

## Critical Discussion Groups

For several years now, writing classes have been supplementing their in-class activities with virtual discussion groups and peer editing boards. Such tools as Black Board, Web CT and Moodle, along with numerous “in-house” platform options, make it easy to set up asynchronous (not requiring all participants to be online at the same time) exchanges within small, manageable groups.

Online asynchronous activities that nevertheless fall within designated time periods (ones that serve the needs of student and class) have several related benefits. Let’s consider four of those. Perhaps most important is the creation of an audience. Writing is a form of communication; it depends in large measure upon your awareness of the readers to whom you are writing. When you are in a discussion group of three or four other members, those peers constitute an audience, one that serves as effective reminder of what it means to have an audience.

Second, flexible discussion exchanges provide an opportunity to think over what others have written on the topic and what you will write to them before you actually respond. You have time to do related research, even for inspiration to strike. Third, group discussions benefit everyone involved by allowing participants to model strategies and techniques for each other. The fourth benefit of asynchronous online critical exchanges is the opportunity to grow from a plurality of viewpoints, and from a student-based perspective in general. At the heart of learning is the student—you and your peers. We view education not as a matter of authorities filling in a *tabula rasa* (blank slate) but rather of mid-wives assisting at a birth, or of facilitators helping you to discover and apply what, in a sense, you already know. Asynchronous discussions are a fine way to facilitate this process while encouraging independent learning.

## Recognizing What You Need to Know to Become an Independent Learner

Clearly stated skills and knowledge required for each discussion allow students to do as much or as little preliminary learning as needed for each exchange activity. The following model comprises three asynchronous discussions, each occurring within a window of five days and each ending two weeks before the next one begins. Students using this model within a distance education program may sign into groups knowing that room for another participant exists but without knowing who the other members are. Gaining a sense of audience is best done with others that one does not yet know well. (An alternative schedule allows for three discussion periods each providing ten-day windows, with each discussion ending a month before the next commences.) Although the learning and not the marks should be what really matters in this activity, we suggest that despite the limited length of writing specified by this model (five paragraphs and various responses to the paragraphs of others), students are required to learn and apply all the essentials of first-year university scholarship, as well as to read and understand a number of course readings. The extent of this learning commitment justifies marks in the vicinity of 20% of the course composite grade.

### Model of Three Asynchronous Discussions

(The arbitrary dates given here simply illustrate the method. Your dates will of course be suited to your own schedule and to those of your class.)

#### ***Discussion 1: Introductions***

Between 10 and 15 January, post two paragraphs of self-introduction and post brief responses to the paragraphs of your other group members. From the course reader or syllabus of readings as presented by your instructor, select one reading that you wish to respond to for Discussion 2. Announce the title of your selected reading to your group members. Respond briefly to the paragraph postings of other members.

### *Required Skills for Discussion 1*

- Audience awareness and how to adapt tone to suit occasion (AOW Chpts. 1 and 2)
- Paragraph craft (AOW Chpt. 4)
- Grammar (AOW Handbook)

### *Detailed Instructions*

- Post one paragraph introducing yourself
- Post a second paragraph discussing one aspect of your culture or community
- Identify one article from the course readings that you intend to discuss next meeting
- Identify the *topic* of your posting for Discussion 3
- Post brief responses to your group members' two paragraphs

### *Checklist of Criteria for Your Paragraphs*

- An effective title that expresses topic and controlling idea
- An effective topic sentence and application of the 4 Fs
- A personal style and tone adapted to the occasion and audience
- Correct grammar, punctuation, and mechanics
- 9 – 12 sentences per paragraph

### ***Discussion 2: Critical Response Paragraphs***

Between 2 and 7 February, post a brief summary of the article that you selected and announced to your group members in Discussion 1. Post one solid paragraph of critical response to the selected reading. Your response will discuss one interesting point in the reading (the controlling idea or a related idea) or examine a relationship between content and rhetoric. If you discuss an idea presented by the essay, you should clarify whether

you agree or disagree with the idea or if you would modify it in some way. Your response must effectively cite one secondary source. Post brief responses to your group members' summaries and critical responses.

### *Required Skills and Knowledge for Discussion 2*

- Awareness of how to write a summary and (for essays with hard-to-find theses) how to use rhetorical analysis to gather an implicit thesis (AOW Chpts. 6 and 13)
- Awareness of critical thinking (AOW Chpt 14)
- Awareness of logic and fallacies (AOW Chpt. 3)
- Awareness of research methods and documentation style (AOW Chpts. 18 and 19)
- Paragraph craft (AOW Chpt. 4)

### *Detailed Instructions*

- Post one brief paragraph summarizing the reading
- Post one substantive paragraph stating and explaining your critical response
- Use at least one secondary source to inform your discussion
- Document your citations and list sources at the end of your paragraph
- Use approved MLA or APA style
- Cite your primary source as well as your secondary source(s)
- Post brief responses to your group members' summaries and critical responses
- Respond to each group member on her or his proposed topic for the group 3 discussion of a controversy. Try to recommend another possible source or way to find relevant sources on the topic each group member has proposed.
- Announce the controversy that you will be summarizing for discussion 3.

### *Checklist of Criteria for Your summary and Critical Response Paragraph*

- For the Summary: a basic title as follows-- A Summary of “Title of Reading”
- For the summary: apply “10 Steps to a Successful Summary,” *Acting on Words* (p. 198)
- For the summary: maximum length of three sentences
- For the critical paragraph: an effective title that expresses topic and controlling idea
- For the critical paragraph: a strong opening sentence providing controlling idea and a sense of the reasons, to be discussed in the rest of the paragraph
- For the critical paragraph: suitable critical tone and style and observation of the 4 Fs of paragraph craft
- For the critical paragraph: effective citation of one source using MLA or APA style
- For the critical paragraph: listing of the source at the end, using MLA or APA style
- For the summary and critical response: correct grammar, punctuation, and mechanics
- For citation and documentation: correct application of the methods demonstrated in Chpts. 18 and 19 and throughout the text by various writing samples.

