

Online Discussions: Tips for Students



Online discussions can help you prepare for class, learn discussion skills, practice your writing skills, and learn from others. To be successful, you need to translate your face-to-face discussion skills to the online environment. Remember that online discussions are first and foremost dialogues, not writing assignments. The following tips highlight key features of effective online discussion strategies, whether for discussion groups or live chats.

Writing a Post

Develop a thesis, argument, or question

After you've done the required reading or task, think of a thesis and how to support it, then read the other postings and see how they support or contradict your idea, and write about this. Another strategy is to look for postings that lack evidence and probe for some. You can also turn your thoughts into questions or play devil's advocate. Remember, though, that opinions aren't arguments. Be sure to support what you say with references to course materials or outside sources, such as readings.

Use keywords in your title

Online discussions can generate a number of messages, so you need to consider efficient ways to make your contributions. To help the other participants quickly understand what your post is about, be sure that your title clearly indicates the content that will follow. “My ideas about today’s readings” isn’t nearly as clear as “My opinion on Freud’s theory of mourning and melancholia.” Your title could even summarize the opinion, argument, or question that you raise, like in the following: “Freud’s theory of mourning and melancholia: A false divide.”

Encourage discussion

If you’re the first to post, strive to encourage discussion. Get others thinking (and writing) by making bold statements or including open-ended questions in your message. Those who post first are most often responded to and cited by others. Remember to check back and see if and how others have responded to your ideas.

Make postings short, clear, and purposeful

In general, write one to two meaningful paragraphs because long messages are difficult to read online. Another rule of thumb is to make only one main point in each posting, supported by evidence and/or an example. Be concise (Vonderwell, 2003).

Your stance need not be forever

It can be intimidating to take a stand on an issue at times, especially when you put it in writing, which we associate with permanence. Remember that you are allowed to change your mind! Simply indicate that with the new information raised in the discussion, you have changed your stance. Learning is about change.

Other practical considerations for discussion board postings

It can be frustrating to read through a busy discussion forum with lots of posts and replies. Make sure to create new threads if new topics evolve in the discussion. Subscribing to receive email alerts of new postings can help participants keep up with a conversation without checking back into the discussion forum repeatedly. You can configure the tool to receive alerts whenever a new post appears or receive a daily summary of the posts.

Responding to other posts

Make the context clear

An informative title will help, but also consider including in your reply a quotation from the original message that you’re responding to. If the original message is lengthy, cut out what is not relevant to your response. And if the original has many paragraphs, you could place your

comments between the paragraphs to give readers the context for your ideas (Vonderwell, 2003).

Add value to the conversation

Saying “I agree” does not move the discussion forward. Ask yourself why you agree and explain your rationale so that others have something else to respond to (Vonderwell, 2003).

Ask probing questions

Consider using the following questions when trying to extend a discussion:

- What reasons do you have for saying that?
- Why do you agree (or disagree) on that point? How are you defining the term that you just used? What do you mean by that expression?
- Could you clarify that remark?
- What follows from what you just said?
- What alternatives are there to such a formulation? (Roper, 2007)

Feel free to disagree with your classmates

To air different perspectives or help others clarify their thinking, you may need to contradict a classmate. Remember to disagree respectfully (no name-calling or obscenities) and support your point with evidence, but do not feel bad about offering a different interpretation. Your contribution should help to make the discussion more productive for all involved.

Work to create group cohesion

Discussions are about group learning. When you function well as a group, you will be more open to all the benefits that this type of learning can offer. Give positive feedback to one another, use light humor, avoid comments that could be taken as insulting, use first names, respond promptly to each other, and offer assistance. Also remember the lack of nonverbal and vocal cues in the online environment. You’ll need to label emotions (e.g., “I’m confused about this” or “I feel strongly”) because no one will pick up on how you feel otherwise.

Be aware when postings prompt emotional responses

If you feel very emotional about a message, wait before responding. It’s very easy to write something in the heat of the moment and then wish you could retract it. If you send it to the discussion, the damage is done. Even waiting overnight can give you enough distance to respond in a calmer and more professional manner.

Developing a positive perspective

Engaging in online chats

Like Twitter in the classroom, online chats can provide an opportunity to ask questions or make comments during an online lecture. Try to make your comments concise and clear. Remember to be respectful and professional: don't write anything that you wouldn't speak in class. Also, avoid clogging up the chat with links to extraneous resources. Stay focused and aim to add value to the class experience. Be open to new ideas

Discussion is about hearing what others have to say and working to shape and re-shape your own thoughts and perspectives. Different perspectives can further everyone's understanding of the issue or concept being discussed--they represent opportunities for learning.

