

Online Discussions: A Brief Guide to Management and Facilitation

The purpose of this document is to guide the management and facilitation of online discussions. This is intended for instructors who may be teaching a course they did not design, as well as for instructors teaching their own course designs. The guidance in this document is a collection of suggestions for consideration only. Since course subject matter, teaching style and course goals vary so widely, you will want to choose those that fit your context.

NOTE: Keep in mind that online discussions are quite different than face-to-face discussions and that the traditional classroom discussion is not necessarily a good model for design or facilitation of online discussions.

1. Before Start of Course: Review the Details

Based on a review of your course's discussions, you may find that you want to adjust certain aspects of how discussions are designed, supported or assessed.

- Review the purpose of the discussions. How do they support course goals? Instructors may use discussions in different ways. Discussions are often used to explore course readings, but they may also be used for application of knowledge and/or skills through such methods as case studies, roleplays, and problem-solving exercises.
- Review any guidelines or support given to students. This may include a discussion rubric, instructions in the syllabus and/or modules, communication guidelines, etc.
- Review the way in which discussions are assessed.
- Consider student-led discussion facilitation, particularly if this aligns with one or more course goals.

2. Monitoring and Managing: Efficiency and Teaching Presence

To efficiently and effectively monitor and manage course discussions, consider your role in facilitation: How will you interact with students during discussions?

Tips:

- Communicate your role to students early on in the course, via the syllabus and/or announcement tool.
 - Avoid becoming overly involved in responding to student posts; scan posts for areas of misunderstanding, moving off-topic, direct questions to you, etc.
 - Respond to discussions after they are completed with a wrap up or scan of the discussion interaction, adding value when possible with feedback pointed towards future growth in student knowledge or skills.
 - Use voice or video tool for wrap-up/scan feedback to discussion. This will add teaching presence for the students and can add helpful tone and detail. This can also save time as compared to writing similar amounts of feedback.
- Use the discussion filtering tools for optimal review/viewing of threads. Determine a workflow which fits how you work. For example, do you want to view posts on a screen or print them out to review? Your workflow will impact how you assess and grade discussions (see below).

3. Assessment/Grading: A Holistic Approach

- Assess and grade discussions in a holistic manner. For example, consider all student posts in one or more discussions as a single body of work. Avoid assessing individual posts or separating grades for initial versus response posts.
- Consider a holistic rubric (see example below) rather than an analytic one. Because discussions are holistic in nature and difficult to break apart into separate pieces for assessment, holistic rubrics are a better fit. Not all desired behaviors in discussions will be apparent in any one post or even one discussion.
- Strongly consider rewarding collaborative behavior by including this in your rubric. This can aid in the health and rigor of discussions. See the example rubric below for details.
- Consider not grading every student on every discussion. Spot-checking discussions for assessment purposes can reduce workload. This can be considered analogous to the effect of “pop-quizzes” in terms of keeping consistent effort.
- Workflow- Consider how you will review discussions for grading purpose and put the grades into the grade center. This may involve a partially paper-based solution to help move between Blackboard course areas.

Holistic Rubric Example with collaborative knowledge-building behaviors

Criteria	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follows assignment instructions • Postings show evidence of one or more of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Agree or disagree respectfully with the ideas in the post ○ Build on, synthesize, or compare existing ideas by quoting, paraphrasing, synthesizing other posts ○ Support statements, arguments or disagreements with evidence ○ Respond to questions of colleagues and instructor ○ Compliment your peers, encourage constructively ○ Ask questions of colleagues or raise new questions for the whole group • Contributions show understanding of course concepts • Contributions show in-depth thinking including analysis or synthesis of ideas as appropriate 	
Points	Performance Levels
4.5 -5	Consistently demonstrates criteria
4-4.5	Usually demonstrates criteria
3.5-4.0	Sometimes demonstrates criteria
0-3.5	Rarely to never demonstrates criteria