

**Leading Class Discussions**  
**English 350—Special Topics in Literature: “Literature and Fashion”**  
**Professor Kudish – Spring 2017**

**Rationale:** Learning how to lead a discussion of your peers is key to a learning-centered classroom; by leading discussions students practice being self-motivated and self-reliant by taking ownership of their education. The group format also builds communication and team-player skills. Moreover, employers and graduate schools look for leadership skills in their applicants, so this is a great place to practice.

**How to be an effective discussion leader:**

Make sure you do the reading thoroughly, preferably more than once.

Meet at least once before your day to lead the discussion. If you do not have a productive meeting, discuss what would make it more productive and schedule another one.

Come up with questions for the class to discuss, but avoid questions that begin with “do you think...?” because these usually elicit “yes” or “no” answers. Questions that begin with “why”, “what” and “how” usually yield better discussions.

Find controversial or puzzling passages in the reading that you want the class to discuss. You can present your own interpretations of them, but also open it up for discussion.

Keep delving deeper into issues. If you are in a leadership position, and the class goes quiet, it’s ok to ask them why. It’s rare that we can have said everything about a good issue, so keep pressing it, asking different kinds of questions, until the conversation continues.

Examples of discussion starters:

1. I noticed this in the reading. What I don’t get is....
2. This sentence seems like it’s really important. Here’s what I get from it. Am I right?
3. It seems like A is saying B, while it seems like X is saying Y. Is this accurate? And if so, who is right?
4. Something that Brooks said reminded me of a movie I saw recently.
5. What Foucault says in this sentence goes against everything I’ve been taught!

**Format:** Discussion leaders will have the floor for about 20-30 minutes; so you will not have to sustain a discussion for the full period. However, if go longer because it’s an excellent discussion, that’s great and we’ll let it happen. Often, I think we will find that the student-led discussion is not so rigidly timed - it may go on for the whole class, with periods of other activities. If it is not going well for whatever reason, we will work from there. I will ask you some questions to get back on track, and see what happens.

**Tips for effectively working as a team of two or three:** Respect each other’s opinions, which may differ. Divide up the roles you are going to perform in class fairly and equally. Make sure that no two people will be doing the same things, but dividing up the roles is not a substitute for being prepared for any part of the discussion. This applies to those who are not in a leadership role as well.

**The role of the rest of the class:** Those not leading the discussion are also expected to come prepared, having thoroughly done the reading and having thought of questions and passages that they want to discuss, both during the student-led portion of the class and the rest of the time. The goal is for each student to speak in every class.

**The instructor’s role:** Especially at the beginning of the semester, I will work hard to steer you in the right direction in leading class discussions. You are more than welcome to talk to me in advance of your leadership day. Again, I will never let you drown, since it’s in my best interest as well as yours that each class is as educational and effective as possible. If I feel that the students leading the group need a little help, I will intervene as gently as possible. In the unlikely event that a discussion becomes inappropriate or if I feel that some students are uncomfortable for any reason, I will also intervene.

**How you will be graded:** Students will be graded individually based on their role in the group, and how well they interact with the group. Your grade will be based on how prepared you are in terms of the reading and having questions and discussion points for the class, as well as in how you present yourself. Being prepared and enthusiastic, however, counts for a lot more than your presentation style. Nerves will not count against you, since public presentations come naturally to some and not to others.