Enjoy yourself

The online environment comes with many benefits, including learning from your peers in addition to your instructor. Use the time productively to hone lifelong skills and refine your ideas about the course content.

References

Roper, A. (2007). How Students Develop Online Learning Skills. *Educause Quarterly*, 1, 62-65.

Vonderwell, S. (2003). An examination of asynchronous communication experience and perspectives of students in an online course: A case study. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 6(1), 77-90.

Yu, L. et al. (2016). When students want to stand out: Discourse moves in online classroom discussion that reflect students' needs for distinctiveness. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 58, 1-11.

Online Discussions: Tips for Students. Centre for Teaching Excellence, University of Waterloo.

Participation in Class Discussions – Scoring and Examples

Overview

Posted messages should be significant – helping the discussion move forward. There are a variety of ways to do this, including (generally in some combination over the course of the week or within a posting):

- Providing concrete examples, perhaps from your own experience

- Describing possible consequences or implications
- Challenging something that has been posted in the discussion – perhaps by playing “devil’s advocate”
- Posing a clarifying question
- Suggesting a different perspective or interpretation
- Pulling in related information from other sources – books, articles, websites, other courses, etc.

Your participation score for a given week will be based on the number and quality of messages you post to that week’s discussion. Participation will be evaluated in terms of quality as well as quantity (which may vary depending on the course requirements), based on the following scale:

	Exceeds Expectations 5 Points	Meets Expectations 4.25 Points	Minimally Meets Expectations 3.5 Points	Below Expectations 3 Points	Does Not Meet Expectations 2 Points
Responsiveness to discussion topics and demonstration of knowledge and understanding from assigned readings.	Readings were understood and incorporated into discussion as it relates to topic.	Readings were understood and incorporated into discussion as it relates to topic.	Some but little use made of readings.	Little use made of readings. Postings have questionable relationships to discussion questions and/or readings; they are non-substantive.	No use made of the readings. Postings have no discernible relationship to discussion questions and/or readings.
Ability of postings to move discussion forward.	Two or more responses add significantly to the discussions (e.g. identifying important relationships, offering a fresh perspective	At least one posting adds significantly to the discussion.	At least two postings supplement or add moderately to the discussion.	Postings do little to move discussion forward.	No feedback provided to fellow student.

	or critique of a point; offers supporting evidence).				
Timeliness and quantity of discussion responses	3 postings well distributed throughout the week.	2-3 postings somewhat distributed throughout the week.	2-3 postings; postings not distributed throughout the week.	1-2 postings; postings not distributed throughout the week.	Postings very concentrated during the week (i.e., all posted within a very brief period of time).

Protocol for posting threads and contributing to an online discussion are as follows:

- Postings should be evenly distributed during the discussion period (not concentrated all on one day or at the beginning and/or end of the period).
- Postings should be a minimum of one short paragraph and a maximum of two paragraphs.
- Avoid postings that are limited to 'I agree' or 'great idea', etc. If you agree (or disagree) with a posting, then say why you agree by supporting your statement with concepts from the readings or by bringing in a related example or experience.
- Address the questions as much as possible (don't let the discussion stray).
- Try to use quotes from the articles that support your postings. Include page numbers when you do that.
- Use proper netiquette (proper language, typing, etc.)

Scoring

Please understand that scoring is not an exact science. We will have to make some judgment calls, and the lines between these categories will seem pretty thin at times. The examples that follow will help clarify the categories.

Examples of non-substantive messages: They may indicate agreement or disagreement with a prior message, but they are too general to help move the discussion forward.

Example 1 – “Good idea for assessing whether people know what to do.”

Example 1 is a "non-substantive" message because it's simply a compliment to the student that posted the original message. It doesn't move the discussion forward or add anything substantial to the discussion.

Example 2 – “I have to agree. Having a SME or experienced designer look at the work is of tremendous help. It is so easy to assume things, and leave out steps here and there. It is certainly not as easy as it looks, and I can see where this process makes for a much better learning experience for the participants.”

Example 2 is a "non-substantive" message because the student is simply agreeing with a statement made by another student. This message does little to move the discussion forward.

Example 3 – “I disagree with your definition of soft technology. Can you please tell me how you came to that conclusion?”

Example 3 is a "non-substantive" message because, although the student disagrees, he doesn't expand on his question by saying why he disagrees.

Examples of "moderate" messages: These messages add to the discussion by clarifying information or showing how it can be applied in a particular situation, but they don't break down individual thoughts and ideas to create something new or criticize an idea based on new thoughts.

