



Text-Based Seminar

Developed by Gene Thompson-Grove.

Purpose

Enlargement of understanding of a text, not the achievement of some particular understanding.

Ground Rules

1. Listen actively.
2. Build on what others say.
3. Don't step on others' talk. Silences and pauses are OK.
4. Let the conversation flow as much as possible without raising hands or using a speaker's list.
5. Make the assumptions underlying your comments explicit to others.
6. Emphasize clarification, amplification, and implications of ideas.
7. Watch your own air time — both in terms of how often you speak, and in terms of how much you say when you speak.
8. Refer to the text; challenge others to go to the text.

Notes to Facilitators

Text-Based Seminars can be remarkably engaging and productive for both students and adults. A Text-Based Seminar facilitator has two primary tasks: posing the framing question and keeping the group focused without pushing any particular agenda.

Facilitating a seminar is not terribly difficult, but it can be challenging. A few tips might make the job easier:

1. Invest time in creating the framing question. It needs to be substantive, clear, relevant to the participants' experience, and likely to push their thinking in new directions. Above all, constructing a response to the question should require close reading of the text. We recommend that the framing question be genuine for everyone, including the facilitator, so that the entire group is engaged in the inquiry. Framing questions are often based on a quote from the text, which begins to establish a pattern of using the document as a basis for the conversation.
2. In addition to the framing question, create a few follow-up questions that seem to raise the level of participants' thinking. If the groups takes off, you may never use them (or you may create new ones that come from the conversation itself), but it's a good idea to have something in your hip pocket, especially if you aren't very experienced at this kind of facilitation.

3. Unless the entire group does Text-Based Seminars routinely, it is useful to go over the purposes and ground rules before you begin. Because so many conversations (in school and out) are based more on opinion than evidence, and aim toward winning the argument rather than constructing new knowledge, it is often important to remind the group of the basics: **work from the text** and **strive to enlarge your understanding**.
4. Give the group time (about 15 minutes) to re-read the text with the framing question in mind.
5. The most common facilitation problems in this kind of seminar come from two kinds of participants: the folks who have to win, and those who want to express opinions independent of the text and will use any quote they can find as a springboard. Usually, a reminder of the ground rules will pull them back, although it is sometimes necessary to redirect the conversation if you are dealing with a particularly insistent “winner.” With the “winner,” asking the group to examine closely the assumptions underneath the arguments or opinions being presented sometimes helps. When someone doesn’t stick to the text, it is often helpful to ask the group to look for evidence of the opinion being expressed in the text. What you **don’t** want to do is ask these two types of participants a direct question, or ask them to cite the evidence in the text for their opinions (although you might be tempted to do so). The goal is to redirect the conversation away from these folks, not to get them to talk more!
6. It is sometimes useful to keep running notes of the conversation, and to periodically summarize for the group what has been said.
7. It is also sometimes useful (especially if you are nervous) to have a “plant” among the participants — someone who will model ideal participant behavior at an early point in the seminar.
8. As is always the case when facilitating, try to keep the conversation balanced. Don’t let one or two people dominate. If there are many quiet people, asking them to speak in pairs for a few minutes on a particular point can sometimes give them an entry into the conversation when you come back to the large group. Sometimes you just have to say, “let’s have someone who hasn’t said much yet speak,” and then use **lots** of wait time, even though it may feel somewhat uncomfortable to do so.