### ***Discussion 3: Paragraph Summarizing a Specific Controversy***

Between 21 and 26 February, post one paragraph summarizing an issue of controversy in your field of work, study, activity, or community

#### *Required Skills and Knowledge for Discussion 3*

- Summarizing (AOW Chpts. 6 and 13)
- Principles of argumentation (AOW Chpt. 16)

- Comparison structure to balance equally both sides of a controversy (AOW Chpt. 12)
- Paragraph craft (AOW Chpt. 4)
- Research and documentation (AOW Chpt. 18 and 19)
- Correct grammar, punctuation, and mechanics (AOW Handbook)

### *Detailed Instructions*

- Post one paragraph summarizing the issue of controversy in your field of work, study, or in your community
- Conclude your paragraph with a reflection on some implication of the controversy
- Cite one secondary source related to one side of the controversy and a second one related to the other side
- Post brief responses to your group members' postings

### *Checklist of Criteria for Your Paragraph*

- An effective title that expresses topic and controlling idea
- An effective topic sentence and application of the 4 Fs
- A style and tone adapted to the occasion and audience
- Effective organizational structure suited to the purpose
- Correct grammar, punctuation, and mechanics
- 9 – 12 sentences long
- Effective citation of two sources using MLA or APA style (one source speaking to one side of the controversy, the other source speaking to the other side of the controversy)
- Correct listing of the sources at the end, using MLA or APA style

## Sample Paragraph Postings

### ***Discussion 2 Sample 1***

The student of the following Discussion 2 paragraph of critical response has selected David Suzuki's essay "The Right Stuff."

#### A Summary of "The Right Stuff"

Brian Mitchell

In his essay "The Right Stuff," David Suzuki argues that high school science courses should begin with sex education, because human sexuality is unavoidable in today's society yet poorly explained by parents, media, and peers. Supporting his suggestion largely through a personal illustration, Suzuki asserts that high school students will find human sexuality a relevant point of departure to other topics. Suzuki concludes by stating that parents opposed to sex education in high school may not offer the necessary education at home. Students are then left to learn from sexually explicit media treatments and the distorted stories of peers, both poor sources, especially at a time of life when an informed introduction to sexuality is so important. Not many students go on to careers in science; more important is that high school science be relevant, interesting, and thus truly educational.

[**Note** how this summary follows the "Ten Steps" described on page 198 yet makes judicious decisions in compressing a longer summary (p. 197) into five sentences. For purposes of this sample, we assume that Brian Mitchell is author of the longer summary draft on p. 197. Otherwise, he would be using words from another source without quotation marks or attribution, which is plagiarism.]

## “The Right Stuff”— Let’s Read It For What It Is

If we consider David Suzuki’s purpose in this essay bearing in mind the audience for whom it was intended, we recognize an example of achieved persuasion. In an article for *The Guttmacher Report on Public Policy*, Cynthia Dailard states that 65% of American parents in 2000 would have supported a call for a broader sex education program in the schools. Since Canadians tend to be more liberal than Americans on social policy, it’s a reasonable guess that many Canadian parents would be fairly receptive to Suzuki’s proposal, especially given that it is coming from a trusted authority. *Acting on Words* refers to effective writers determining a realistic “goal” (Brundage and Lahey, p. 251): the occasion determines what is realistic. *Acting on Words* mentions three levels of persuasion across an apparent continuum from a change of awareness to a change of thinking to the taking of an action (p. 251). Suzuki has opted primarily for the least ambitious of these, a change of awareness. Lee Jennings fails to understand this writer’s choice when he says that Suzuki “spends too long on one personal anecdote and ignores or, at best, sweeps aside counterarguments” (qtd. in Brundage and Lahey, pp. 218-19). A newspaper column (this article was an opinion piece for the *Globe and Mail*) hardly permits the length or style of a persuasive implementation report complete with budget estimates, which is almost what Lee Jennings seems to call for. On the other hand, a “simple” change of awareness can precipitate a change of thinking and from there exert an influence on politicians. Suzuki reminds parents (the primary, business-class readers of the *Globe*) that teenage hormones go into overdrive and someone knowledgeable had better help teens to understand that, because denying the matter is simply naïve. His personal story of how he directed class attention to meaningful learning by being both frank and mature about sexuality offers an undeniable point that *Globe* readers might not have considered, since the debate over sex education almost always starts and finishes with sex. Jennings is right to point out that Suzuki favours a personal example over statistics, studies, or detailed concessions to other sides of the controversy, but Jennings overlooks how the original and valuable idea emerging from the personal example suits the author’s purpose.



## Works Cited

Brundage, David and Michael Lahey. *Acting on Words: An Integrated Rhetoric, Reader and Handbook*. Toronto: Pearson, 2009.

*Guttmacher Report on Public Policy*. 4, 1 (February 2001). 1 April 2007.

<http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/tgr/o4/1/gr040109.html>

Jennings, Lee. ““The Right Stuff”—If Only It Were that Simple,” in *Acting on Words: An Integrated Rhetoric, Reader and Handbook*. Ed. David Brundage and Michael Lahey, Toronto: Pearson, 2009, pages

### ***Discussion 2 Sample 2***

Summary of “Kyoto Discord—Let’s Be Wise if Not Right or Rich”

John Roberts

In her essay, written in 2002 when Canada was deciding whether to commit to the Kyoto Accord, Gwen Kelly argues that Canada should commit to the proposed carbon-emission reduction targets because objections presented by George Bush are inconsiderate and unreliable while risks to the planet anticipated by increasing numbers of scientists are not worth taking. Drawing upon information from the David Suzuki Foundation, Kelly refers to the broad categories of extreme weather, imperiled ecosystems, and threats to human health (tropical diseases believed to be spreading with warmer weather). The Foundation claims that “global warming is a reality” (para. 4) and that “carbon emissions do contribute to this trend” (para. 4). Kelly acknowledges her lack of a scientific basis from which to decide what research to trust. She sums up her reasoning by comparing the earth to a human mother whose well-being may depend on certain herbs; she says it is better to sacrifice for the herbs than to risk the consequences, especially since she does not see decisive evidence that meeting Kyoto standards would bring hardship to the country in general. In conclusion, she advocates for regional representation through the Canadian Senate to provide an increased mechanism for political conciliation.

