

Guidelines for Leading Class Discussions and Tips for Reading Theory

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LEADING CLASS DISCUSSIONS

- ⇒ The designated discussion leader is responsible for
 - offering a brief summary of the theoretical intertexts (no more than 5–10 min)
 - posing a series of questions or comments to begin discussion
 - keeping the discussion going and ensuring that all students are able to participate

- ⇒ For your introductory comments, you should be sure to include the following for each theorist we read:
 - What was the main problem or question the article/chapter/book was trying to address?
 - What was the proposed solution or central argument of the piece, in your own words
 - Who is the author? When and where were they writing? Where were they educated, and if they did field work, where did they do it?
 - How might these factors be impacting their thinking and writing?

- ⇒ Issues that are helpful to raise for discussion:
 - What methodology was used to address the main problem/question?
 - What strategies is the author using to construct their theory/approach? In other words, *how* does the author make this argument? By analogies? Exposing a contradiction? Telling a story? Empirical examples? Writing from a specific location? Something else?
 - And how was the text itself organized?
 - Who is the intended audience? How much expertise is presumed here?
 - What does this theory do? In other words, once you have understood this theory, what does it allow you to do/understand that you couldn't before?
 - What are the limits of this theory's applications? According to its author? According to you?
 - What historical conditions is the theory/theorist speaking to? Who and/or what are they in dialogue with?
 - What do you think of this theory/approach? What are its strengths and weaknesses? Are you convinced by it? Would you argue differently? Do you see the problem the author poses as a genuine problem that needs to be solved?

- ⇒ Open-ended questions are going to be more productive than closed questions or questions that are fishing for a specific correct answer.
- ⇒ If there is a specific point you want to make about a reading or set of readings, make that point explicitly, and allow the class to comment, critique, or ask questions about it.
- ⇒ If you do not understand part of the reading, make that a part of your discussion. Describe what you don't understand, point to a specific passage or section, and ask the class to work through it together (if you want).
- ⇒ Feel free to connect the week's readings to previous theoretical intertexts, or even examples in the Bible or ancient Near East. But don't assume that every student has the same knowledge base as you. *Explain* your examples and connections.
- ⇒ Ideally, the student leading the discussion will do the least amount of talking after their introductory comments. The goal is to get the rest of the class discussing the readings!
- ⇒ Class discussions about theoretical intertexts will last approximately an hour (2:00–3:00)

GENERAL TIPS FOR READING THEORETICAL TEXTS

Reading theory can be different from reading other texts, especially philological analyses of biblical texts! As biblical scholars, we are used to reading secondary literature very closely, and paying attention to the minute details of argumentation. Theory can require a different approach.

- For theoretical texts, you may need to take a step back and think in broader/more abstract terms. Theory typically involves broad concepts that are put in dialogue with each other. Try to identify the concepts and their relationships to each other.
 - Look at the vocabulary. What are the key terms being used? These can often be helpful in identifying the concepts an author is working with.
 - Try to map the structure of the argument. How does the author get from point to point?
 - If all else fails, go online and try to find a summary of the argument, or a review of the book. Read the summary/review, then go back to the text itself and try to identify those parts of the argument.
- Don't give up on reading a text if you don't understand it the first time. You might have to read a theoretical text more than once to understand it!
 - On the first read: identify what you understand and mark what you don't. At the end of a section, write a 2 sentence summary of the section in your own words.
 - On the second read: take more detailed notes, re-read difficult passages, look up words you don't know. Read the whole thing! Concepts often become clearer as you get to the end.
 - If you still don't understand, it's okay! Bring specific questions, highlight passages you didn't get. We'll talk about them. Maybe someone else understood, or maybe no one else did. This is a group project and we'll work through this stuff together.