

# Discussion forum best practices: an introduction

## WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

A robust primer on online discussion forum assignments including:

* the role of the instructor moderator
* discussion forum assignment design
* sample good/bad discussion assignments
* a checklist for discussion assignments
* a sample grading rubric
* questions a moderator could ask to stimulate engagement
* a guide to troubleshooting discussion forum problems as a moderator

## HOW DO I USE IT?

Model your online discussion forum assignment design on the included samples. Moderate discussions using the provided tips and by using the questions that stimulate engagement. Modify the grading rubric as needed and use it to score your students’ discussion assignments. For assistance, please contact [CET](http://cet.usc.edu/).

Discussion forums are tools used to engage students in social learning. As the name implies, the learning taking place in a discussion forum should be a product of the social interactions occurring among participants. Ideally, assignments in a discussion forum will be designed to effectively lead students in creating, sharing, and constructing knowledge together. Social learning is an active learning strategy; students in a discussion should be active, not passive, learners. The instructor serves as a moderator; his/her role is not to evaluate each student or each post.

### Role of the moderator

* Check in twice a day, perhaps for just 30 minutes at a time.
* Don’t post a response to every comment in the forum, but make specific comments to student posts you find particularly well thought-out or provocative in order to encourage more discussion.
* Moderate (!) the discussion, rather than dominate the discussion.
* Keep the conversation lively. Ask new questions. Correct misconceptions. Remind participants of the rules if necessary.
* Challenge shallow thought. “OK, then answer me this…” “Suppose the opposite were true. What then?” “Can you identify support for your statement in this week’s readings?”
* Address and/or reject inappropriate posts.

### Discussion forum assignment design

Set participation expectations and grading methods at the start of the course. Check for student understanding by making the first discussion ungraded, and correct student misunderstandings within that discussion.

* Prepare an assignment that requires an actual discussion, not a simple statement of fact.
* Require learners to explicitly reference course content.
* Make the assignment have a personal aspect for the learner.
* Provide all relevant rules for the discussion, including time restraints.

### Sample of a good discussion forum assignment description

The objective of this assignment is to devise appropriate accommodations to address needs of persons with physical disabilities. Please review the discussion post expectations, online code of conduct, and discussion grading rubric in the course syllabus. Review chapter 6 of the textbook and the other Week 6 assigned readings.

**By midnight Monday**

* Based on a family member or acquaintance with physical limitations, describe some daily challenges for a fictional character with disabilities. Give a general description of the character and identify their challenges performing daily tasks at home.
* Describe your home, focusing on physical conditions that could pose a challenge to the character you described above.
* Minimum 200 words.

**By midnight Thursday**

* Respond to the initial post from three of your peers, suggesting accommodations in their home to address their characters’ physical challenges. Explicitly reference relevant course readings (source, page number) and details from the initial post.
* Minimum 100 words each response post.

**Throughout the week**

* Respond to all peers who commented on your initial post.

**By midnight Saturday**

* Post a summary of suggestions made by your peers, identifying accommodations that would be most appropriate and practical.

Grading will follow the participation guidelines and discussion grading rubric provided in the course syllabus. Please review the syllabus prior to starting the discussion forum assignment.

### Sample of a poor discussion forum assignment description

Read chapter 6 of the textbook. Create a summary of the chapter: highlight the most important concepts and include information that you found most interesting. Post your summary in a new discussion thread in the Week 6 discussion area.

Reply to other students’ initial posts throughout the week. Comment on concepts in Chapter 6 that the student should have included or excluded. Make at least three replies to other students.

Grading will be as follows: Up to three points for the initial post and up to three points for replies to other posts, one point per reply. See discussion forum rubric and assignment description for details.

### A checklist for discussion assignments

#### At the start of the course or in syllabus

* Establish a code of online conduct in discussions.
* Specify technological requirements, such as access to the course in Blackboard.
* Establish discussion post expectations.
* Establish a separate, ungraded discussion forum for students to pose questions to the instructor and/or their peers.
* Communicate instructor schedule of availability to check/monitor posts.