“Kyoto Discord”: *What Exactly Are We Talking About?*

John Roberts

Gwen Kelly’s essay “Kyoto Discord—Let’s Be Wise if Not Right or Rich” certainly demonstrates a clear concession-refutation structure for argument; as an illustration of critical analysis, however, it touches on a number of major topics without looking closely enough at any. Because of this generality, the basic argument that there could be a crisis so we better respond accordingly doesn’t convince me; in fact, it could be yet one more appeal to group think. Professor Ross McKitrick of the University of Guelph writes the following:

Twenty years ago I decided to specialize in environmental economics after hearing more and more about the environmental crisis. But in the intervening years I have found that the perception of crisis is often inversely proportional to the specificity of the discussion (15).

In a caution against generalizing, McKitrick tells his students not to use the word “environment,” which he calls “the E-word,” because it “includes everything between your skin and outer space” (13). Kelly’s essay has this weakness of referring to so much and therefore to so little. As opposition to her view, she presents President Bush, an easy source to reject. She recommends democratizing life in Canada by providing elected regional influence in the Senate. Will this give power to ordinary Albertans rather than the oil and gas industry, which pretty much runs Alberta? Her answers appear a little too easy. I would like to see some Ross McKitricks in her discussion, more independent thinking scientists whose specific research may question some of the crisis thinking that abounds today, even among scientists. I’m no supporter of the quasi-fascist practices of George Bush, but I can’t help hypothesizing that today’s crisis mentality owes more to a religious past of Puritanism, doctrines of good versus evil, and convictions of original sin than it does to true science.

## Works Cited

Kelly, Gwen. "Kyoto Discord-- Let's Be Wise if Not Right or Rich." *Acting on Words: An Integrated Rhetoric, Reader, and Handbook*. 2<sup>nd</sup>. ed. Ed. David Brundage and Michael Lahey. Toronto: Pearson, 2009. 211-215.

McKittrick, Ross. "The Environmental Crisis: The Devil Is in the Details." *Academic Matters*. OCUFA. April-May 2008. 13-16.

### **Discussion 2 Sample 3**

Magazine Speak—Interesting, but...

A Response to Susan McClelland's "The Lure of the Body Image":

Sandra Fairweather

From personal observation, I certainly agree that some men, like a good number of women, do questionable things in hopes of attaining an idealized body image. I don't think many people would disagree that in some of these cases, media images intensify the pressures. But what I think Susan McClelland's article mainly demonstrates is that general public magazine stories may be informative on current events and often interesting in suggesting historical or other connections, but if you are seeking carefully weighed analysis and specialized information on the topic, view them with "reader discretion." A sample essay at the *Acting on Words* Text Enrichment Site, Chapter 12, describes *Maclean's* as having a "mandate to present thoughtful, relatively objective reportage responding to current events for a well educated general readership" (1). The sample essay observes that McClelland's article shares some of the features of scholarly writing yet also uses human interest "hooks" (narratives with personal appeal), a method that seems part of today's journalistic formula as reflected in other media stories reprinted in *Acting on Words*, such as "College Girl to Call Girl." These stories invariably start with a personal example that signals a controlling idea, then consult at least two experts (universities provide lists of faculty considered expert on various

topics), and usually refer to several studies, reports, and statistics (not always clearly attributed). We need to keep in mind that despite university training or the equivalent, the writer is not a specialist in the topic, has only so long to prepare the article, has an obligation to be lively and readable, and has only so many words available. These constraints show up in “Body Image.” As one example, paragraph 2 refers to “hundreds of thousands of men in Canada [...] flocking to gyms and health clubs in the quest to look buffed and toned.” The author gives no source for the number cited (perhaps it comes from the report mentioned two paragraphs later?), but even assuming that the number is accurate, how can she conclude that none of these men is interested in gaining exercise, enjoying athletic activities, and releasing stress? The term “flocking” is clearly biased, used for narrative appeal, and the conclusion is oversimplified. Yet another question is whether it is really surprising or alarming to hear that less than 4% of young men around 1993 took steroids to look beefy (para. 6). Our society is not exactly predicated on natural or healthy behaviour, witness immoderate sedentary work patterns, unwholesome mass produced food, and “epidemic” obesity rather more alarming than McClelland’s statistics on body image excess (Starky).

#### Works Cited

McClelland, Susan. “The Lure of the Body Image.” *Acting on Words: An Integrated Rhetoric, Reader, and Handbook*. 2<sup>nd</sup>. ed. Ed. David Brundage and Michael Lahey. Toronto: Pearson, 2009. 447-50.

“Sample Essay of Comparison Using a Hybrid of Point-by-point and Subject-by-subject.” *Acting on Words* Text Enrichment Site. Chapter 12. Toronto: Pearson, 2009. August 2008. 15 August 2008.  
<http://www.pearsoned.ca/brundage>

Starky, Sheena. “The Obesity Epidemic in Canada.” Parliamentary Information and Research Service. 15 July 2005. 2 August 2008.  
<http://www.parl.gc.ca/information/library/prbpubs/prb0511-e.htm>

The following is quoted from the introduction to Starky’s report, which uses information from Health Canada and other official sources:

In 2004, approximately 6.8 million Canadian adults ages 20 to 64 were overweight, and an additional 4.5 million were obese (Health Canada). Roughly speaking, an adult male is considered overweight when his body weight exceeds the maximum desirable weight for his height, and obese when his body weight is 20% or more over this desirable weight. A similar guideline holds true for women, but at a threshold of 25% rather than 20%. Dramatic increases in overweight and obesity among Canadians over the past 30 years have been deemed to constitute an “epidemic.”

### ***Discussion 3 Sample 1***

Little Cat Feet<sup>1</sup>  
Alejandra Piaz

Whether cats should be allowed to roam—at least, in urban communities—has been a heated public issue for the past ten years in Edmonton. When City Hall first proposed a bylaw restricting cats to their owners’ properties, a groundswell protest resulted. Gina Davis, president of a citizens’ action group for animals’ rights, argues that a cat’s independent nature requires the freedom to roam, to fulfill its hunting instincts and to function within cat society, one that has its own rules and structure. She acknowledges that some owners inconsiderately allow their cats to sully the yards of neighbours, but that cats provide companionship to children, seniors, and the infirm— values that mean far more to communities than pristine flower beds. She points out that moth balls and other such tactics effectively discourage undesired feline visitors. On the other hand, Ruth Melnyk of the Edmonton Pound reports that homeless, injured, and distressed cats vastly outnumber homeless, injured, and distressed dogs. She believes this is because the

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<sup>1</sup> “The fog comes on little cat feet...” Carl Sandburg

city regulates dogs but leaves cats to the whims of cars, coyotes, falls, and incensed neighbors. A cat in the city is no longer in a natural world, she says, so alternative ways of providing them access to the outdoors and of countering indoor boredom need to be found. She says that regulating cats would make overly casual owners think harder before acquiring one. The city recently began providing live capture traps in hopes of appeasing citizens who simply cannot tolerate cat intruders—my next-door neighbour, one such individual, has already carted three captured cats to Animal Control. While sympathizing with both Ms. Davis and Ms. Melnyk, I also find myself wondering if one of the mysterious forces underlying this quarrel is our deep-seated if all but repressed associations of cats with white... or, in some minds, black powers.

