

Preparing for Precepts, Seminars, and Other Discussion-based Classes

There are three features that typically characterize precepts, seminars, and other discussion-based classes: a heavy reading load, papers (as opposed to exams), and, of course, in-class discussions. Here are some strategies that you can try before, during, and after class to make discussion-based classes more manageable and fun. We encourage you to edit, add to, and even delete strategies from this list as you figure out what works best for you.

	Before	During	After
Reading Assignments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use the course syllabus to understand <i>why</i> you are reading a particular text Set aside plenty of uninterrupted time to complete the reading assignments Talk to somebody about the reading you completed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highlight, flag, or annotate the sections of the text(s) that are discussed in class Pay attention to HOW your instructor and classmates analyze and respond to texts to learn new methods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On your syllabus, note down 2-3 keywords associated with each reading and/or a brief sentence summary of how reading related to the week's topic or questions Flip through the text to flag sections or quotations that are illustrative of concepts or ideas you discussed in class
Class Discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For each reading, prepare 2-3 questions or comments (and email them to your professor or preceptor or post them on the class discussion forum) Before class starts, ask the person sitting next to you what they thought about the readings/lectures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Look at the "Participating in Class: Contributions that Count" handout for practical suggestions on what you can say to meaningfully contribute to class discussions Set tangible goals for yourself about the quality and quantity of your in-class participation Feel free to pass on answering a question or say "I don't know" when appropriate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review your class notes to make sure you understand them – and send your professor or preceptor a clarifying or follow-up question Fill in gaps in your notes and add responses or comments to what you wrote during class
Papers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practicing creating (and answering) potential questions that you could answer with one or more of the readings Read the paper prompts as soon as they are available – keep making and revising "back-of-the-envelope" responses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Note down instructions or thoughts that the professor or preceptor provides about what they might (not) be looking for in paper Get input on your paper ideas (topics and analyses) by including them in class discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set aside a little time (10-15 minutes) after every class to write a summary of class discussion or to highlight how different readings connect to one another

Author: Zitsi Mirakhur, Ph.D. Candidate – Demography and Social Policy. 2016.