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## BASIC GUIDE TO ONLINE CHAT

### WHAT IS ONLINE CHAT?

First, let's establish a common understanding of what is meant by the term "online discussions." Online chat sessions are the synchronous conversations by members of a class, communicating at the same time. This is not as flexible as online discussions, but the exchange is instantaneous. Online chat may be based on topics designated by the instructor, or may also include free form chatting which develops a student sense of community.

### SOME CONCEPTUAL USES OF ONLINE CHAT

- **Share knowledge** - Every student comes into your class with a unique set of experiences and learning. Sharing individual "expertise" through online chat provides enrichment for others and helps the student expert clarify his/her own knowledge on the subject.
- **Reflect on ideas** - Reflection helps students clarify concepts and internalize the information-to-knowledge process. By participating in an online chat, the process of writing can aid in that reflection process. Additionally, often students who are reticent in class participate fully in the online chat so the idea exchange is richer for all.
- **Improve critical thinking** - As students interact with each other and with the instructor through the activities employed in online chat, they often must compare, contrast, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate. Thus they have the opportunity to improve their critical thinking skills.

### APPLICATION IDEAS FOR ONLINE CHAT

- **Virtual Office Hours** - Schedule time online for virtual office hours.
- **Question & Answers sessions** - Schedule time to allow students to ask question. The instructor, student assistants, or other students may provide answers.
- **Formal Debates** - Assign students specific sides to a topic and engage in formal debates online.
- **Virtual Guest speakers** - Invite virtual guests to present and be available for a question & answer session.
- **Brainstorming** - As a pre-class or post-class activity, students can use the online chat format to brainstorm ideas on a topic.
- **Small Group Communication** - Small groups can communicate on projects, clarify lecture points, and basically any application of in-person conversations.

### BEST PRACTICES IN ONLINE CHAT

- **Be prepared for each session.** The students seem to relish being challenged to discover ideas they don't already know.
- **Keep realistic expectations.** Chat sessions can become difficult to follow if too many people are involved.
- **Announce the discussion theme.** Prior to the chat give the students a context.
  - Have pre-written questions and principles ready. Have a series of questions, key principles, relevant quotations, pertinent articles, etc. prepared in your word processor (e.g. MS Word) to be cut and pasted into the chat. Having your word processor open to click on and cutting and pasting saves time typing and allows for more concentration on what is being discussed by students. Encourage students to have their questions prepared to cut and paste, too.
- **Aspire to brevity in students.** Ask the students to keep their answers brief and succinct. Praise those who master that technique, email those who do not and offer suggestions.

- **Submit questions to students prior to the chat time.** This gives students time to think through their answers, create their cut & paste answers, and allows them to spend more time thinking and commenting on their classmates' contributions. This focuses the students on the issue instead of on their typing skills.
- **Assign questions to specific students.** As an adaptation to the above technique, you not only submit the questions prior to the chat, but assign them to certain students. This encourages equal participation by everyone.
- **Query for comprehension.** In the last 15 minutes of the chat, ask the students to "ALL STOP" and then ask for each of them to write 2-3 sentences as a synopsis of what they have gained from that session's preparation and chat. No one should be permitted to comment a second time until each has submitted an initial response. This helps understand how each student processed the material so that adjustments can be made for the next class.