



INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL LAW & POLICY
HARVARD LAW SCHOOL

The IGLP Approach to Presenting and Offering Feedback at Writing Workshops

ALL OF US GIVE FEEDBACK and comment on other people's intellectual work. We all try to situate our own work in relationship to the ideas other people have had about issues we care about, which also requires that we accurately reflect on their prior work. We hope the Writing Workshop will help us all become better at this crucial professional activity. We propose a simple three step approach when you present someone's work:

First, restate the paper. What does it say? Reflect as accurately as possible what the other author has said as you heard or read it. By itself, this can often be extremely helpful – letting the author know what came across.

Second, identify the scholarly intervention. What is the main contribution of this piece to the existing literature? What appears to be the author's purpose in publishing this piece and why would/should others want to read it?

Third, offer constructive feedback. How can the author's project be improved, her or his intervention strengthened?

We purposely leave out a fourth element that is, unfortunately, common in reviews of other people's work – explaining what you would write, how you would intervene in the same debate. Although crucial for your own work, this is only rarely helpful to another author. Each of us begins our own work by moving from what others are saying to what we wish to say. In presenting someone else's work, the goal is a different one: help the author and your audience understand what he or she has communicated and how it might matter. In formulating your feedback aim to assist the author achieve his or her own objectives better.

In what follows, we give you the outline that will guide discussions in each of the sessions and some more specific suggestions to inform your remarks.

OUTLINE FOR THE DISCUSSION OF EACH PAPER

Each paper is allotted roughly 55 minutes for discussion during the workshop, as detailed below. **Please note that all the members of each workshop section are expected to have read each of the papers in advance.**

Author Introduction (2 minutes or less) - imagine the group asking you “how can we be helpful?” Then:

1. Describe the basic nature of your intervention.
 - a. Mode/Venue: Is it meant as a law review article, or a book chapter? Is it part of a dissertation? Is it for a peer-reviewed journal?
 - b. Genre: What is the literature with which it engages? What and who is the intended audience?
2. Identify areas of difficulty where feedback might be most helpful.

Peer Discussant Presentation (12 minutes or less)

Your presentation should approximate the format below:

1. Describe the paper and identify its central argument(s) and contribution(s). **(5 minutes)**
 - a. What appears to be the central issue/puzzle that the paper seeks to address?
 - b. How would you state the paper’s central argument or thesis? Are there more than one?
 - c. How does the author develop the argument? Offer a brief summary of the paper.
 - d. In what debates/discussions does it seek to intervene? Who is the author writing against? For?
 - e. **How would the author complete the sentence: “Until now, everyone has thought _____ but now we should think _____.”**
2. Identify the types and modes of scholarly intervention. (2 minutes) See page 3 for a possible list of types and modes.
3. Offer constructive feedback. (5 minutes; see page 4 for suggested types, based in part on the stage of the project). What might be helpful for the group to discuss to assist the author?

Faculty Discussant Presentation (6 minutes or less each)

Group Discussion (25-30 minutes) We will reserve 2-3 minutes at the end for the authors to respond, if they wish.

TYPES OF SCHOLARLY INTERVENTION AND MODES OF ARGUMENTATION

Scholarly works “intervene” in ongoing scholarly or policy discussions in various ways. They do so with arguments of many different types. It is often helpful to try to specify just what kind of intervention is being made, into what ongoing discussion, using what mode of argumentation. Here are some possible types of intervention and modes of argumentation. The lists may be useful in describing the various drafts to be discussed in your workshop section. You will surely identify others in the papers you discuss during the Workshop.

An Incomplete List of Types of Scholarly Intervention - Please use the blank lines below to extend the lists.

1. Proposing a new take on a well-established empirical claim, line of reasoning, or doctrine
2. Reorganizing or reinterpreting a doctrinal field
3. Critically mapping the consciousness of the establishment
4. Demonstrating unintended consequences of well-meaning law reform projects or of a jurisprudential line of reasoning
5. Intervening in a theoretical, jurisprudential, or political debate on the basis of new evidence or a new approach
6. Interdisciplinary: advocating a new or renewed interdisciplinary project or intervening in two disciplines simultaneously in an original way
7. Comparison: intervening in two different national political or legal debates at the same time; using comparison to intervene in a policy or jurisprudential debate; using comparison to challenge accepted empirical claims.
8. Retelling or unsettling a settled historical narrative: recovering possibilities that have been overlooked
9. Using historical retelling to challenge a discipline’s basic assumptions
10. Critiquing a scholar with whom you are generally sympathetic – or more hostile – through a book or literature review
11. _____
12. _____

