

DISCUSSION GROUPS

Tomorrow, Thursday afternoon, we will pick five topics and break up into five small groups. Each group will discuss its topic for over an hour. Each group will have a moderator and a scribe (see below).

After we reconvene, the scribes will summarize the discussion and especially any consensus or conclusions that emerged. The workshop may decide to post these summaries on its web site.

Homework!

Tonight, pick three topics that you would like to discuss. Tomorrow after lunch we'll vote among them to pick five.

Also, think seriously about volunteering to act as a moderator or scribe for some topic.

Advice for the Moderator and Scribe

The moderator will try to ensure equal participation by all members, and the scribe will summarize the group's informally discussion in writing.

Group discussions can be exciting, but they can also be frustrating: certain persons may tend to dominate while others withdraw into silence. The discussion may drift from the stated goals. Silence may fall. There's no guarantee that the results will satisfy everyone — or anyone. So, don't worry if it doesn't seem to be going well: it's probably going as well or better than the other groups!

Occasionally, ask yourself: would a researcher or engineer learn anything from overhearing this? Even disagreement and confusion can reveal the state of the art!

Advice for the Moderator

Begin by saying that the most important goal is for everyone to have an opportunity to speak.

Go around the table, asking each person briefly to define the topic in his/her own words and state what he/she hopes the discussion will achieve.

One way to plan the discussion is to ask each person to suggest two or three sub-topics (words or short phrases). Write these all down on the whiteboard or flipchart provided, then ask the group to vote for the most interesting, then the next most interesting, etc. Another way to help focus the discussion is to ask the group to try to draw up two lists:

1. *open research problems*: questions that are potentially important, that researchers should be attacking right away; and
2. *reliable engineering methods*: algorithms that are proven to be effective, that engineers should be using right away.

Attempting this usually generates a lot of very specific disagreements, which is good.

If some people stay quiet, occasionally ask them what they think. If they reply they "came to listen," then ask them "what questions do you want to hear answers to?" This can start a dialogue.

If disagreement isn't resolved quickly, and is taking up too much time, interrupt and ask for a vote on the question: the scribe will write down the vote; and then you can move on to another issue.

Fifteen minutes before the end, ask the scribe to briefly read his notes out loud; ask for any last comments, corrections, or summaries.

Advice for the Scribe

Write down the names and affiliations of all participants.

Reassure everyone that you will *not* identify anyone, by name, with any opinions they express.

If the discussion becomes so vague and disorganized that you can't take clear notes, ask them to stop a moment and try to summarize the last few minutes, for your benefit.

If people disagree on a question, that in itself is interesting: write it down. One way to end a disagreement is to restate it as a *yes/no* question and ask for a quick vote: write down the results.

If the moderator uses the flipchart, take the resulting notes away with you.

When we all reconvene after the working groups, you will stand up and give a brief, informal, verbal report on the working group. Be candid about what happened in the discussion — but, again, don't quote anyone by name. These verbal reports are usually a lot of fun for everyone.

If your written summaries are archived, they can be illuminating to look back on even only a few years later.