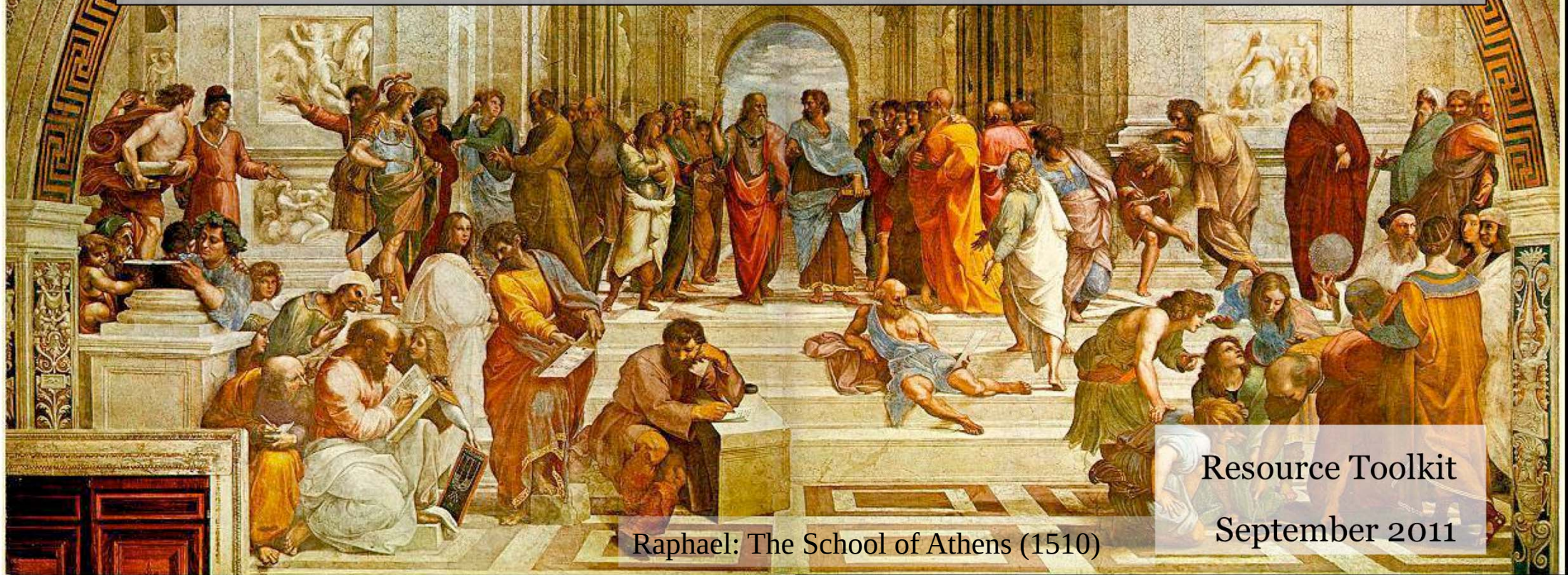




Universität St. Gallen

How to lead and participate in a text-based discussion

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Raphael: The School of Athens (1510)

Resource Toolkit

September 2011



1.
What is a text-
based
discussion?

1. What is a text-based discussion? |

2.
Four steps to
leading good
text-based
discussions

2. Four steps to leading good text-based discussions |

3.
Dos and Don'ts

3. Dos and Don'ts |

4.
Tips for
discussion
participants

4. Tips for discussion participants |



What is the purpose and aim of leading a text-based discussion?

1.
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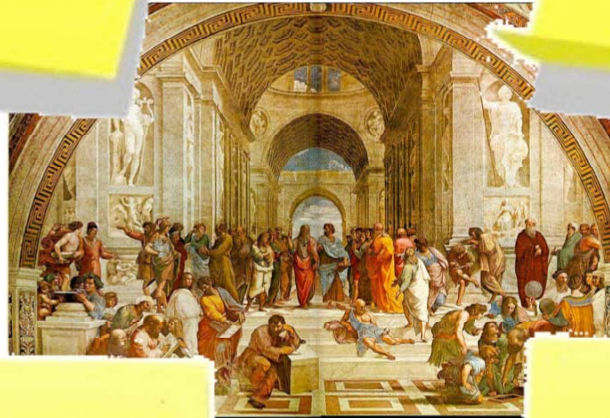
2.
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Tips for discussion participants

develop a deeper understanding of the text

reflect critically on aspects of the text



facilitate group think

learn to argue through interaction and testing ideas



Do not underestimate leading a discussion.

