

THE BUDDY

A seminar buddy is a partner who is discussant when you present, and a kind but direct critic when you write. The job of a buddy (or of a professor, for that matter) is not to tear the prospectus / paper / presentation apart, but to show you how to improve it. He or she helps you turn in a better paper at the end of the course, and you, in turn, help him or her to do so.

Commenting on Buddy Papers

Let's say your buddy has chosen the following problem:

"I am going to study the formal and informal social organization of a group of Berkeley residents who own and manage a community garden."

Or

"I am going to model ways in which to integrate wind power into the grid"

Here are some guiding points for you, as discussant. Bear in mind that some of these points will be relevant only when the research is better specified.

1. Begin your comments with something you can praise. If nothing else you can say why you find the topic interesting. What is interesting or relevant about this question and what might other researchers learn from the hoped-for outcome? This sets a positive tone to the critique and lets the author know that you are not hostile. (This is particularly important if you end up being critical.) Be careful about making remarks you think are witty—they may indeed be so, but sometimes these are embarrassing for the buddy.

2. Look for clarity.

a) Can you sum up the author's central question in one or two sentences? If not, he/she probably needs to clarify the topic and/or approaches.

b) Is the topic specific? "I am going to write about the environmental movement and tropical rain forests" is fuzzy. "I am going to write about the means by which European environmental organizations organized the boycott of tropical hardwoods" is a lot more specific. If the topic is fuzzy, ask some questions that will help the author narrow in on something more specific. The time spent clarifying a topic is time well spent, especially as the research is just getting started.

c) Is the argument logical and clear? If not, ask clarifying questions. These will help the author as he / she moves on

d) Is the language clear? If there is any phrase or word or indeed whole sentence that doesn't make any sense to you, mark it. Imprecise language and the use of pretentious jargon should be avoided. If more than one meaning occurs to you, ask the author, "does this mean x or y". This is more helpful than "what does this mean?" Your comment will show him/her not only that the writing or slide is unclear, but why.

3. If you know an opposing argument, lay it out with sources, if possible. This is extremely helpful to get the author to consider alternative perspectives or rival hypotheses that he / she may not have heard of.
4. Consider the methods – do these strike you as being appropriate for the question? If so, mention it. If not, say why, or if you can, suggest other options.
5. Consider the data the author presents or proposes to use. Is it compelling to you? Could some other sources have provided better / complementary data? Even if the buddy cannot access other data your comments will help him / her to think about the strengths and limitations of the data he / she has.
6. Consider whether the structure of the proposed paper is the most effective way to lay out the argument. You might make suggestions about a possible outline.
7. Make suggestions about sources (both written and contact people) the author might use. You may know part of the literature that the author does not, or you may have an “angle” from a different sort of literature.

On Receiving Buddy Comments (at the seminar or on the paper)

1. Think about how much time and care your critic took over your work and be appreciative. Especially if he / she was tough on you. Isn't it great to have a generous friend in the grad school business?
2. Did your buddy understand / communicate your central research question or idea? If not, you may want to clarify. The research question is the key basis for evaluating your research: your work will be judged against the question you set out to answer.
3. Sit right down and think through comment by comment: how you can use this suggestion, why it is misguided, and write all this down. Immediately after the session, if you can. (Even the most misguided criticism, if well-meant, usually responds to something that doesn't feel right, even if the critic can't quite say what that is).
3. Remember that you don't need to respond to **all** comments. Some just may not be relevant to your interests or purpose, but ask yourself why that comment arose, and you will understand your own work better. There is great value in trying to figure out why your buddy flagged a certain point and what that actually tells you about your work.