Example 4 – “As far as having used behavioral objectives, I've used them to advertise the training and again at the beginning of training in order to explain to employees what they're going to learn. For instance, an example of a behavioral objective in training for managers would be: "At the end of the class, participants will be able to define the steps in the disciplinary process." In describing the behavior, I agree that using action verbs such as define, rather than a verb like understand lets the employee know that he/she will actually be able to do something at the end of the training.”

Example 4 is a "moderate" message because the student displays knowledge of behavioral objectives and she gives an example.

Example 5 – “As an example, I work with someone who is an instructional designer, yet he's one of the slowest in adapting new elements and methods to our work. My point is that although his background is in the training field, he just couldn't seem to transition and apply that to Web-based training. Perhaps his individual capacity just isn't tailored to developing this type of training application.”

Example 5 is a "moderate" message because this student shows comprehension of the definition of the term “capacity,” as it's used in Gilbert's Behavioral Engineering Model, and is applying that definition to an example at her work.

Example 6 – “Perhaps the next important thing to consider is: Does the measurement we make (or invent) have meaning? Can it be applied in a useful manner or is it just more information? Can this measurement be used to produce or improve results?”

Example 6 is a "moderate" message because the student is asking questions to move the discussion forward. Notice that the questions in this message are more specific than the question in Example 3. If this student had attempted to answer her own questions by providing some solutions on how to ensure measurement was useful, the posting may have been considered substantial.

Examples of "significant" messages. These messages add to the discussion by identifying important relationships, putting ideas together in some unique way, or offering a critique as a point of discussion.

Example 7 – “I believe that learning is more effective if we allow learners to create their own behavioral objectives. Like Driscoll, I believe that "Learners are not empty vessels waiting to be filled, but rather active organisms seeking meaning." Bearing in mind that we are all products of our own experiences; be it socioeconomic, gender specific, cultural and/or family related, I firmly believe that the learning needs of learners should always be the force which guides the instructional development process and the crafting of meaningful behavioral objectives. Therefore, differentiated instruction is of paramount importance if we are to provide meaningful learning environments, which emulate challenge, variety, creativity and innovation. Consequently, a synergistic blend between Bloom's Taxonomy and Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences must be found if learning is to be truly effective.”

Example 7 is a "significant" message because the student is combining ideas learned from various resources into a new thought.

Example 8 – “I agree with the statement "learning is generally less effective when only the learners create the objectives", However, I would not wish to lump ALL learners into this category, whether they are intellectually gifted or not. I believe that in much instruction the student is an integral part of defining the objective, especially in skills training, or efficiency of operations. If a company has been producing X product in the same manner for an extended time, it is reasonable to believe that new employees have been trained in that "tried and proven" method of production. However, as times and markets change, production techniques must also change. The student (employee) who is being taught the same "old" method would invariably attempt to modify the technique to increase efficiency of the production. If the student is stifled by being held only to the objectives stated in the training, no improvement will be made and the company will ultimately suffer.”

Example 8 is a "significant" message because the student is disagreeing and making a contrary argument, based on an evaluation of the idea expressed in a previous message.

Example 9 – “I'm a Thomas Gilbert fan and I saw a parallel here with Gilbert's Behavioral Engineering Model and what Rossett is calling barriers. Barriers, of course, could include anything, including supervisor resistance (data and incentives), lack of alignment between training and actual work (knowledge), lack of tools (information), lack of information (data).”

Example 9 is a "significant" message because the student is identifying relationships between ideas presented by Gilbert and Rossett. Another thing to notice here is that messages don't have to be long to be "significant", but they do have to show a level of analysis, synthesis, or evaluation of the material.

A final guideline for postings, make sure your posted comments are CRISP:

Considerate

You may have strong views and will want to express those views. That's great. But remember that others may have equally strong views that are the polar opposite of your views. Feel free to question, challenge, or disagree with anything in the discussion, but do so in a respectful, considerate way.

Reflective

An asynchronous discussion may lack the spontaneity of a live discussion. But this can be an advantage. There is more time to think before responding. Take the time to think about the ideas that have been expressed (in the readings and the discussion) from the perspective of your own experience. Then add your own comments and insights.

Interactive

Remember that you're a participant in a discussion and talk with one another. Cut and paste parts of previous messages into your message. The idea is to be interactive, not just active.

Succinct

Get to the point. Short, focused messages are usually more effective than long comments.

Pertinent

Comments and questions should be related to the discussion topic. There will be times when you want to talk with someone about something unrelated to the topic. That's fine, but this is not the place to do that. When you enter into a weekly discussion, please remember that you're in a classroom, not a chat room.