
BASIC GUIDE TO ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

WHAT IS AN ONLINE DISCUSSION?

First, let's establish a common understanding of what is meant by the term "online discussions." Online discussions are the asynchronous posting of electronic messages by members of a class in a conversation on topics designated by the instructor. Messages are posted and stored for later reference. This allows students to participate at various times.

SOME CONCEPTUAL USES OF ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

- **Share knowledge** - Every student comes into your class with a unique set of experiences and learning. Sharing individual "expertise" through online discussions 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 discussion, the process of writing can aid in that reflection process. Additionally, often students who are reticent in class participate fully in the online discussions 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 discussions, they often must compare, contrast, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate. Thus they have the opportunity to improve their critical thinking skills.

APPLICATION IDEAS FOR ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

- **Case scenarios** - Students can be divided into small groups or work in large groups to respond to cases that help them apply theories and concepts presented in class or in readings.
- **Brainstorming** - As a pre-class or post-class activity, students can use the online discussion format to brainstorm ideas on a topic.
- **Role-playing** - In small groups, students can each assume roles and develop scenarios around course content.
- **Reaction postings** - Students can react to posted readings, assigned readings, or web sites. Also, discussion questions related to the course textbook can provide the basis for discussion.
- **Expand course content** - Students may read different articles and post summaries or find appropriate web resources and post links. Students may react to each other's postings.
- **Extend in-class discussions** - It's frustrating to cut off a really good discussion at the end of class. Online discussions can quickly be established to allow conversations to flourish outside of class time.

BEST PRACTICES IN ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

- Give participants a warm welcome encouraging contributions. Your message will set the tone of the discussion group and act as a model for further responses. Students will be slow to contribute unless they have some sense of the level and tone of the anticipated dialogue.
- Give participants a space to practice communicating in the virtual classroom. Not only may the technology be new to them, but also they may not have experienced communication in an asynchronous online environment. A good start is to ask each participant to introduce themselves to the group.
- Point out any 'participation guidelines' or specific interaction requirements of the discussion group.
- Indicate how often you, as moderator, are likely to look in on the discussion. Will you check it twice a day? Once a day? Three times a week? Once a week. If you are going away, let students know. Do not just suddenly disappear from the conversation.

- Introduce the topic for discussion. Let participants know if there is a special structure or pattern for the discussion. Explain whether formal or less formal responses are appropriate.
- Re-focus the discussion when required. Do not wait too long to re-direct the conversation if it moves off track. On the other hand, it is unlikely that you will need to respond to every message individually.
- Encourage inactive participants (lurkers) to join in, and refocus the discussion if particular contributors tend to dominate.
- Encourage participants to initiate conversation with each other and not depend on the moderator to chair the discussion all the time. Suggest that they ask questions of others in the group as well as supply information, opinions and observations.
- Summarize the discussion from time to time, move it forward to the next topic, and then give a conclusion at the end of the discussion period.