a bit about where the paper is going. Now describe the section you've written—how does it fit into that big picture?
- What do you want us readers to think about as you read the paper aloud to us? What exactly are you wanting us to pay attention to?

QUESTIONS FOR READERS:

For any sort of paper:

- What seems to be the main point/argument of this paper? What does the writer want people to think/feel/believe/understand?
- How does the writer help readers to think/feel/believe/understand that point?
- Was there a point in the paper that you felt was particularly strong? What was that section, and what made it so strong?
- Was there a point in the paper that you felt was particularly weak—the writer lost credibility, or you didn't follow the writer's argument, or you couldn't picture what was happening?
- What was your favorite part of the paper? Why?
- How does the writer appeal to an academic audience in this paper? (What *is* an academic audience? What techniques are appropriate to reaching that audience?)
- Is the paper well-organized? How would you describe the progression of ideas throughout the paper?
- Do there seem to be good transitions between paragraphs? Point out a few places where the transitions are particularly strong (or weak).

For research-based papers:

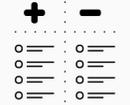
- Where do you think the writer needs more sources?
- Where does the paper seem too source-heavy?
- Does the writer manage to retain his or her own voice in the paper? If so, how does the writer do that? If not, what might the writer do to remedy this problem?
- Does the writer consistently document sources correctly? Where might the writer need to work on integrating quotations more smoothly or documenting sources more accurately?

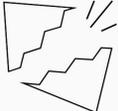
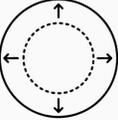
For personal narrative papers:

- Is the paper descriptive enough? Can you see/hear the action?
- What do you think of the dialogue? Should there be more? Less? Does it sound realistic?
- What seems to be the message the writer is getting across to readers?
- Are there any clichés in the writing? How might they be eliminated? Where is the writing particularly fresh?

Tried & True Strategies for Facilitating a Good Discussion

	<p>Consciously use wait time.</p>
	<p>Assign roles: one student is a timekeeper; another evaluates how well the introduction works with the rest of the paper; another evaluates how effective the conclusion closes the paper; another thinks about counter-arguments that might need to be addressed, etc.</p>
	<p>Have students, before the discussion begins, write out three questions about their draft. They should read the questions aloud before reading the group their drafts and getting feedback. (You can even assign one question per student in the group to answer for the writer).</p>
	<p>Alternately, ask students which sections of their paper they want the most help with. Direct the other students to pay particular attention to those areas, and begin giving the writer feedback on them.</p>
	<p>Talk about the content of the paper generally before actually asking the student to read the draft. That way, the group is “primed” to pay attention to the topic under discussion—and you can ask students to share what came up in discussion that wasn’t in the draft, or how the writer might use the pre-feedback discussion to make revisions to the draft.</p>
	<p>If you are brainstorming topics, give students something to write before the discussion begins. “Jot down a list of everything you know about the death penalty.” “Make a list of the arguments for building another parking lot on campus; then, make a list of all the reasons GVSU shouldn’t build one.”</p>
	<p>Have students outline their papers and then share the flow of information with each other. Does the organizational structure make sense? (This leads to an in-depth discussion on one issue. You could have similar focused discussions about students’ introductions, conclusions, or the part of the essay they are most struggling with).</p>

	<p>Ask students what they're doing well. Celebrate those achievements and that sense of self-confidence. Then, move on to asking what they're concerned about. Tackle those problems—as a group—before beginning feedback to individuals' drafts. (Be careful not to do this every week, though, or students will come to think they don't need to have drafts prepared!)</p>
	<p>Do a "practice" workshop session with a sample WRT 150 paper. (See Pat for some). This might warm up the group to workshopping—and make them less afraid to share criticism with each other in the future.</p>
	<p>As a student reads a paper aloud, have the others keep two lists: three things the writer has done well, and three areas for improvement. In the subsequent discussion, be sure to get students to explain WHY those parts of the paper were good or needed work.</p>
	<p>Ask each member of the group to jot down the writers' thesis. Ask everyone to share what they wrote—and then find out from the writer who got it right. Then, as a group, talk about how the writer could revise the draft (or the thesis!) to make the focus and purpose of the writing more clear.</p>
	<p>Be sure to ask the quiet (or distracted, or uncertain) student directly for his or her input, too. Don't simply allow the "talkers" of the group to do all the work. Students could be missing out on great feedback from that one person who doesn't say much!</p>
	<p>Make connections among students' papers. As long as it's appropriate, mention what the group has already discussed, and ask students how they'd apply that concept to the next paper. Example: "Marcy, we just talked about the way you worked quotations into your essay. What do you think about how Stan has incorporated quotations into his?"</p>
	<p>Encourage your group members to look at each other (not at you!) when they give each other feedback about the papers. Stress to them that you're not the writer of the papers; you're just asking questions to prompt discussion. They should address each other so that the group's work functions as a real discussion.</p>

	<p>If discussion is slow, ask students to pretend that the paper being workshopped is their own and discuss their writing process and what each students' next step would be in the writing process. Or, ask them “if this were your paper, what would you do next?”</p>
	<p>Sounds simple: but encourage students to jot notes as their peers read. That way, they won't forget any points they might want to make in the discussion. Don't be surprised if you have to be very directive, requesting that students get their pens and paper out. Even wait while they do this, so that everyone is ready to listen productively to their peers' papers.</p>
	<p>Encourage writers to listen to each person's feedback before responding. That way, the group has adequate opportunity to give the writer feedback without interruption. It can be a very educational experience for the writer to just sit back and listen to what others have to say about the draft!</p>
	<p>Do everything you can to break the ice early in the semester. Get students talking to each other about anything—and then, once the ice has been broken, segue into a discussion of the paper.</p>
	<p>Try a six degrees of separation game with a student's topic (in a brainstorming session). Begin with the student's topic, and then get group members to elaborate, expand, or move the topic into a new direction. After six tries, see what the topic has developed.</p>