

Backward Design Your Online Discussions

To backward design your online discussions, let's begin by defining three key elements:

- your course goal
- the knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSA's) needed for your final assessment and
- disciplinary thinking as it appears in your course

You can use these elements to create discussion activities that serve as scaffolding to teach, practice, and assess the kind of thinking you are teaching.

1. Define Your Course Goal

There is something that students "catch" from a dedicated professor. You know when a student "gets it." You can see the shift in thinking in their eyes and in their work. Answer the questions below to define what happens when a student really "lights up."

The single most important thing I want students to "get" in my course is...

The 10 Year Test: Imagine meeting one of your favorite students at a social event ten years from now. The student approaches you and says, "Your course was one of the best courses I have ever taken. What I learned most from your course was..." (Write your ideal answer below.)

2. Identify Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes (KSA's)

Now that you have defined a goal that meets the 10-year test, let's do some backward design. Reread your course goal and then answer the following questions:

When students achieve my course goal, they should be able to...

Next, go deeper and describe key knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSA's) that students will need to be ready for the final assessment or for higher-level courses.

Knowledge

Skills

Attitudes

3. Teach, Practice, and Assess Disciplinary Thinking

Disciplinary thinking refers to the methods of analysis and problem solving in your field. It is easy for you, but it presents new and unfamiliar ways of thinking to your students. For more this topic, see [Developing Students' Disciplinary Thinking](#).

On this page, define disciplinary thinking in your course by describing

- *how you teach the **components***
- *how you teach students to **put the components together** to engage in critical thinking, analysis, or problem solving, and*
- *how you provide enough scaffolded **practice**.*
- *Hint: every discussion is an opportunity to teach, practice, and assess disciplinary thinking.*

What kind of thinking / reasoning do you teach?

How do you teach each step in the thinking / reasoning process and then teach students to perform the steps in a fluid sequence?

How do you give students the practice they need to learn the steps, to perform them in a fluid sequence, and to be ready for your final exam, paper, or project? How can practice be included in your discussion activities?

Discussions as Scaffolding

Write one or more discussion prompts for your course.

1. Select a week or chapter and apply one or more of the three elements above: your course goal, the KSA's needed on the final assessment, or disciplinary thinking.
2. Write (or revise) a discussion prompt that engages students in the kind of thinking you are teaching. For ideas, see [Answers to Key Questions on Designing Effective Online Discussions](#)
3. Encourage learner agency by offering several options to connect to or apply the material.
4. If your course is on-campus, remote, or blended, try one of two approaches:
 - At the end of class, post a prompt online and have all students respond before the next class meeting.
 - Before class, have students respond to one or more questions on the current chapter or content.

Tip: For on-campus and remote courses, you don't have to respond online. Compile their responses on one screen to review to see where students' thinking is accurate or inaccurate so you can start the next class with a targeted lecture/discussion.

Review Your Thinking

In pairs, ask each other the following questions.

- **Course Goal:** How well does this activity move students toward your course goal?
- **Knowledge, Skills, & Attitudes (KSA's):** Which KSA's are students practicing?
- **Disciplinary Thinking:** Which step(s) of disciplinary thinking are students practicing?
- **Scaffolding:** How do your discussion activities serve as scaffolding to teach, practice, and assess the thinking needed on your final assessment?
- **Teachable Moments:** How are you intentionally recreating your favorite teachable moments?