

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 through discussions. The instructor plays a central role in making that learning happen and supporting it, in motivating students, and in keeping them engaged. The instructor achieves the latter by doing two things: writing good discussion questions and managing discussions effectively. The following pages provide suggestions on how to craft good discussion questions and help your students get the most out of your discussion board.

A CLOSER LOOK

Three components ensure successful discussions: open-ended questions, guidelines for students, and 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.

Most commonly, questions are based on the course textbook or other readings. Switch things up by including questions based on your students' experience or ones that have a direct relation to their lives.

Logistics

- Set expectations and provide guidelines for students by specifying when posts and reply posts are due, their length and 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 roles to ensure that the discussion is carried through and all aspects are covered; this also motivates students because they feel that they are in charge and have a sense of responsibility.



Tips for Using Discussions Effectively:

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

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.



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It is important to find the right balance somewhere in the middle of these two extremes. Here are some tips to help you find 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 postings 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. Pick one of your classmates' responses and apply it to your business.

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

Imagine the city where you live in the year 2030. How might it differ from today? (adapted from: Teaching Effectiveness Program, p. 5)

How do you feel about prohibiting retailers from using plastic bags? (adapted from: Teaching Effectiveness Program, p. 5)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

CREST + Model: Writing Effective Online Discussion Questions: <http://jolt.merlot.org/vol3no2/akin.htm>

Guidelines for effective online discussions: <https://kb.wisc.edu/luwmad/page.php?id=39736>

Making Online Classroom Discussion More Dynamic and Engaging: <https://teachonline.asu.edu/2014/01/making-online-classroom-discussion-dynamic-engaging/>