

**Four Roles in Discussion**  
**Handout Developed by Emily Clough**  
**Gov. 20: Foundations of Comparative Politics**

The best discussions in academic classes go beyond a regurgitation of texts to include analysis, debate, and synthesis of new material. Early in your college careers, it's useful to develop a set of skills that yield lively conversations in which participants test out arguments, evaluate and critique texts, and integrate material from their reading and lecture into larger ideas from the course. There are four useful roles you can play in an academic discussion, and when you play them well, discussions can be very rewarding.

1. **Text Reviewer:** Put some raw material on the table. You can do this by quoting or paraphrasing texts, summarizing readings, or answering questions about an author's main point.

*What does the text say?*

2. **Analyst:** Put forward your own original analysis or synthesis of the raw material that's on the table. You can do this by comparing texts, complicating an author's argument, offering evidence that might help the class to evaluate a theory, or contesting an author's point.

*What do you think about what the text says?*

3. **Respondent:** Respond to other people's analytical points by engaging them directly, moving the discussion from a series of individual points to a true back-and-forth conversation. You can do this by saying things like, "I agree with Sarah because..." or "I see things differently and here's how," by interrogating the person's point, or by extending the point to apply to something else you've read for class.

*What do you think about your classmates' analysis of the text?*

4. **Synthesizer:** Act as the meta-level discussant, narrator, synthesizer, or conversation evolver. You can do this by saying things like "what I'm hearing is that there's a larger disagreement about what the goal of this theory is" or "I hear so-and-so saying this, and so-and-so saying this, and I think their perspectives have more in common than we might think" or "I'm hearing a lot of support for X idea, but I think what we're missing here is a discussion of Y related point."

*Where is this discussion going? What are we missing?*