1. "The fog comes on little cat feet..." Carl Sandburg.

#### Works Cited

Davis, Gina. Personal Interview. 12 Sept. 2002.

Melnyk, Ruth. Personal Interview. 14 Sept. 2002.

### ***Discussion 3 Sample 2***

#### Women in Combat: an Either-Or Fallacy?

Roger Côté

The heated debate over women in combat assures us that either they have what it takes... or they haven't. The debate has intensified since a 1997 \$1.5 ad campaign encouraging Canadian women to sign up for combat (Ward). This initiative followed a 1986 Canadian Human Rights Tribunal decision ordering the Canadian military to open all its jobs to women. The 48 women in combat trades in 1989 rose to 66 in 1997 and the numbers are now heading into the hundreds. Opponents, such as REAL Women of Canada, consider

this sort of “social experimentation [to be] just plain foolishness—and typically Canadian.” They point to a 1997 British Ministry of Defense study conclusion that “only 1% of women can equal the performance of the average man.” Furthermore, say the critics, women disrupt the men who become defensive, sexually distracted, or overprotective. On the other side, supporters like Dr. Eleanor Hancock of Monash University, Australia, argue that the “performance” tests are skewed to men’s particular strengths, thus overlooking female stamina, endurance, and leg strength. The remarkable achievements of numerous females who fought in the last century in Serbian, Russian, and North Vietnamese armies demonstrate clearly that women soldiers—far from disruptive—can be potential determiners of their country’s military success. Dr. Hancock considers Canada “at the most progressive end of the spectrum” in granting women the ultimate symbol of full citizenship. A few weeks ago, I welcomed my daughter back from her service in Afghanistan, a military action I honestly don’t understand. In welcoming my daughter, I recognized the truth of Dr. Hancock’s equation; not, however, without recalling my 1960s protests against war, my wish for a world washed by the wisdom of Gandhi, and my frequent reflection that so little is simple in life-- or in death.

#### Works Cited

“The Failure of Women in Combat.” REAL Women of Canada Newsletter. Sept. 2002.  
10 Sept. 2003.

[http://www.realwomenca.com/newsletter/2002\\_sept\\_oct/article\\_3.html/](http://www.realwomenca.com/newsletter/2002_sept_oct/article_3.html/)

Hancock, Eleanor. Monash Newslne. Monash University. 10 Sept. 2003.

<http://www.pso.adm.monash.edu/au/news/>

This posted article, untitled, is a chapter from an upcoming book with Allen and Unwin entitled *The Human Face of Warfare: Killing, Fear, and Chaos in Battle*.

Ward, John. Women in Combat New Army Strategy. The Halifax Herald. 19 Dec. 1997.  
10 Sept. 2003.

<http://viking.phoenix.com/news/archives/1997/mi/97243.htm/>

## Commentary on Alejandra's and Roger's Discussion 3 paragraphs

Both paragraphs by Alejandra and Roger open with a topic sentence that identifies the debate and its scope. Block comparison style is then employed to review subtopics on one side followed by the same subtopics in parallel order on the other side (see Chapter 12 for various other ways to organize comparison). Linking terms (“on the other hand,” “on the other side”) are used to guide the reader into the second block of the summary. Both paragraphs conclude with brief reflections, using descriptive analysis, the writers are less interested, ultimately, in favoring one side over the other than in pondering deeper implications of the debate.

Alejandra and Roger have both achieved an effective balance for this assignment between the use of third person and the use of first person. Third person serves the predominant part of the paragraph dealing with summary of the public issue. But note how both student writers choose to end with first-person reflections, helping to stress their connections and responses to the issues. Alejandra's personal observations lead her to suspect that something deeper than a sense of animal rights or civic justice underlies the actions of some participants in the cat quarrel. Roger introduces an element of surprise when, in shifting from summary to reflection, he reveals that his daughter is one of Canada's female soldiers and—furthermore—that he is, or was—a pacifist. The complexity of this topic is embodied in the contradictory allegiances of Roger's situation, adding to his ethos in speaking to the matter. You do not have to express your reflections in first person as these two student writers have done, but consider the advantages of making strong connections this way. The important thing—after providing a clear, concise, and complete summary of the issues-- is to deliver a reflection that is uniquely your own.



## Posting Responses

In this discussion exchange model, we recommend that group members respond to the primary postings by all other group members (i.e. to the paragraphs of self- introduction, to the reading summary and critical response paragraph, and to the paragraph summarizing a public controversy). We recommend groups of no more than five members, to contain the amount of responses required. We recommend that over the three discussions, at least one response to all of the other members be a paragraph of 7 – 10 sentences, observing the 4 Fs of paragraph craft and the principles of correct language usage. Tone and style should be adapted to an alert sense of the purpose of the response.

## Tips for Posting Responses

The main tip for responses to group members is to respect what they have said: assume that there may be more reasons behind the view they have expressed than they have made explicit in words and that those reasons are of importance. A spirit of cooperation rather than competition adds immeasurably to this activity. The goal of the discussion model is primarily enriching others and thereby enriching oneself, not appearing to be “right” or “smarter” than someone else. For example, the following two responses illustrate a potentially offensive tone in contrast to a considerate tone:

*Potentially offensive:* “You missed the point of this article. The author is really saying...”

*Considerate:* “I find this point really interesting, too, although I have been taking the author’s controlling idea and reasons to be... This essay seems indirect, making the thesis hard to identify. I wonder what the others take it to be.”

