**Leading a Discussion**

**1. Provide a summary of the paper:**

In most cases, you want to first provide the audience a brief but accurate overview of the paper. It’s often useful to do a little research about the authors – this provides a context that may be very helpful and may prove insightful later on. For example, do the authors have a publication record that aligns with the current paper? Are the authors graduate students, profs, agency biologists (not that it matters, but it does provide context).

The focus on the summary should be about the research questions / hypothesis, and to explain these you will also need to discuss an overall conceptual framework. This should be in the Introduction, with the objectives/hypotheses in the last paragraph of the Introduction. You need to understand the conceptual framework very well. After providing the broader context and framework, you should quickly go over the main methods, and the key results. You should act as a guide for the group, and take them through the key results. Try not to spend a lot of time on trivial aspects of a paper. In general, your summary should not go too deeply in the discussion part of the paper.

Don’t forget: you are assuming everyone in the room has read the paper, so your overall introduction should be relatively short (no more than 10 minutes). More time may be required if a concept or methodological approach is particularly complex. Try not to provide opinions or critiques of the paper at this point in time – save this for the general discussion.

**2. Ask for points of clarification:**

Before proceeding with detailed discussion of the paper, you should ask the audience if they require clarification on anything in the paper. You are leading a discussion and therefore considered an ‘expert’ on the paper, and as such, should be prepared to handle these points of clarification – if not, maybe someone else in the group can help. At this stage you are not engaging in a detailed critique yet; you are first making sure that people all understand the critical ‘nuts and bolts’ of the paper.

**3. Managing the discussion:**

The majority of the time should be spent on the actual discussion.  There are many ways to do this, but here are some tips:

* Try not to let your own opinion of the paper distract or take over – your goal is to get other people to reveal their own views; these may or may not agree with your own views. Be welcoming and accommodating to other people’s opinions and viewpoints. Never make anyone feel small or stupid, even if they make a goofy mistake.
* That being said, make sure that you do have an opinion, and be willing to share it at some point
* A common problem made by the discussion leader is to talk too much. Remember, the discussion leader’s job is not to make a presentation but to promote discussion by others. Generally, you will initiate discussion by asking a question or by making a statement and asking for a response. If you are lucky, someone in the class will respond promptly to your questions, but sometimes your question will be met with a long and uncomfortable silence. In fact, this is usually what happens at the outset of the discussion when participants do not yet feel at ease. What you do in response to this silence is crucial. Above all, do not answer your own question because this informs the group that they need not respond since you will do that for them. Try re-wording the question, and wait them out. They are uncomfortable too, and eventually someone will say something to start the discussion.
* Prepare a list of questions that you could ask other people if the discussion needs help to get started. Always try to find positive points in a paper, even if the paper is, overall, very weak. Similarly, try to bring out negative features even if the paper is strong.  This means you have to sort out strong and negative parts of a paper for yourself ahead of time
* It’s sometimes a good idea to first go around the table and ask for something that people felt was strong and positive about the paper, and then do this again but ask for points of constructive criticism about the paper.
* Don’t ask just what they thought about the paper, but whether a particular aspect of the presentation was effective/needed/informative (or say – this seemed odd, important, etc.), whether particular critical assumptions (stated or not) are valid/needed, how some conclusions or issue about the design, data or conclusions also have implications for....., etc.
* Don’t hesitate to ask people (specifically) for their views on some sections of this paper: a gentle push may be needed to get started on discussing the specifics.
* Once the discussion gets going, you are faced with the delicate task of providing periodic direction to the discussion while still giving everyone freedom to express their ideas. Because you are chairing the discussion, don’t be afraid to take control if the discussion wanders too far from where it needs to be, and/or if the discussion gets too trivial or bogged down in the mud
* It is important to make sure that all participants are involved and contributing. You should pay particular attention to make sure that all participants have the opportunity to share if they desire. Make mental notes when a student has made an attempt to contribute but may have lost out on that opportunity because someone else interrupted or spoke up sooner. It is important to offer these participants a chance to add their comments to the discussion.
* Sometimes the discussion may appear to be progressing well, when in fact, only one or a few persons are dominating the discussion. Try to include others by asking something like "Does anyone else have a view/comment that they would like to share?" or by calling on specific students to respond. Pay particular attention to soliciting input of participants who may have tried to contribute to the discussion earlier, but were not aggressive enough to make themselves heard.
* If the discussion has strayed too far afield or if you need to move on due to time constraints, simply interrupt the discussion, acknowledge the current focus of the discussion, and announce that you want to bring the focus back to the original topic or that you need to take up the next issue.
* Whenever needed, draw the discussion back to the actual research objectives, and try to broaden the discussion out to the overarching conceptual framework: are the results generalizable to other aspects of aquatic systems or other fields of ecology? Does the paper make broad and meaningful conclusions that will be long-lived and significant?
* Towards the end of the discussion, it may be useful to ask people how they might have done the work differently. Or, stated another way, what could have been improved?

**4. Summarize the discussion:**

Spend some time reminding people about the actual research objectives, and provide a concise summary of the discussion that just wrapped up. If possible, do this in an inclusive way: make participants feel that their points of views and opinions are taken seriously even if you disagree.   Try to get an overall consensus about the general quality of the paper, and one litmus test may be whether or not you would cite the paper in your own work, and in what context.