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Leading a discussion is a challenging assignment, because it requires:

- a solid knowledge of the base text.
- a well-founded understanding of the general discussions and positions in the literature.
- the ability to deal with situations and inputs 'on the fly' as they arise and remain in the driver's seat.
- to understand and deal with the personalities and whims of discussion participants.
- to order and synthesise inputs.

-



A good discussion leader...

1.
What is a text-
based
discussion?

... guides, focuses, structures the discussion.

... clarifies confusing points.

2.
Four steps to
leading good
text-based
discussions

... allows discussion participants to express their viewpoints
and arrive at their own conclusions.

3.
Dos and Don'ts

... manages controversy without offending participants.

4.
Tips for
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... is familiar with the literature that is being discussed.

Leading a discussion is the art of managing spontaneity!



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Elements of a moderated discussion

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1) Pointed summary



2) Start the discussion



3) Steer the ship



4) Wrap up





1) Pointed summary of the base text.



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The initial summary provides the foundation for the discussion.

Summarise with a purpose, i.e. with a view on the discussion:

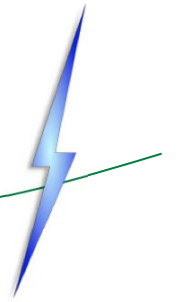
- Put the text in a larger context:
 - To what kind of issues does it speak?
 - What is the position of the author(s)?
 - How does it compare or contrast with other literature?
- Highlight the main conclusions and contestable hypotheses.
- Establish relations to other texts and positions.

A text-based discussion assumes that everyone has read the text.
There is therefore no need to go over it again, point by point.

The pointed summary should be short, perhaps between 5 and 10 minutes.



2) Start the discussion.



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The beginning of a discussion sets it off on a particular path that may be difficult to change.



Starting a discussion requires extra thought.



Do not: “Let’s discuss” is rarely a good way of sparking a discussion.



Do:

- Perhaps use a provocative opening statement
- Perhaps highlight controversial claims in the text
- Perhaps draw on quotes from the text
- Perhaps use an engaging illustrative example



3a) Steer the ship.



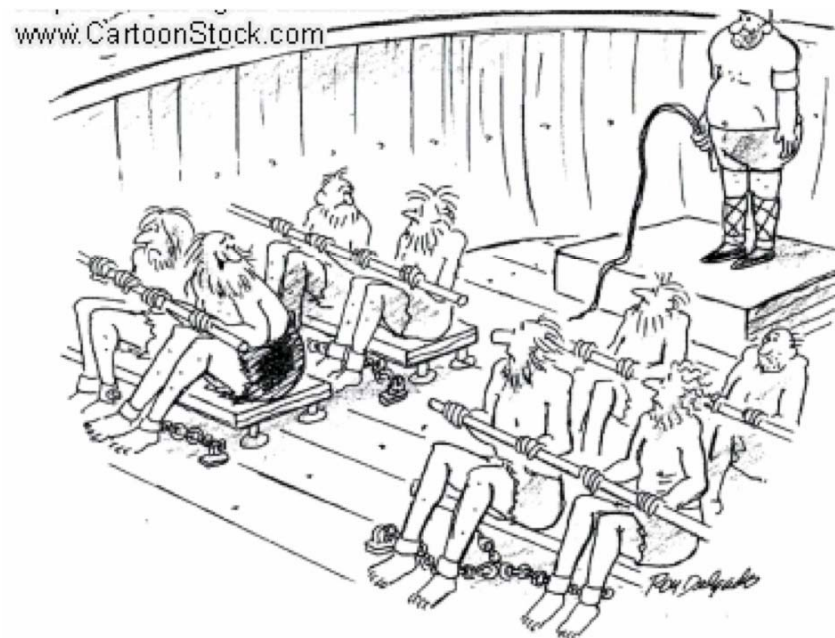
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Leading a discussion is akin to the art of naval navigation. Act as a facilitator of existing currents and winds, bringing them together to get the ship moving, rather than as a unilateral dictator.



" Thank goodness he's gone through **sensitivity training**. "

*Do not go against
the winds. Make
deft use of them to
move ahead.*



3b) Steer the ship.

