



Online Discussion Forum Strategies & Tips

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Online discussion forums too often feel like busy work, resulting in little learning payoff for the time and energy expended. Here are some strategies for online discussion participants, drawn from my observations and experiences as an instructor of online courses, to help discussions feel more organic and promote tangible learning benefits.

- **A little organization improves discussion effectiveness.**
For example, in Canvas[®] discussions, “replying” to a discussion prompt starts a new discussion thread. People can either reply in the thread, or start their own threads. Treat threads as topical mini-discussions: start new threads with each new idea or topic, and reply to others' comments in the appropriate established threads.
- **Focus on short and topical posts (organized in threads).**
Short discussion posts with a single idea can often be more effective (not to mention easier and more enjoyable to read) than long posts with many ideas.
- **Post early in the discussion period and participate several times throughout.**
Comments that come at the end of a discussion period are less likely to be read, and leave little time for discussion if they are. Furthermore, trying to engage in discussions while also fulfilling other class activities can feel burdensome and result in “discussion fatigue.” The way I approach discussions is to set aside 2-3 short blocks of time during the week exclusively for discussion participation. I enter these into my calendar, and set event reminders to make sure I don't forget.
- **Provide new observations, ideas, or arguments for others to engage and build on.**
Discussion posts that simply support or restate the comments of another do little to further the conversation. In contrast, posts that raise new ideas, take a stand on an issue or state an argument, and/or pose *interesting* questions, provoke others' reactions and encourage dialogue.

Finally – ***how you approach discussions is the biggest determining factor of the value you get out of them.*** If you approach discussions as busy work to be “ticked off” for a grade, you will likely see little return. If, in the other hand, you approach them as opportunities to engage the material, practice critical reasoning and communication, and test the ideas of your peers, they will likely be meaningful additions to your class experience. Of course, every group has a different dynamic, and every individual a different method, however, practicing these strategies will help you get the most out of online discussion forums.