

# DISCUSSIONS IN ONLINE COURSES

## INTRODUCTION

Discussions are a common component of online courses, and research consistently shows that some of the most valuable learning takes place in courses that use them effectively. Instructors play a central role in managing and making good discussions happen. This tip sheet provides suggestions on how to craft good discussion questions and motivate your students to make the most of them.

## A CLOSER LOOK

Three components ensure successful discussions:

- Open-ended questions
- Well-crafted guidelines for students
- Your involvement

### *Open-Ended Questions*

Instead of factual questions, use ones that invite reflection, ask for an opinion, and lead to well-thought-out, broad answers.

Discussion questions are frequently based on the course textbook or other readings. Switch things up by including questions based on your students' experiences or on things that are directly applicable to their lives.

### *Logistics*

- Set expectations and provide guidelines for students by specifying when posts and reply posts are due, their length, and their style.
- Include rubrics.
- Make discussions part of the grade.
- Make things livelier by pairing or grouping your students in various ways during the semester.
- Assign students roles to ensure that the discussion is carried through and all aspects are covered; this also motivates students because they feel a sense of responsibility.

### *Active Participation*

It is important for faculty to find a good balance when participating in online discussions. Visualize participation as a continuum: On one end, you participate very little or not at all, potentially sending a message to students that you do not care. On the other end, you participate too much and create an environment where students may not feel their participation is valuable or needed.

### **Tips for using discussions effectively:**

- Use open-ended questions.
- Set expectations up front.
- Be present! Participate with students in the discussion forum.



Too little participation

Too much participation

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Clearly, it is important to find the right spot somewhere in the middle.

Here are some tips to help you find a good balance:

- Students like to see participation from their instructor but can get discouraged from contributing if they perceive an instructor's post as the "final answer." Chime in and demonstrate in your own posts how you want your students to post, keeping in mind not to dominate the discussion or cut it off by providing the "right" answer.
- You can revive a stagnating discussion by asking another question or rephrasing your original one.
- Students are more likely to participate if they feel they are part of a community. You can establish community effectively through personal introductions or off-topic fun discussions at the beginning of the semester.
- A more formal way of ensuring participation is to ask students to submit a summary of the discussion.
- Consider emailing individual students who do not participate.

## EXAMPLES

Below are some examples of open-ended questions that encourage student engagement:

Reread the case study on page 15. Explain what you would do in Sarah's situation and why.

Briefly outline the company's manufacturing approach and describe its application of sustainability concepts. Then pick one of your classmates' responses and apply it to your business.

Reflect on any challenges you encountered while reviewing the article. Were they related to the criteria or to the author's writing style? Were you sure of your impressions until you read the findings of another member in your group? What steps can you take to overcome these challenges?

Imagine your town or city 20 years from now. What are the big changes you see in terms of how people go about their lives?

Describe a recent team interaction you were a part of, and recount particularly one aspect you felt uncomfortable about.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [CREST + Model: Writing Effective Online Discussion Questions](#) by MERLOT
- [Learn@UW - Guidelines for Effective Online Discussions](#) by University of Wisconsin-Madison
- [Making Online Classroom Discussion More Dynamic and Engaging](#) by Arizona State University