

Harkness Discussion Circle

Teacher's Planning & Facilitation Guide

What is a Harkness Discussion?

The Harkness method originated at Phillips Exeter Academy and is named after philanthropist Edward Harkness, who in 1930 funded the construction of oval tables so students could see one another and discuss ideas as equals. In a Harkness discussion, students sit in a circle and lead an open, evidence-based conversation about a text, concept, or question. The teacher steps back from the role of lecturer and becomes an observer. Students ask questions, challenge one another respectfully, build on each other's ideas, and arrive at new understanding together. The goal is not to reach a single "correct" answer, but to deepen thinking through collaborative inquiry.

Why Harkness? The Research Case

Decades of research on discussion-based learning confirm that students retain more, think more critically, and develop stronger communication skills when they are active participants rather than passive recipients. Harkness discussions build several skills simultaneously:

Skill Developed	How Harkness Builds It
Critical Thinking	Students must read closely, form positions, anticipate counterarguments, and revise their thinking in real time
Academic Communication	Students practice the language of academic discourse: building on ideas, respectful disagreement, asking clarifying questions, citing evidence
Active Listening	Because students must respond to peers, they develop the discipline of listening to understand rather than listening to reply
Ownership of Learning	When students lead their own discussion, they take intellectual responsibility for the class in a way that teacher-led instruction cannot replicate
Civic Discourse	Harkness models the kind of deliberative conversation that democratic participation requires — especially valuable in government and civic courses

Phase 1: Before the Discussion — Preparation

Selecting and Preparing the Text

The quality of a Harkness discussion depends almost entirely on the quality of the text and question that launches it. A good Harkness text is rich enough to sustain genuine disagreement. It should resist easy summarization and reward close reading.

Characteristics of a strong Harkness text:

- Contains ambiguity, tension, or a genuine arguable claim — not just information to be recalled
- Is short enough to be read and re-read (300–1,000 words is ideal for a 50-minute discussion)
- Is complex enough that multiple valid interpretations are possible
- Connects to the course’s essential questions or learning objectives
- Rewards annotation — students should be able to find specific language to quote and debate

Writing the Opening Question

The opening question is the most important thing you will prepare. It should be open-ended, text-dependent, and genuinely contestable. Students should not be able to answer it without engaging with the text — and there should be no single correct answer.

Weak Opening Questions — Avoid	Strong Opening Questions — Use
What is federalism?	Madison argues that federal powers are “few and defined.” Is that still true today, and does it matter?
Who wrote the Federalist Papers?	Whose interests does the Bill of Rights actually protect — and whose does it leave out?
Did you agree with the article?	The author claims checks and balances have weakened. What evidence in the text supports or challenges that claim?
What did the court decide?	Was the court’s reasoning in this case consistent with the original intent of the

Founders? What's at stake in how we answer that?

Prepare 2–3 follow-up questions to keep in your back pocket:

- What evidence from the text supports that?
- Can someone push back on that claim?
- We've heard two different positions — can anyone identify the specific point of disagreement?
- Has anyone's thinking shifted during this discussion? What changed it?
- What question do we still not have a good answer to?

Assigning Student Preparation

Students should come to a Harkness discussion having done meaningful preparation, not just read the text once. The following preparation structure works well:

Step 1

Close Reading

Students read the text at least twice. On the first read, they track their general comprehension. On the second read, they annotate: circling unfamiliar words, underlining arguable claims, putting stars next to surprising passages, and writing questions in the margin.

Step 2

Position Statement

Students write 2–3 sentences in response to the opening question before the discussion. This is not a polished essay — it is a thinking tool. It forces every student to enter the room with something to say.

Step 3

Evidence Selection

Students identify 2–3 specific quotations from the text they plan to use in the discussion. They should write the page or paragraph number next to each quote and one sentence explaining why it is relevant.

Step 4

Question Generation

Students write one question of their own — something the text raised for them that they genuinely want to explore with the group. This is often the richest source of discussion direction.

Phase 2: During the Discussion — Facilitation

Classroom Setup

Physical arrangement matters. Students must be able to see every other student's face. A true circle — no corners, no rows — is essential. If your room does not allow a single circle, use a fishbowl format (see below). The teacher sits outside the circle or slightly apart from it, signaling by position that this is a student-led space.

Fishbowl variation:

If the class is larger than 14–16 students, divide into an inner circle (active discussants) and an outer circle (observers with a specific observation task). Rotate halfway through so every student participates in both roles. The outer circle's observation work feeds a debrief after the inner circle finishes.

Your Role as Facilitator: What to Do and What Not to Do

DO ✓	DO NOT ✗
Pose the opening question, then step back	Repeat, rephrase, or validate student answers
Track discussion participation on a seating chart	Fill silences quickly — give students time to think
Use a back-pocket question only when discussion is truly stalled	Direct traffic by calling on students in order
Note patterns in the conversation for the debrief	Correct students' interpretations mid-discussion
Intervene if conversation becomes disrespectful or exclusionary	Offer your own position on the question
Track who has and has not contributed	Summarize or wrap up students' points for them

Handling a stalled discussion:

If the room goes quiet for more than 20–30 seconds and no student moves the conversation forward, try one of these moves rather than simply re-asking the question:

- Point to a specific passage: "Go back to paragraph 3. What is the author actually claiming there?"
- Invite disagreement: "Is there anyone who sees this differently?"

- Surface a tension: “Two different ideas have been raised — can someone name the conflict between them?”
- Ask for evidence: “That’s a strong claim — where in the text does that come from?”

