

How to Make the Most of a Policy Discussion Group

This note is intended to help participants in INAF 5429W get the most out of the time they spend in the weekly breakout sessions that are an integral part of the course. While this guidance has been developed specifically for our seminar, these points would be applicable in any meeting or small group discussion in a governmental context where policy ideas and initiatives are being discussed.

Advice to every participant:

1. *Be sure you've read all the relevant material in advance.* Don't come to the meeting (i.e., the breakout group) unprepared.
2. *Think before you speak* and try to ensure that what you say builds on what's been said toward a conclusion the meeting can live with. *Policy development is a dialectical process – it's about constructive dialogue that (ideally) builds toward an agreed conclusion.*
3. *Don't talk too much*, but at the same time *don't hesitate to raise your hand* to make sure your point or your concern is heard.
4. *Be a respectful listener.* This is critically important.
5. *Don't waste time on process* – make the rules clear at the beginning and follow them.

If you're chairing the meeting:

1. *Start the session by ensuring that everyone is clear on why you're there.* Make sure everyone understands “What is our purpose? What are we supposed to do? What's the product we're supposed to end up with at the conclusion of this breakout session?”
2. *Assign tasks* – someone needs to take notes; someone (perhaps the same person) needs to serve as rapporteur.
3. *Don't hesitate to divide up the work* into chewable chunks.
4. *Make sure everyone has a chance to speak*, and if what they're saying isn't perfectly clear, try saying it another way and asking them if that's what they mean.
5. *Make sure people don't go on too long.* A policy forum is not an opportunity for speechmaking – it's a working session with a specific objective and a limited time frame.
6. *Watch the time.* Make sure you complete the group's work with 10 minutes to spare, so that you can collectively go over what is going to be reported back to the plenary session, and then change it if necessary.
7. *A good chair will try to summarize the results of the meeting while also flagging points of agreement and disagreement* (not forcing a consensus but shaping it). It is quite an art but “wrapping the package” leaves participants with a clear sense what has been accomplished. This is perhaps the hardest part of chairing.

If you're the rapporteur:

8. *Look your audience in the eye and speak to them.* Don't just read the notes you've prepared.
9. *Your job is not to convey information but rather to “make the case”* for the conclusions your group has reached or the recommendations you're making.