



Tips on Being a Good Discussant

Developing the skills of a good discussant pays off in several ways. It is something that economists are often asked to do. The same skills that you develop to be a good discussant will also be used in your future responsibility as a journal referee. Learning how to read other papers with the critical eye of a good discussant will help you improve your own writing.

As a discussant, you have two main responsibilities.

1. Help those in the audience better understand the paper. You have read the paper very carefully and have taken the time to understand the paper's contributions, its strengths and weaknesses and its most salient points that need to be conveyed to the audience.
2. Help the author. What's your reaction to the paper and why? What can the author do to improve the paper?

There are various strategies to follow in forming your discussion. Here are some tips.

Stay on time.

There is a **ten-minute** time limit on your portion of the presentation. This time limit is firm. Prepare your remarks in advance, practice them and be concise.

Briefly summarize the paper's main message and its contribution.

The presenter must spend a good deal of time developing the ideas in the paper, carefully presenting the steps in the argument and reporting the main findings. Sometimes, the audience gets lost in the detail. Summarize the paper's main contribution, which will capture the essence of the paper for the audience. If the presenter gives a good summary, you can abbreviate this step of the discussion, but remember that a summary is almost always welcomed. If the presenter was confusing, then your summary is often the best way for the audience to follow the paper's contribution, and you may need to spend a bit more time on summarizing the paper.

Describe how the paper fits into the literature. Usually, this is clear from your summary of the paper's main message and its contribution and does not require any further elaboration. However, sometimes there are important references that the paper does not mention or entire literatures are ignored. In other circumstances, you may wish to point out that the paper's message is applicable beyond the narrow focus described in the paper.

Evaluate if the paper makes its case. Almost every paper in its introduction claims its contribution. Are the claims convincing? Are there problems with specific parts of the argument? For example, “It succeeds in making points 1–5 but not 6–8.” If problems exist, identify them. Is it a mistake in economics, mathematics, data analysis or interpretation?

Describe any unique aspects of the paper.

Is there a particularly useful and interesting approach in the paper? If the paper introduces you to a new technique or interesting data set and you think that it will be useful in other applications, then share it with the audience.

Simplify the paper’s technical contribution if unduly difficult to understand.

Sometimes a paper’s results are hard to understand. There may be a lot of technical detail that obscures the intuition behind a result. Something may seem counterintuitive at first, but not, if you look at it in a different way. You may be able to make the main points in a way that highlights clearly what’s going on in the paper. This is very hard to pull off but can be a great help to the audience. It’s good training for you to think about just what you need and do not need to convey the paper’s findings.

Make suggestions on how to improve the paper. Do you think the paper could be strengthened by changing it in some direction? Are there obvious directions for future research? Try to be specific. It’s not helpful to make very general or vague recommendations, so be clear and concise.

Focus on the big picture. Do not get bogged down in details. A typical discussion lasts ten minutes. Decide what needs to be said and focus on making your points to the audience and author. Try to distill your discussion to one or two important points, and use most of your time in discussing them. After the seminar is usually the best time to go over the many small but useful comments and corrections, including spelling errors, incorrect citations, etc. Don’t waste your discussion time going over minutiae unless the paper includes no substantive points and is poorly written.

Be constructive. Authors need feedback on their work. Was something missed? Is something obviously wrong? Is the work interesting? And, most importantly, how can the paper be improved? Again, many small suggestions are best handled in a private conversation between you and the author after the seminar, but if one or two are particularly clever, then you can share them with the audience. Above all, try to avoid making unhelpful criticism. Substantiate your criticism.

Do not apologize for being a poor choice to discuss the paper.

Over time, we all get asked to discuss papers that are not in our immediate area of expertise. Just do the best you can without apologizing. If the paper was delivered to you very late, or if the paper presented has undergone major changes from the draft the author sent you, then the presenter should apologize to you and the audience and should let everyone know that you were not given the tools to properly do your job. If the presenter does not offer you this courtesy, then you may explain. For example, “I haven’t seen this draft of the paper, so some of my comments may no longer be relevant.”

Get down to business.

In preparation of your discussant role, you may find helpful the following suggestions:

- Make a list initially of all of the paper's sections, tables, figures, etc., and the approximate number of pages devoted to each.
- Read the paper once just to form an initial impression of what each section does and how they fit together.
- Make a list of things that you particularly notice or questions you have.
- Read the paper again making a new list in response to your first list. (Some questions may go away upon the second reading.)
- Work through each equation and table, making sure that you can either reproduce the math or verify the calculations and, most importantly, you understand the result.
- Jot down ideas for a potential extension or anything else that seems unusual or interesting.
- Read a few of the background papers from the references to get a better idea of how the paper fits into the literature.
- Review all your notes and develop a discussion outline.
- Set the paper aside if time permits.
- Prepare your remarks after reading the paper once again. Make sure you have concisely summarized the paper and your remarks are relevant and helpful. If you are not sure, read the paper and citations again until you are confident.
- Be happy with a preparation well done.

What you should do during the presentation.

Pay careful attention to the paper's presenter, and try to adjust your comments to create a natural flow from presentation to discussion. This will require modification on your part. Do what you feel comfortable with. For example, if the presenter makes a point particularly well, you will probably not want to spend much time on it. On the other hand, if an important idea was not well presented and you feel confident in addressing it, by all means do so.