Avoiding hasty overly simple positions while also considering the feelings of others in the group is not the same thing as compromising your ideas or standards or being hypocritical. Learning to adapt to constructive ways of expressing your ideas and

standards is a valuable part of what you can learn from this activity. One way to do this is to remember that when you are stating opinion—even a well thought out opinion—it is, nevertheless, still opinion and not fact. It is not something that everyone will agree with or should be expected to agree with, just because you believe it.

Another tip is not to point out issues of writing mechanics. Leave those for the peer editing boards and similar workshopping activities, where other apprentice writers have expressly requested editorial feedback on their technique. Very few people like to be told that they have used a dangling participle when they are in the midst of discussing an idea of importance.

Demonstrate in your own responses that you are open to accepting suggestions and to considering new points; chances are, others will be encouraged by your example and will expand their perspectives as well. If they do not, as a writer, you can at least mark that down as an example of audience variation and the fact that some of your ideas will not be understood and may even be resisted. Finding positive ways to work against resistance is part of a writer's education.

## Adding Responses to Discussion 1 Postings

The main purpose of Discussion 1 is introductory: getting to know your group mates and establishing a good basis for the upcoming critical exchanges. Therefore your responses to the other assignment paragraphs in this session should focus on shared experience or knowledge (things in their postings that you know about) or appreciation of points they have raised. Read both assignment paragraphs by your other group members. Your response of one paragraph (of around seven sentences) should acknowledge both of their paragraphs. Seek in your comments to make connections, either through shared experience or through reflecting on interesting differences (e.g. between lifestyles). You may wish to conclude your paragraph with a relevant question raised by the paragraph you are responding to.

Title your posting as follows: “Response to \_\_\_\_\_’s Discussion 1 Paragraphs.” If the student you are responding to is using the name “Jane,” then you will use that name in the blank: “Response to Jane’s Discussion 1 Paragraphs.” Your paragraph does not need a title but can begin with the standard salutation “Jane.” Post your paragraph immediately below the assignment to which it responds.

## Adding Responses to Discussion 2 Summary and Critical Response Paragraph Postings

For assignment postings by other group members, your goal should be to amplify the writers’ responses by elaborating on the evidence they have given, or to offer an alternative reading or concern. Your alternative reading or concern need not invalidate the view of your group member; tone should avoid the style of confrontation in favour of welcoming plurality. If you believe your member’s posting contains outright errors, you may of course offer amendments, but do so with tact and respect. Your response to each assignment should take the form of a well-written paragraph of approximately seven sentences. You may wish to refer to other sources that could help to inform a discussion of the reading in question.

Title your posting as follows: “Response to \_\_\_\_\_’s Discussion 2 Summary and Critical Response.” If the student you are responding to is using the name “Jane,” then you will use that name in the blank: “Response to Jane’s Discussion 2 Summary and Critical Response.” Your paragraph itself does not need a title but can begin with the standard salutation “Jane.” Post your paragraph immediately below the assignment to which it responds.

## ***Discussion 2 Sample Responses to Postings***

The following model paragraphs illustrate style, length, format, and possible content for the Discussion 2 summary and critical response followed by another group members' response.

### **Lee's Session 2 Summary and Critical Response [the title Lee has given his posting]**

Summary of "The Right Stuff" [the standard title that Lee has given his summary]

In his essay "The Right Stuff," David Suzuki argues that high school science courses should begin with sex education, because human sexuality is unavoidable in today's society yet poorly explained by parents, media, and peers. Supporting his suggestion largely through a personal illustration, Suzuki asserts that high school students will find human sexuality a relevant point of departure to other topics. Suzuki concludes by stating that parents opposed to sex education in high school may not offer the necessary education at home. Students are then left to learn from sexually explicit media treatments and the distorted stories of peers, both poor sources, especially at a time of life when an informed introduction to sexuality is so important. Not many students go on to careers in science; more important is that high school science be relevant, interesting, and thus truly educational.

"The Right Stuff"—If Only It Were That Simple [the title Lee has given his critical response paragraph]

David Suzuki's "The Right Stuff" features the gracious, entertaining and informative style we have come to associate with this well-known host of "The Nature of Things." But the essay fails to support its thesis that high school science courses should begin with

sex education. This failure is because the essay spends too long on one personal anecdote and ignores or, at best, sweeps aside counterarguments. Almost half of this seven-paragraph essay describes a trip Suzuki made to a certain high school in a “tough” northern town where he was to address 400 students in the school auditorium. The anecdote is lively and interesting, building to the moment when the famous geneticist greets his young audience with the comment, “I know you’re basically walking gonads, so I’m going to talk about sex.” This demonstrates a good point about the value of knowing your audience. But it distracts us from a concern with logic. The specific problem here is the fallacy of *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*: Suzuki assumes that his remark caused the class reaction. But the reaction could have been caused by his charisma and celebrity. Furthermore, certain students might have been privately disturbed by his directness: one observer cannot determine how 400 students are responding on deeper levels. Other hasty conclusions include that teenage behaviour is caused by biology alone, that opponents of sex education in schools would not handle the education themselves, and that sex education would be as easy to introduce and manage as Suzuki makes it seem in his anecdote. This essay, in conclusion, seems more convincing than it really is.

Lee

**Brian’s response to Lee’s Summary and Critical Response [title for the board posting]**

Lee:

Your summary is virtually word for word what I had come up with, so it’s reassuring to have this much confirmation. Summarizing is by no means easy, or so I am finding. Concerning critical response, it’s interesting that we have both zeroed in on a matter of persuasive effect. I agree that Suzuki would not win over politicians and school bureaucrats with his essay as it stands. He would need to convince them that a solid majority of citizens wants a broader sex education

program for the schools, and he would need to relieve concerns about all the practical difficulties of resources, training, and families opposed. Given that this essay was an opinion column for the *Globe and Mail*, however, the primary audience was probably business-class parents from a socially moderate or even liberal background. In an article for *The Guttmacher Report on Public Policy*, Cynthia Dailard states that 65% of American parents in 2000 would have supported a call for a broader sex education program in the schools. Since Canadians tend to be more liberal than Americans on social policy, it's a reasonable guess that many Canadian parents would be fairly receptive to Suzuki's proposal, especially given that it is coming from a trusted authority. I guessed that Suzuki's persuasive goal was to raise awareness among a group that might already be open to his idea: in other words, to provide a gentle nudge for those already with something at stake rather than to take on those who may believe they have nothing at stake. I wonder what others may say.

