Comments from Tom Getty:
Leading a discussion of a research paper will be a new challenge for most of you. We don't expect you to be good at this at the beginning of the semester. We will learn through practice (and we will adjust our expectations as we progress). The first thing to understand is that this is meant to be a discussion, involving the whole class, not an oral exam of the leaders. However, the leaders have to be prepared to manage the discussion.

In general terms, here is what you need to do. Read the paper several times, first superficially and then at each pass digging in at the most important points. You don't need to understand everything in the paper but you do need to know what you do and do not understand. Make a plan that includes the following:

You and your partners should plan on opening the discussion by eliciting an overview of the paper. Do not start with 'I think this is a load of crap! What do you think?' You have to make sure that there is a set of common knowledge on the table for the class to work with. Many students will have lost the big picture - can't see the forest for the trees. Make an outline to serve as a road map of where you want to go.

Assume that you will be interrupted with questions and additional ideas as you go. The trick is to manage this effectively. For instance, we might start off by agreeing that 'The goal of this paper is to test the hypothesis that measurements of heritability in the lab are useful for predicting heritabilities in natural environments' only to have a student immediately wave her hand and say 'I think the real goal is to show that different mouse populations are genetically adapted to different environments.' If we can address this adequately in a few seconds, go ahead. Otherwise, you should acknowledge this possibility, jot yourself a note and plan to pursue this further at a more appropriate time, later. You have to be flexible about allowing classmates to suggest alternatives but you have to keep us moving ahead.

After we have gotten the basics out on the table, it is time to open up the analysis and discussion. At this point, we will pursue various issues. You should do less of the talking but you still need to manage the discussion. You should try to get the class to work on the most important points first. You may need to ask leading questions to get the discussion going. For instance, you might say “I'm not sure I really understand this concept of a norm of reaction. Can anyone explain it?”
Don't be surprised if it takes some effort to kindle the fire. After that, wild ideas may start flying like sparks. You will sometimes need to say 'That's a good possibility but let's set it aside until we've finished our consideration of whether these are really the best methods,' or whatever. Again, you have to be flexible about having a good plan for addressing particular questions and modifying it in light of the developing discussion. You'll need that map to get back on track periodically.

Ideally, our discussion will give us an opportunity to test our ideas and help lead us toward a general consensus about what we can confidently take away from the paper and what questions should be pursued next. Everyone should be satisfied that they've learned something useful. No one should feel humiliated. Plan on devoting at least 5 minutes to managing a wrap-up of what we've accomplished.

Leading a discussion is a high art and we can really only master it through practice - see you on the practice field!

Comments from Cindy Wei:
In preparation for your discussion, we would like you to prepare a written “game plan” of some of the questions/ topics you want to address in your discussion. This should be handed in after the discussion. Hopefully, it will help you prepare for the discussion.

Written component: Please write a) a summary in your own words about the objectives of the paper. Make it concise but clear. This might serve as the overview you plan to give. b) write out the questions/ discussion topics you hope to address. These should be thoughtful, well explained discussions of a particular issue. In other words, you should describe the issue well and make it clear what you do and do not know (and it is ok to not know the answer to your own question!) You can start out with a simple question like "what does experiment 1 show", but then follow it up with your thoughts on the topic. Again, keep it concise, clear, and please proofread.

This does not need to be super long. I would guess 1-2 pages single spaced is sufficient (again, I'm more focused on the quality than the quantity.) The purpose for this assignment is to give you a chance to have your 15% be based on more than what transpires in the 50 minutes of discussion in case you don’t get to say all that you wanted to!

Also, plan to meet with the other members of your discussion group to figure out how to divide the work. If you have questions, please feel free to contact me (Cindy) by phone/e-mail or set up an appointment (432-1493/mailto:weicynth@msu.edu).