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Tools to help steer the ship:

- Visual aids for illustrations, questions, quotes, ...
- Paraphrasing of comments and asking for clarification
- Drawing people in: asking them directly about their position
- Summarising and synthesising to keep track of what's been said and consolidate contributions
- Redirecting long-winded talkers with questions and introducing new topics



Do not forget to keep track of the time.



4) Wrap up.



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Don't let the discussion just peter out. Close it with a purpose. Summarise and synthesise.

Some possibilities of wrapping up include:

- What has been learned about the text?
- Does the text appear in a new or different light?
- What are the conclusions you have reached?
- What issues remain unresolved and why?

Not everything needs to end in perfect harmony: consensus is often less important than understanding the reasons behind controversy.



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Do: Consider playing *advocatus diaboli*.



Discussions benefit from contrasting viewpoints. Consider adopting a position that goes against the grain and backing it up with good arguments.

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Challenge people! Don't let things get all nice, sugar and spice. That will enliven the discussion.





Do: relate statements and points.



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The art of leading a discussion relies on bringing things together. Relate statements to, for example:

- the text
- previous statements
- empirical cases
- other positions in the literature
- ...





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- Highlight key passages of the text to refer to for further evidence
- Prepare a short summary of the key points of the text (with page numbers!)
- Take notes of aspects of the text to which you could respond
- Develop a stance towards the text:
 - Do you agree or disagree with the author(s)?
 - Where and why do you dis-/agree?
 - Where are the authors' claims contestable?
 - How does the text relate to other texts?



During the discussion

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- Paraphrase mentally what other speakers say to check your comprehension.
- Evaluate silently for yourself what is being said.
- Analyse how other participants argue their points.
- Keep track of the discussion, for example through a mind map or a list of bullet points.
- Keep an open mind! Listen to new ideas and diverging points of view.



When making a contribution...

... consider the following aspects:

- What is your argument?
- How does your argument relate to the discussion?
 - Are you rebutting or reinforcing a previous point?
 - Are you bringing in a new perspective?
- What is the evidence for your argument?

Don't be afraid to speak up.

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Do: Stay close to the text.



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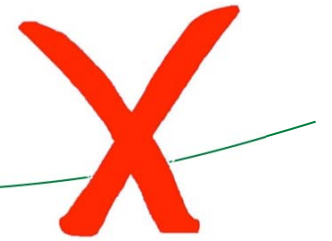
Remember: you are discussing on the basis of the text.
Do not let discussions go too much astray. Ground them in the text and the statements found in it.

- ✓ Be able to back up your statements with references to the text (page, paragraph).
- ✓ Check whether what you are contributing relates to the conclusions and hypotheses of the text.





Don't: get hung up on marginal issues

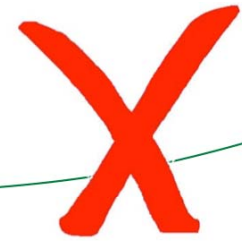


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Don't: launch *ad hominem* attacks



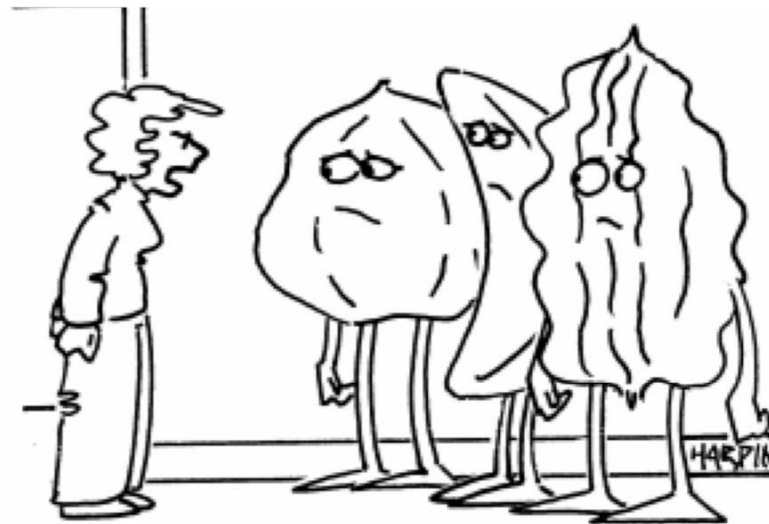
Even when disagreeing with another person's viewpoint, do so in a polite and respectful way. A discussion is not a fight.

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"You're all nuts!"