#### Set specific criteria for each discussion assignment

* Specify dates and times for posting deadlines.
* Explain how discussions will be graded, preferably with a rubric.
* Consider assigning grades on substance, not just number, of posts.
* Consider requiring explicit incorporation of lesson or module content
* Clarify for learners the objectives of the assignment
* Reference relevant information in the course syllabus
* Specify word length expectations
* Specify citation requirements, if any
* Use simple, business-like language
* Ensure that spelling and grammar are correct

#### Create engaging discussion assignments

* Promote construction of knowledge by learners
* Promote authentic collaboration between learners
* Promote active interactions between learners and course content
* Incorporate personal relevance for learner

### Sample discussion post rubric

Table 1 Sample discussion post rubric

| **Criteria** | **Needs Improvement** | **Approaches Expectations** | **Excellent** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Initial Posting** | **0 points**  Posting does not occur within 24 hours after deadline  **and/or**  Post does not fulfill most of the requirements | **2 points**  Posting does not occur before deadline  **and/or**  Post fulfills most, but not all, of the requirements | **5 points**  Posting occurs by the deadline  **and**  Post fulfills all of the requirements |
| **Peer**  **Response 1** | **0 points**  Posting does not occur before deadline  **and/or**  Post does not fulfill all of the requirements | no partial credit | **1 point**  Posting occurs by the deadline  **and**  Post fulfills all of the requirements |
| **Peer**  **Response 2** | **0 points**  Posting does not occur before deadline  **and/or**  Post does not fulfill all of the requirements | no partial credit | **1 point**  Posting occurs by the deadline  **and**  Post fulfills all of the requirements |
| **Peer**  **Response 3** | **0 points**  Posting does not occur before deadline  **and/or**  Post does not fulfill all of the requirements | no partial credit | **1 point**  Posting occurs by the deadline  **and**  Post fulfills all of the requirements |
| **Summary of**  **Peer Replies** | **0 points**  Summary not posted within 24 hours after the deadline  **and/or**  Post does not fulfill all of the requirements | **1 point**  Summary posted by the deadline  **and**  Post does not fulfill all of the requirements | **2 points**  Summary posted by the deadline  **and**  Post fulfills all of the requirements |

### Sample questions a moderator can ask to stimulate engagement in online discussions

**To assess learning.**

* What is the most important idea that was generated in today’s discussion?
* Can you explain this concept in your own words?

**To ask a student to clarify a vague comment.**

* Could you elaborate on that point?
* Can you explain what you mean?

**To prompt students to explore attitudes, values, or feelings (when appropriate).**

* What are the values or beliefs that inform this argument?
* What is your initial reaction to this argument?

**To prompt students to see a concept from another perspective.**

* How do you think that this issue is viewed by those with whom you disagree, or by those from another culture/country?
* How does that concept apply to this new problem?

**To ask students to illustrate a concept with an example.**

* Can you think of an example of this phenomenon, drawn from your research, professional experience, or culture/country?
* Can you identify a resource that exemplifies that idea?

**To prompt students to support their assertions and interpretations.**

* How do you know that?
* Which part of the text led you to that conclusion?

**To direct students to respond to one another.**

* Do you agree or do you see the issue differently? Explain.
* Can you think of another way to solve that problem?

**To prompt students to investigate a thought process.**

* What are the assumptions that informed the design of this experiment?
* What are the assumptions that these two arguments share?

**To ask students to predict possible outcomes.**

* What might happen if this practice were to be outlawed?
* What would be the result if a different set of assumptions were used to set up this research/project/program?
* Would you get a different result?

**To prompt students to connect and organize information.**

* How does this article shed light on the concept we studied last week?
* Can you develop a graph or table that organizes this information in a helpful way?

**To ask a student to refine a statement or idea.**

* When does that principle/theory/practice apply? Always? Only under certain conditions?
* Would you say, then, that you disagree with the author?

**To ask students to apply a principle or formula.**

* How does this principle apply to the following situation?
* Who can suggest how we might use this new formula to solve the problems we examined at the start of the semester/discussion?
* Under what conditions is this principle/practice/theory not valid?

### **Sources**

Horton, William Kendall. E-learning by Design, 2nd Edition. San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer, 2012. Print.