Tracking the Discussion: The Participation Map

Draw a circle with each student’s name or seat position. Every time a student speaks, place a dot by their name. Draw an arrow to whoever they were responding to. After the discussion, you can see who dominated, who was silent, who was consistently responding to others, and whether the conversation was genuinely dialogic or a series of disconnected speeches. Share anonymized patterns with students during the debrief.

Pattern You See on the Map	What It Means / How to Address It
A few students with many dots	Dominant voices — address in the debrief; assign a participation goal for the next discussion; consider a “Chip In” rule (each student gets 3 chips per discussion; spend a chip every time you speak)
Most students with zero or one dot	Under-participation — check whether prep was completed; consider fishbowl or small-group pre-discussion; revise the opening question for more accessibility
Arrows only going to the teacher’s position	Students are performing for you, not discussing with each other — physically move further from the circle; remind students to address the group
Parallel statements with no connecting arrows	Monologuing rather than discussing — explicitly teach the “Build on / Challenge / Question” framework; practice transition phrases before the next discussion

Phase 3: After the Discussion — Debrief and Assessment

The Discussion Debrief

Reserve the final 8–10 minutes of class for a structured debrief. This is where much of the learning consolidates. The debrief should address both **content** (what did we figure out?) and **process** (how did we discuss?).

Step 1	Content Synthesis
	Ask: “What was the most important idea that emerged today — something you didn’t think before the discussion started?” Give 60 seconds of silent think time, then take 3–4 responses.
Step 2	Process Reflection
	Share one or two observations from your participation map (without naming individuals). Ask the group: “What did we do well as a group? What would make our next discussion stronger?”
Step 3	Exit Ticket
	Students write 2–3 sentences: What is one idea you want to keep thinking about? What is one question the discussion did not answer? Collect and read before the next class — they reveal misunderstandings and strong threads to pick up next time.

Assessment: What to Grade and How

The most common mistake in grading Harkness is rewarding quantity of talk over quality of contribution. A student who speaks twelve times without responding to a single peer should score lower than a student who speaks four times with precise textual evidence and direct engagement with others’ ideas.

Discussion Quality Indicators	4	3	2	1	Evidence / Notes	Score
Use of Evidence Cites specific text to support claims	Always cites text with precision	Usually cites text	Occasionally cites text	Rarely or never cites text		
Building on Others Responds directly to peers, not just the question	Consistently names and responds to	Usually acknowledges others	Occasionally responds to others	Speaks without connecting to others		

	others' ideas					
Quality of Questions Asks genuine questions that move conversation forward	Asks rich, text-grounded questions	Asks mostly open questions	Asks some questions	Rarely asks questions		
Depth of Thinking Moves beyond summary to interpretation and analysis	Consistently interpretive and analytical	Mostly analytical	Mix of summary and analysis	Mostly summary or recall		
Discussion Citizenship Listens actively; does not interrupt; invites quieter voices	Consistently models discussion norms	Usually follows norms	Sometimes violates norms	Frequently violates norms		
TOTAL	/ 20					

Preparation grade (position statement + annotated text) may be assessed separately as a completion or quality grade, typically 20–30% of the total discussion score.

Harkness Format Variations

Format	When to Use It
Full Circle	Best for classes of 10–16. Everyone participates simultaneously. Ideal for classes that are comfortable with the method.
Fishbowl	Inner circle discusses while outer circle observes with a specific task (mapping, tracking claim types, noting discussion moves). Rotate at the midpoint. Best for larger classes or early in the semester.

Concentric Fishbowl	Inner circle includes one empty chair. Any student from the outer circle can temporarily “tap in” to the empty seat, contribute, then return. Creates a fluid boundary between circles.
Speed Harkness	Students rotate through 3–4 small-group discussions of 8–10 minutes each, with a different focus question at each station. Good for introducing the method or reviewing multiple topics.
Written Harkness	A written version for quieter students or asynchronous settings. Students pass a shared document, responding in writing to each other’s posts using the same discussion norms. Useful as a scaffold before moving to spoken Harkness.

Implementing Harkness: A Semester Arc

Harkness works best when students practice the skills progressively. The following arc is designed for a 16-week semester but can be compressed into a shorter unit.

Phase	Weeks	What to Do
Introduction	<i>Weeks 1–2</i>	Teach the what and why. - Introduce the student guide; discuss the purpose and norms of Harkness - Model a short discussion with teacher participation so students see the moves in action - Practice with a low-stakes, familiar text (a short article, a political cartoon, a news clip)
Scaffolded Practice	<i>Weeks 3–6</i>	Build the skills deliberately. - Run fishbowl format — half discuss, half observe with structured observation forms - Teach and practice specific discussion moves: paraphrasing, building, challenging with evidence - Debrief every discussion with the participation map visible to the class
Independent Practice	<i>Weeks 7–12</i>	Step further back. - Move to full-circle discussions; teacher observes and tracks only - Assign a student “discussion facilitator” role on a rotating basis

		Students begin self-assessing against the rubric before the teacher grades
Mastery	<i>Weeks 13–16</i>	Let students own it. - Students select the text and write the opening question for one discussion - Students lead the debrief and share their own participation map observations - Use discussion quality as a summative assessment tied to course learning outcomes

A note on equity and access:

Harkness discussions naturally favor students who are verbal, confident, and have had prior experience with academic discourse. Be deliberate about equitable access: provide sentence frames for students who are building academic language, allow students to “pass” once per discussion without penalty, build in structured think time before discussion begins, and consider allowing students to share a written note rather than speak aloud on days when anxiety or other factors are high. The goal is genuine intellectual participation, not performance.