Brian

#### Work Cited

Dailard, Cynthia. "Sex Education: Politicians, Parents, Teachers and Teens." *The Guttmacher Report on Public Policy*. 4, 1 (February 2001). 1 April 2007.  
<http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/tgr/o4/1/gr040109.html>

**Wilma's Response to Lee's Discussion 2 Summary and Critical Response [title for the board posting]**

Lee:

I agree that the style of Suzuki's essay puts too much stress on entertainment at the expense of further contemplation. This seems like an example of the Entertainer's Stance defined by Wayne Booth in his essay "The Rhetorical Stance" (p. 487). As

an Indigenous person—what people used to call, when I was growing up, an Indian—I wonder why Suzuki felt he had to mention that a high proportion of the people in the “tough” northern town were Native. Being no stranger to stereotyping, I had trouble continuing with the essay after this particular mention. Handbooks on usage advise writers not to say things like “The female police officer chased the suspect.” Unless the officer’s being female plays a part later in the story, there is no reason to point out her sex. The handbooks consider this to be sexist, and I think the same reasoning could be used to consider Suzuki’s remark racist, even though I don’t believe he is a prejudiced person.

Wilma

Work Cited

Booth, Wayne. “The Rhetorical Stance” in *Acting on Words: An Integrated Rhetoric, Reader and Handbook*, edited by David Brundage and Michael Lahey, Toronto: Pearson, 2009. 487-493.

**Lee’s Reply to Wilma’s Discussion 2 Response [title for the board posting]**

Wilma:

I wondered about this reference, too—an apparent stereotype that because the town has Native people it must be tough. But I do agree that Suzuki is not prejudiced, and especially not against Native people. In his childhood, he experienced incarceration because of his race. He and his family were loyal Canadians, yet imprisoned simply because Canada was at war with Japan. I believe his writing in general demonstrates that this experience, if anything, strengthened his dislike of racial prejudice. His book *Wisdom of the Elders* shows how traditional Native insights are paralleled by current scientific findings and theories. He also works hard on behalf

of the environment, another connection to traditional Native culture, and he seems to take his bearings more and more from spiritual rather than scientific beacons. Perhaps a literary critic would say that the reader, given Suzuki's use of irony, is expected to interpret the opposite of certain statements: the science teacher's ideas are shown to be prejudiced, so maybe we are meant to object to the notion that the town is tough. I also think we have been more sensitized to possible sexist and racist usages since the time when Suzuki wrote the essay, which on the whole is probably a good thing. I wonder what others in the group think about this concern.

Lee

## Commentary on the Discussion 2 Samples

### ***Lee's Critical Response***

Lee's critical response paragraph opens on a note of balance and respect by acknowledging the author's ethos (qualifications), but then moves promptly in its topic sentence to a critical stand on the essay's thesis. Lee's next sentence adds to his topic sentence assertion by telling us what reasons his paragraph will demonstrate. These two reasons might be called the sub-points of the paragraph. Lee deals with each in consistent order, building to further instances of the second sub-point. He then concludes by reinforcing his main assertion.

### ***Brian's Response to Lee***

Brian's response to Lee shows conscious or unconscious understanding of Rogerian Argument (see Chapter 16, pp. 265-69). Brian believes that Suzuki's essay demonstrates persuasive success whereas Lee has stated an opposite view. So Brian begins on common ground—they both summarize the essay the same way and the both have an interest in persuasive effect. Brian then concedes the shortcomings of Suzuki's essay if it is to be



taken as directed to politicians and bureaucrats. Brian's refutation follows, however in a gentle way: he suggests that if we keep in mind an audience of business-class *Globe & Mail* reading parents, maybe Suzuki has said enough for a limited newspaper column to achieve an effect of increased awareness and thereby of support. Brian, in effect, allows that Lee's view makes sense in one context but that an alternative view may be valid in a different context. Brian could have said, "If you had read the background information, you would realize the audience that Suzuki had in mind"... but a little tact and diplomacy seldom hurts. Lee cinches his paragraph effectively by reinforcing his view and calling for other ones. If you contrast this response to Lee to Brian's longer paragraph sample earlier in this chapter, you can see how he has applied some Rogerian principles to adapt to the situation of speaking directly with Lee. Tone is respectful of Lee yet clear and confident in positing an alternative or additional interpretation. The paragraph also applies the 4 Fs and correct language usage.

### ***Wilma's Response to Lee***

Wilma's comment illustrates an important value of discussions: the opportunity to learn how certain references contain what Chapter 1 describes as "trigger words." Lee acknowledges in his response to Wilma that he had wondered about Suzuki's reference to Native students, but he did not find it seriously troublesome as she did. Her response does maintain a calm, reasonable tone while presenting a relevant matter that is truly upsetting to her. She uses logos to connect her concern to the issue of sexist expressions and raises the question of whether Suzuki's reference is, indeed, similar to a journalist saying "the female police officer...." Wilma has used first person and a somewhat more informal style than Lee's critical response; this suits her purpose, but not that she retains a suitable level of formality and still observes the 4 Fs of paragraph craft and the principles of correct language usage.

### ***Lee's Response to Wilma***

Lee's response certainly draws upon Rogerian principles, the importance of establishing common ground. He must make completely clear that he shares Wilma's distaste for racist intrusions. Picking up on her suggestion that she does not think Suzuki is actively prejudiced, Lee adds support—many reasons why he thinks Suzuki is, in fact, a model of a non-Aboriginal who respects and learns from Aboriginal cultures. Lee then offers the alternative possibility that ironic point of view may determine how we understand what Suzuki meant by referring to Native students. But Lee also ends with a strong expression of respect for Wilma's concern and acknowledges that writing in today's world is partly an ongoing matter of growing toward a better understanding of a truly diverse readership. He, too, now uses first person, adapting to the purpose of his response. He still follows the 4 Fs of paragraph craft and the principles of correct language usage.

