

SIS 202: DISCUSSION GUIDELINES FOR SECTION

The section meetings for SIS 202 are opportunities to discuss the course readings, films, and lectures. Discussion is the central activity of our work together in sections. In fact, the sections are taught as seminars—discussion circles in which learning and refinement of understanding develops through collective discussion and debate with other students.

It is important for us to be clear about the rules of conduct for our discussions, because some of the readings are difficult, and some of the lectures, films, and readings raise issues that are emotional because they impact us in intense, personal ways. We, Professor Robinson and all of the SIS 202 teaching assistants, have agreed that the following principles will guide the discussions in sections and in lectures:

- **Your authority to speak in discussion comes from having done the assigned readings for SIS 202.** Students with a background in course materials are an invaluable resource to the class, but you should engage in section discussions by referring to the SIS 202 assigned materials with which we are all familiar. All of us draw from our personal experiences and feelings to understand course materials, often in productive and illuminating ways. However, productive discussion in this class must always be grounded in and engage with assigned readings.
- **In order to clarify our confusion, it is necessary to “think out loud” and to ask peers for assistance at the point where our thinking becomes less clear.** Thinking out loud is a risk-taking activity that has great rewards. These rewards include the opportunity to resolve confusion, to strengthen analytical thinking skills, to strengthen your argument by testing it against other alternative interpretations, and to consider changing your position when others provide more convincing evidence or interpretations of course materials. In other words, do not be afraid to speak before you have fully developed your own argument—discussion is a process of thinking, not its outcome.
- **You are expected to contribute to the intellectual work of the seminar by engaging the ideas of authors and all other seminar participants.** Any informed question is a good question. When necessary, speak from the point of view of the author in order to clarify questions about the readings. Strive to be clear and specific whether you are addressing points of evidence or interpretation. Answer your classmate’s questions, and ask each other for help when you come to the end of your own understanding.
- **Because of the sensitive nature of much this course’s content, it is vital for you to *listen to and respect what others say*.** You are expected to engage in discussion with others when you do not understand a speaker’s point or when you do not agree, as well as to be clear and specific about what points of evidence or interpretation cause your disagreement.
- **You have the right to refine your positions or to change them—multiple times even—over the course of the quarter.** In these sections, we are striving to develop stronger critical thinking skills and new analytical perspectives. In the course of doing so, it is expected that everyone will experience moments of confusion or begin to question long held beliefs about the nature of the social world. These moments will happen for different seminar participants at different times and in relation to different readings, films, or discussions; you can benefit both from your own questions and from taking note of the places where your classmates become confused.
- **Disagreeing with one another does not in any way impugn anyone’s intellectual skills or commitments to ethical action.** Throughout this course we will be discussing some very serious and pressing political issues and current events. Recognize that very rigorous and ethical thinkers may come to different conclusions about an issue.