

Task for *Journey to the Stone Country*

Panel Discussion Guide

Panel discussions tend to be less structured than formal debates, but more focussed than an informal conversation. Panel discussions are often found in the media or at conventions and generally consist of experts in a given field. In these cases there is often a chairperson who guides the direction of the discussion, but doesn't dominate it. Rather, the chairperson encourages contributions from all panel members.

In our panel discussions, ALL students will be expected to act, in some ways, like a chairperson. That is:

- encourage contributions from others (*e.g. asking questions or eliciting feedback on their own views*);
- guide the direction of the discussion into areas of interest;
- maintain the flow of the discussion (*avoiding silences*);
- keep the discussion focused on the given topic (*while some digression and humour is good, it is important that the central focus is returned quickly to the topic*)

The focus of the panels being left general and open-ended for a variety of reasons:

- Panel members should operate from their expert knowledge – not a script.
- Interesting panel discussions have their members feeding off each other's comments. To an audience it would sound like an intelligent, focused conversation. Narrowly focused topics in the form of a question can produce rather a rigid, narrow range of comments.
 - One would expect there to be disagreements about attitudes and interpretations. These are often the most interesting parts of a discussion. It means members have to articulate clearly the reasons for the ideas, while not denigrating the views of others. *The best way to challenge the view of someone is not through ridicule or scorn, but through reason and enthusiasm for own ideas.*
- Open-ended topics allows your panel to branch off into different directions and allow you to draw on your broader knowledge about the world and/or other texts.
 - While this kind of thing is encouraged, be aware of the limited time you have – this means getting back on track as quickly as possible.
- As well as demonstrating knowledge of the text, open-ended topics allow you to include your opinions, emotions and other responses to the text. What matters here is that you can elaborate and clarify the comments you make.
- By having open-ended topics and being an 'expert panel member' there is little need for panel members to get together before the panel discussion.

Hints for making worthwhile contributions to panel discussions:

- prepare some specific points you would like to make;
- come up with some questions you can pose to the panel (preferably, these questions will guide the discussion to the direction you want to take it – so you can make the points you’ve already prepared);
- practise articulating complex points (that is, practise how you will express them and elaborate them in meaningful detail. This will involve having a range of references from the text on hand to support your views.);
- if someone beats you to the point you’d planned to make – DON’T PANIC. Express your agreement and add to the point by, for instance, giving another example from the text to support the point.

GOOD LUCK