

Harkness Discussion Circle

Your Student Guide to Thinking, Listening, and Discussing

What is this?

A Harkness discussion is a student-led conversation where your class sits in a circle and discusses a text or question together — without the teacher directing the conversation. You lead it. You ask the questions. You challenge each other's ideas. You arrive at new understanding together.

It might feel different at first. That's the point.

Name:

Date / Topic:

Section 1: What a Harkness Discussion Is — and Isn't

A Harkness Discussion IS ✓	A Harkness Discussion is NOT ✗
A conversation where everyone's voice matters equally	A debate where someone wins
Students asking questions and responding to each other	A Q&A session where the teacher asks and students answer
Evidence-based — you cite the text to support your ideas	An opinion contest — your feelings alone are not enough
A place to think out loud and change your mind	A performance where you prove you already know everything
Collaborative — building on each other's ideas	Competitive — talking to show off or shut others down
Open-ended — there is no single correct answer	A quiz in discussion form

Section 2: How to Prepare Before the Discussion

The quality of the discussion depends on how well everyone prepares. A Harkness discussion where students haven't read the text falls apart within five minutes. One where everyone has prepared deeply can be one of the best intellectual experiences of your semester.

Step 1

Read the Text — Twice

First read: Read all the way through for general understanding. Don't stop to look things up yet. What is this about? What is the author's main point? What is your reaction?

Second read: Read slowly with a pen in hand. Annotate as you go:

- Underline sentences that make a strong or surprising claim
- Circle words or phrases you don't fully understand
- Put a star (★) next to the most important or interesting passage
- Write questions in the margin wherever you are confused or curious
- Put an exclamation point (!) next to anything that surprises or provokes you

Step 2

Write Your Opening Position

Before you come to class, write 2–3 sentences in response to the discussion question your instructor provides. This is not a polished essay — it is your honest first take. It gives you something to say when the discussion opens.

Ask yourself: What do I actually think about this question right now? What in the text makes me think that?

Select Your Evidence

Find 2–3 specific quotations from the text you want to use in the discussion. For each one, write:

- The exact quote (and where it appears in the text)
- One sentence explaining why it matters to the question

You should be able to find a quote and cite it by page or paragraph during the discussion without fumbling through the text.

Step 3

Write Your Own Question

Write one genuine question the text raised for you — something you don't know the answer to and actually want to explore. The best discussion questions are ones where:

- Reasonable people could disagree
- The text gives you something to work with but doesn't resolve it cleanly
- You genuinely want to hear what other people think

Step 4

Pre-Discussion Checklist — Complete Before Class:

- ☐ I have read the text at least twice
- ☐ I have annotated my text (underlines, circles, stars, margin notes)
- ☐ I have written my 2–3 sentence opening position
- ☐ I have identified 2–3 quotations I plan to use, with locations
- ☐ I have written one genuine question of my own

Section 3: During the Discussion

The Discussion Norms

These are the norms that make a Harkness discussion work. They apply to everyone, including the most confident speakers and the quietest thinkers in the room.

1	Speak to each other, not to the teacher. Address the group. Make eye contact with other students. The teacher is an observer today, not the audience.
2	Use the text. When you make a claim, support it with evidence from the reading. Say where it comes from. “On page 2, the author argues...” is always stronger than “I think...” alone.
3	Listen to understand, not to reply. Before you speak, be able to say what the previous speaker said. Build on their idea, challenge it, or ask them a question about it.
4	Don’t dominate. Don’t disappear. If you’ve spoken three or more times, make space. If you haven’t spoken at all, find an entry point. Both extremes hurt the group.
5	Disagree with ideas, not with people. You can challenge any claim in the room as long as you challenge it with evidence and respect. Attack the argument, never the person.
6	Change your mind out loud. If something someone says shifts your thinking, say so. “I came in thinking X, but what you just said makes me reconsider because...” is one of the most powerful things you can do in a Harkness discussion.

Discussion Moves: What to Say and How to Say It

Knowing **what** to say is one challenge. Knowing **how** to say it in a way that advances the conversation is another. The phrases below are models — adapt them into your own voice, but learn the moves behind them.

The Move	Example Language	Try It Here
Opening a claim	<i>"The text argues... and I think this means..."</i> <i>"My reading of this passage is... because..."</i>	
Building on an idea	<i>"Building on what [Name] said, I think..."</i> <i>"I want to add to that point — the text also says..."</i>	
Respectful disagreement	<i>"I see it differently. In paragraph... the author seems to suggest..."</i> <i>"I want to push back on that — can you point to where in the text...?"</i>	
Asking for evidence	<i>"What in the text makes you say that?"</i> <i>"Can you point us to a specific passage?"</i>	
Clarifying	<i>"When you say [word/phrase], do you mean...?"</i> <i>"I want to make sure I understand your argument. Are you saying...?"</i>	
Inviting others in	<i>"I'd like to hear what someone else thinks about this."</i> <i>"[Name], you annotated this section — what did you notice there?"</i>	
Synthesizing	<i>"It seems like we have two different ideas on the table..."</i> <i>"Both [Name] and [Name] are pointing to the same tension..."</i>	
Changing your mind	<i>"I came in thinking X, but what you said makes me reconsider..."</i> <i>"I'm not sure I still agree with my own opening position because..."</i>	

Asking a genuine question	<i>"I'm genuinely unsure about this — does the text actually say...?"</i> <i>"Here's what I still don't understand: if [X], then why does the author say [Y]?"</i>	
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A note on silence:

Silence during a Harkness discussion is not a failure. It means the group is thinking. Resist the urge to fill every pause. If 20–30 seconds of silence feels uncomfortable, use it — re-read the passage, look at your notes, form a thought. The discussion that happens after genuine silence is almost always better than the one that rushes to fill it.

Section 4: Discussion Notes Page

Use this page during or immediately after the discussion to track your thinking. You don't need to write everything — capture the ideas that shift your thinking, the claims you want to remember, and the questions that are still open.

The opening question was:

My opening position (before discussion):

My position at the end (did it change?):

Ideas from others that stuck with me:

Questions the discussion didn't answer:

The most important idea that emerged from this discussion was:

Section 5: After the Discussion — Self-Assessment

Be honest. This is about your own growth as a thinker and communicator, not about making yourself look good on paper.

I did this today...	Not yet	Some what	Yes	Evidence / Example
I came prepared: annotated text, opening position, evidence selected	☐	☐	☐	
I cited specific textual evidence when I made a claim	☐	☐	☐	
I responded directly to at least one other student's idea	☐	☐	☐	
I asked a genuine question (not rhetorical, not to show off)	☐	☐	☐	
I listened carefully before speaking	☐	☐	☐	
I kept my contributions balanced (not too many, not zero)	☐	☐	☐	
I disagreed respectfully when I had a different view	☐	☐	☐	
I tried to use one of the discussion move phrases	☐	☐	☐	

One thing I did well in this discussion:

One specific thing I will do differently in the next discussion:

Remember:

The goal of a Harkness discussion is not to be the smartest person in the room. It is to leave the room smarter than you entered it — together. Every time you ask a genuine question, change your mind out loud, or make space for someone who hasn't spoken, you are contributing to something the whole group benefits from. That is what real intellectual community looks like.