In the case of Lee's response, we see a situation of a continued thread of exchange: Lee has posted a critical response, Wilma has responded to it, and Lee has responded to Wilma's response. Will Wilma now respond again... how long will this continue? In senior undergraduate and graduate courses, long threaded discussion exchanges may occur. We recommend that for introductory undergraduate courses, a reasonable limit be set on the degree of responses expected. Lee felt it important to reassure Wilma that he shared her fundamental concern for equality of treatment. His further reply to her initial response makes sense, but in many cases the activity could successfully resolve after a group member has posted one reply to a preliminary assignment posting. Creating a link from the formal discussion forum to a less formal chat room designed in keeping with social software principles would allow those students who wish to pursue discussion more informally to do so in the "chat" space.

## Adding Responses to Discussion 3 Paragraphs Summarizing a Public Controversy

Earlier we illustrated Discussion 3 paragraphs summarizing a public controversy. We now reproduce those paragraphs with sample responses from another discussion group member.

### **Alejandra's Discussion 3 Paragraph Summarizing a Public Controversy**

Little Cat Feet<sup>2</sup>

Alejandra Piaz

Whether cats should be allowed to roam—at least, in urban communities—has been a heated public issue for the past ten years in Edmonton. When City Hall first proposed a bylaw restricting cats to their owners' properties, a groundswell protest resulted. Gina Davis, president of a citizens' action group for animals' rights, argues that a cat's independent nature requires the freedom to roam, to fulfill its hunting instincts and to function within cat society, one that has its own rules and structure. She acknowledges that some owners inconsiderately allow their cats to sully the yards of neighbours, but that cats provide companionship to children, seniors, and the infirm— values that mean far more to communities than pristine flower beds. She points out that moth balls and other such tactics effectively discourage undesired feline visitors. On the other hand, Ruth Melnyk of the Edmonton Pound reports that homeless, injured, and distressed cats vastly outnumber homeless, injured, and distressed dogs. She believes this is because the city regulates dogs but leaves cats to the whims of cars, coyotes, falls, and incensed neighbors. A cat in the city is no longer in a natural world, she says, so alternative ways of providing them access to the outdoors and of countering indoor boredom need to be found. She says that regulating cats would make overly casual owners think harder before acquiring one. The city recently began providing live capture traps in hopes of appeasing

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<sup>2</sup> "The fog comes on little cat feet..." Carl Sandburg

citizens who simply cannot tolerate cat intruders—my next-door neighbour, one such individual, has already carted three captured cats to Animal Control. While sympathizing with both Ms. Davis and Ms. Melnyk, I also find myself wondering if one of the mysterious forces underlying this quarrel is our deep-seated if all but repressed associations of cats with white... or, in some minds, black powers.

1. “The fog comes on little cat feet...” Carl Sandburg.

#### Works Cited

Davis, Gina. Personal Interview. 12 Sept. 2002.

Melnyk, Ruth. Personal Interview. 14 Sept. 2002.

#### **Sample Response to Alejandra’s Discussion 3 Paragraph: By Mok, Yuk Sung**

Alejandra:

I was three when my family moved to Canada; in my earliest memory of life on Canadian soil, I am kneeling beside my big sister as we watch a mother cat and her kittens beneath the neighbours’ porch. My mother explained that in the small village we had left behind in China, people did not keep cats as pets. Today my big sister Alice is a veterinarian; being just a zoology major myself (with hopes of becoming an ethologist, like Roger Fouts), I asked her about the issues summarized in your paragraph. She made a number of interesting comments, adding to the complexity of this subject. First, she agreed with the concerns raised by Ms. Melnyk. In her work, my sister treats far too many injured cats, many of them hurt by passing cars. However, she also observes that the average life span of feral cats is much shorter than that of domestic ones, even factoring in the road deaths. Veterinary care almost doubles the life span of the average domestic cat

over that of its feral brother or sister. So in a way the roaming issue includes the broader issue of how we use science and various other initiatives to extend life, sometimes at all costs. That outdoor mother cat we watched under the porch might not have lived half as long as my 20-year-old Rascal—but does that mean her life was half as meaningful as Rascal’s? Finally, Alice made a point that I later found reiterated in our course text in Chapter 13, quoting ethologist Rupert Sheldrake: “[t]here is a huge gulf between companion animals, treated as members of our families, and animals in factory farms and research laboratories” (page) In this respect as well, our attitudes to cats shows a human tendency to divide things into black and white.

Mok, Yuk Sung

#### Work Cited

Brundage, David and Michael Lahey. *Acting on Words: An Integrated Rhetoric, Reader and Handbook*. Toronto: Pearson Education Canada, 2008.

### **Roger’s Discussion 3 paragraph summarizing a public controversy**

#### Women in Combat: an Either-Or Fallacy?

Roger Côté

The heated debate over women in combat assures us that either they have what it takes... or they haven’t. The debate has intensified since a 1997 \$1.5 ad campaign encouraging Canadian women to sign up for combat (Ward). This initiative followed a 1986 Canadian Human Rights Tribunal decision ordering the Canadian military to open all its jobs to women. The 48 women in combat trades in 1989 rose to 66 in 1997 and the numbers are now heading into the hundreds. Opponents, such as REAL Women of Canada, consider

this sort of “social experimentation [to be] just plain foolishness—and typically Canadian.” They point to a 1997 British Ministry of Defense study conclusion that “only 1% of women can equal the performance of the average man.” Furthermore, say the critics, women disrupt the men who become defensive, sexually distracted, or overprotective. On the other side, supporters like Dr. Eleanor Hancock of Monash University, Australia, argue that the “performance” tests are skewed to men’s particular strengths, thus overlooking female stamina, endurance, and leg strength. The remarkable achievements of numerous females who fought in the last century in Serbian, Russian, and North Vietnamese armies demonstrate clearly that women soldiers—far from disruptive—can be potential determiners of their country’s military success. Dr. Hancock considers Canada “at the most progressive end of the spectrum” in granting women the ultimate symbol of full citizenship. A few weeks ago, I welcomed my daughter back from her service in Afghanistan, a military action I honestly don’t understand. In welcoming my daughter, I recognized the truth of Dr. Hancock’s equation; not, however, without recalling my 1960s protests against war, my wish for a world washed by the wisdom of Gandhi, and my frequent reflection that so little is simple in life-- or in death.

#### Works Cited

“The Failure of Women in Combat.” REAL Women of Canada Newsletter. Sept. 2002.  
10 Sept. 2003.

