



DISCUSSION ONLINE – HOW TO DO IT

One of the most common forms of fostering interactivity—in both the traditional classroom and online courses—is through the facilitation of meaningful discussions. **Just as holding in-class discussions face-to-face takes practice, so too does guiding online discourse.** Because online discussion is written, students miss the nuances added by facial expressions, tone quality and gestures and may misconstrue another's meaning. Furthermore, because the conversation is taking place without you physically hovering nearby, the discussion can easily veer off on tangents. It's up to you to guide the discussion toward reasoned discourse. Sometimes you'll need to do this "behind the scenes"—as what may be acceptable in person may seem overbearing in print.

The online instructor must have excellent written communication skills, know how to create a relaxed environment and a sense of community where students feel comfortable contributing their opinions and ideas. Most important, the online instructor must create a dynamic atmosphere in which a synergy exists where interesting discussions can develop and all students feel comfortable participating.

Using strategies to support online discussion is crucial to producing higher order thinking. Below are just a few strategies that are unique and essential to online environments.

STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING DISCUSSION

- **Communicate your expectations** -- Expectations for online discussions should be clearly outlined in the syllabus where you should **quantify the minimum number of weekly student contributions to discussions.** Grade postings for quality and quantity. To be an effective motivator, participation should constitute between 10-40% of the student's overall grade.
- **Feedback** – It's important to establish a presence in online courses so that students don't feel abandoned. Give feedback in a timely fashion in order to show students that you are "listening." They will be motivated to participate more often if they feel that the instructor is paying attention to them.
- **Establish a pattern of frequent response** -- After you start the discussions, participate on a regular basis; your behavior will be a role model for your students. Rather than engaging in long, concentrated visits to your classroom, it is best to participate in short, but frequent intervals at least 3-5 days/week. When your students see that you are contributing to the discussions regularly and that you are visible and available, they will be more likely to participate in the discussions themselves.
- **Create a forum for introductions, casual conversations, and Q & A** -- In addition to weekly forums for discussion on the course materials and topics, provide an initial forum (called the Water-cooler, lounge, pub, cafe, etc.) where students can introduce themselves to you and their classmates. By greeting all students individually in the first week of class in this forum, you can establish a supportive learning community where students feel they are part of a group.

- **Set limits on message length** -- Messages posted to the discussion board should not be more than 3-4 paragraphs long. This serves two purposes:
 - It encourages student contribution because they won't feel obligated to write long responses
 - Readers begin to lose interest and focus if a message is too long.

RESOURCES

Check the LT&ITC Library & Resource Center for titles on discussion



[Discussion](#)

- Bender, Tisher. 2003. [Discussion-Based Online Teaching to Enhance Student Learning: Theory, Practice, and Assessment](#). Sterling, Virginia: Stylus.
- Dr. Katrina Meyer, Univ of North Dakota, explores the differences between online and face-to-face discussions and presents research on which mode is better for higher order thinking in her article [Face-to-Face vs Threaded Discussions: The Role of Time and Higher Order Thinking.2003](#)

Tags: [discussion](#), [engaging students](#), [active learning](#), [presentation](#)

*This teaching tip was taken from "Strategies for Promoting Online Discussion" on [onlinelearning.net](#) . You can download the complete article on that web site.