

: Guidelines for Discussions – peter.gruber@usi.ch

Discussions are an important element of the scientific process. They provide formalized feedback to an author before a paper is sent to publication. A good discussion is a lot of work, but on average you will receive as much as you give: every conference participant usually gives and receives one discussion. A badly prepared discussion is considered free riding and frowned upon in the community.

A discussion is a short presentation and should be prepared as such. This includes producing slides, rehearsing at least once and checking the timing (10 minutes).

The structure of the discussion should follow the three “Cs”: context – contribution – criticism.

Context (1 slide)

- The problem that this paper tries to address and why it is important.
- A categorization of the problem and the approach. Example: “This is an option pricing model in the class of multifactor affine latent state space models.”
- The state of the literature so far and how this paper is positioned in the literature. Remember that the audience is usually not aware of the literature.

Contribution (1-2 slides)

- Approach: What is new? E.g.: method, data set, hypothesis, combination of two approaches,...
- Results: What do we learn from the paper?
- If there are several contributions, which is the most important one?
- Explain briefly the main method/idea. Do not exaggerate this part: just the main idea!
- If you did not understand something reading the paper, probably most other people will not have understood it either. Raise these points so that the author can think of a better exposition.

Criticism (1-3 slides)

- First, always include some positive feedback. It is very interesting for the author to see what people liked. He may put more emphasis on these elements in a revised version.
- Your critique should start with the most severe items, like the ...
 - Main modelling assumptions
 - Econometrics
 - Data sources
 - Interpretation of results including possible over-claiming
- Where possible, substantiate your criticism with your own calculations.
- Present possible alternatives including references. It is OK to refer to your own experience here.
- Raise minor quibbles such as typos, unexplained symbols, unclear exposition or illegible graphs last.
- The final slide should contain open questions, suggestions for further work and possibly a “wish list” of what you would like to see added to the paper. Try to refrain from producing a long list of obvious extensions. Focus on feasible additions that provide important additional insights.

A good discussion requires you to study the entire paper and have at least some understanding of the related literature. Give yourself a week to prepare your discussion. Finally, it is OK to ask for a different paper to discuss if you have absolutely no idea about the topic and fear you could not produce a useful discussion in a reasonable amount of time.