[http://www.realwomenca.com/newsletter/2002\\_sept\\_oct/article\\_3.html/](http://www.realwomenca.com/newsletter/2002_sept_oct/article_3.html/)

Hancock, Eleanor. Monash Newslne. Monash University. 10 Sept. 2003.

<http://www.pso.adm.monash.edu/au/news/>

This posted article, untitled, is a chapter from an upcoming book with Allen and Unwin entitled *The Human Face of Warfare: Killing, Fear, and Chaos in Battle*.

Ward, John. Women in Combat New Army Strategy. The Halifax Herald. 19 Dec. 1997.  
10 Sept. 2003.

<http://viking.phoenix.com/news/archives/1997/mi/97243.htm/>

### Sample Response to Roger's Discussion 3 paragraph: Response by Joyce White

Roger:

Your reflections on women in combat have got me thinking; I am especially challenged by Dr. Hancock's dark idea that to qualify for equal citizenship, women must have the opportunity to kill or be killed on behalf of their country. While I agree that women can handle the demands—and maybe outperform the men in some situations—I believe that one argument opposing women soldiers in the midst of men does deserve further consideration: the concern that men will feel a protective urge toward the women in their platoon. The *Halifax Herald* article by John Ward, cited in your paragraph, includes an interesting anecdote by a former Korean War soldier whose platoon tried to protect a sixteen-year-old member who had lied his way into service. It is possible that men would feel similarly protective toward women. Dian Fossey's book *Gorillas in the Mist*, observes that when a tribe of gorillas is threatened by an enemy, it will send out the young males as defense (84). If all the young males are killed, the tribe will send out all the older males. Only if all the older males are killed will the gorillas send out the females. Last to be sent are the females with young. The difference between human DNA and that of our closest primate cousins is negligible and our behaviours are generally similar. If a protective instinct does influence human attitudes toward women in combat, it might be best for us to acknowledge this as biology rather than sexism—then see how platoon tactics might be modified to make this reality an asset rather than a danger. In time, women soldiers may influence approaches to combat as women police officers have modified—dare I say improved – policing.

Work Cited

Fossey, Dian. *Gorillas in the Mist*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983.

Joyce White

## Commentary on the Discussion 3 Responses by Yuk Sung and Joyce

Both Yuk Sung and Joyce demonstrate that they have carefully read and reflected upon the paragraphs to which they have responded. Yuk Sung uses first person entirely, with considerable justification, since both he and his sister Alice have, in addition to an added cultural perspective, strong connections with cats and other animals. Opening with his memory of the mother cat allows Yuk Sung to support Alejandra's implied belief that this topic is far from the trivial one it is sometimes taken to be. By summarizing Alejandra's points for Alice, Yuk Sung deepens his interest. Alice's responses as a vet provide a helpful assessment of the arguments Alejandro has reported after interviewing Ms. Davis and Ms. Melnyk. As a vet, Alice both cares for animals—in sympathy with Ms. Davis—and endorses the observations of Ms. Melnyk. Yuk Sung has thereby maintained balance while increasing a degree of authority on the subject. He develops support for allowing cats to roam (the quality of life argument) while also showing that he has an elderly cat and has probably kept it on his own property. Like Roger, he demonstrates the challenge of reconciling viewpoints or, at least, of recognizing contradictions in one's own position. His conclusion pays tribute to and plays with Alejandra's reference to white and black: taking her reference to magical associations and applying it to Sheldrake's perception of split attitudes towards animals in general. Yuk Sung also connects the topic of discussion to parts of the course text—a helpful way to broaden relevant references without obliging other group members to research beyond their own course materials.

Joyce demonstrates the same level of diligent reading and synthesizing as Yuk Sung, both in her engagement with Roger's paragraph itself and with related sources. Note that she has taken the time to find and read the *Halifax Herald* article that Roger mentions. In that article, she finds an issue for further consideration: the matter of a possible protective instinct. She develops this through her close knowledge of Dian Fossey's book and primate research in general. (Note that her documentation of the reference, in MLA style, is complete.) Her response, rather than refuting Roger's conclusion that women soldiers should be integrated into male fighting units, cautions us against hasty decisions about



the issues and ends with a thoughtful implication recognizing a possible analogy to the entry of women into patrol work in policing.

Like Yuk Sung and Joyce, you should take the time to explore topics related to the public issue paragraphs you write and respond to. As a further example, in responding to Roger's paragraph, you might find and evaluate information about the women soldiers he refers to: those who fought for Serbia, Russia, and North Vietnam. Prepare appropriate questions to guide this research. Did such soldiers exist? What were their numbers and how successful were they? Why did they enlist, why did their countries allow them to serve? How did they serve—were they employed in a manner similar to that of women soldiers in Canadian army units today? Ultimately, does their example allow us to draw conclusions about the potential effectiveness of female soldiers in the combat situations proposed for them today? Internet inquiry seldom provides the last word needed, but this method can get you off to a good start toward the further knowledge required to frame informed and thoughtful responses.

## Entering the Discussion Boards Two or Three Times per Session

It's a good idea to enter the discussion boards at least two or three times during the period assigned for each discussion: once on or before the start date, to post your assignment; once after a couple of days or no later than midway through the period, to read responses to your posting and to contribute your responses to newly posted assignments; and once around the end of the session period, to read and respond to any last postings since your previous visit.

## A Model With Proven Value for Future Use and Study

Paced, asynchronous online discussion groups have been used at Athabasca University in English 255 since 1999. These groups are optional, since we cannot assume that all students have internet access or wish to build an element of paced activity into an otherwise "open" schedule of study. The groups have been formally studied through

interviews with the course staff (around 20 instructors), surveys of student participants and non-participants (those who chose an alternative assignment), and examination of pass and completion rates. For a twelve month period extending to Oct 31, 2006, the course experienced 1,231 registrations. Four hundred and eighty-eight students (around 40%) chose the discussion group option to fulfill their unit on critical thinking. The course pass rate for students who chose the online critical discussion groups was 74%, well above the completion rate average for all second year courses in the humanities and social sciences. While this does not, of course, prove that the groups caused the increased pass rate, it does indicate a strong relationship between involvement in critical exchanges with peers and successful learning. For distance students, such a model overcomes a sense of isolation, while providing the additional advantages discussed in the introduction to this document. Those additional advantages are equally important for those in classroom study.