An Incomplete List of Modes of Argumentation

Intervening has a positive side, of course – how you think things should be understood. There is also a critical component – how has the prevailing discussion run off track? Arguing against other points of view can be done in many ways. Here are some examples:

1. Uncovering problematic assumptions underlying particular theories, doctrines, and policies with which you disagree
2. Highlighting unresolved gaps, conflicts, and ambiguities in existing arguments or proposals
3. Focusing on structural biases and blind spots that existing approaches ignore
4. Bringing new (or old but forgotten) theories, theorists, personal narratives, and/or empirical methods to bear on familiar problems
5. Presenting new data or a new analysis that challenge(s) existing empirical findings
6. Engaging in cost/benefit analysis
7. _____
8. _____

TYPES OF FEEDBACK

You should consult this list before you start preparing your feedback, but feel free to identify other types of comments. Depending on what stage of a project someone is in different types of feedback will be helpful.

Helpful Types of Feedback

When no significant new research is needed or possible:

1. Suggest how the author might clarify or sharpen the thesis, type of intervention, etc.
2. Suggest ways the author might reorganize the paper to make the thesis/intervention clearer. (Hint: Imagine how the paper would read if it were to start with the conclusion.)
3. Offer objections that are likely to be raised to the paper and suggest responses.

When some more research might be feasible:

1. Offer objections that are likely to be raised to the paper and suggest responses.
2. Propose the consideration of related literature that might offer further theoretical or methodological insight or that might be good models for the paper. It is usually helpful to be as specific as possible – and to work within the author’s chosen method/approach.
3. Consider ways that the author might sharpen or strengthen the paper’s method.
 - a. Is the author reaching macro conclusions from micro analysis? The reverse?
 - b. Is the author relying on unexamined assumptions?

When there are some fundamental issues with the paper or project:

1. Are there unexamined alternative explanations for the conclusions offered?
2. Might the author’s analysis lead to a different conclusion?
3. More broadly, are the methods appropriate to the question/data?

Not Helpful Types of Feedback

1. Suggest that the author take a totally different theoretical/political approach (such as the one you might take) to the issue she or he is addressing.
2. Propose an entirely new field or literature that the author needs to know before continuing with her or his project (unless it is directly implicated and clearly overlooked).
3. Propose a different/more interesting question the author could answer.

OUTLINE FOR DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH OR DISSERTATION PROPOSALS

Your presentation should approximate the format below:

1. Describe the project and identify its central questions(s)/contribution(s). (5 minutes)
 - a. What appears to be the central issue/puzzle that the proposed project seeks to address?
 - b. How would you state the central argument or thesis of the proposed project? (If you see more than one potential argument, articulate the various possibilities.)
 - c. How does the author propose to develop the argument? (Offer a brief summary of the method.)
 - d. In what debates/discussions does the project seek to intervene? Who is the author writing against? For?
 - e. How would the author, at the end of the project, complete the sentence: "Until now, every one has thought _____ but now we should think _____."
2. Identify the types and modes of scholarly intervention. (2 minutes – see page 3 for incomplete typologies)
 - a. What evidence/methods does the author propose to use to support the claims made?
 - b. How does/should the author explain the nature of her or his intervention? Why does this proposed project matter? What gap or shortcoming in the literature is this project addressing?
 - c. How would you classify the type and mode of intervention that it proposes?
3. Offer constructive feedback. (5 minutes; consult page 4 for additional suggestions)
 - a. Identify one or more key ways in which the way the research question is posed could be improved – is the question too broad (the usual case)? Too narrow? How might the question be re-framed without losing sight of the author's primary intellectual goal(s)?
 - b. Identify additional literature that might shed light on the proposed question or methods. Suggest completed projects/books that might serve as models for the author to follow.
 - c. Identify ways in which the proposed method of the project could be improved – what additional sources of data or materials might help answer the question? Is the case selection appropriate? Is the choice of historical period or corpus of materials the right one?
 - d. Identify whether the proposed methods, data or primary materials on which the author proposes to rely are appropriate for the question proposed.
 - e. What might be helpful for the group to discuss to assist the author?