# Online Discussions: Tips for Students

Online discussions can help us prepare for class, learn discussion skills, practice our writing skills, and learn from others. To be successful, we need to translate our face-to-face discussion skills to the online environment. Remember that online discussions are dialogues, not writing assignments. The following tips highlight key features of effective online discussion strategies, whether for discussion groups or live chats.

## Writing a post

### Develop a thesis, argument, or question

After completing the required reading or task, think of a thesis and how to support it, then read the other postings and see how others support or contradict your idea, and write about this. Another strategy is to look for postings that lack evidence and probe for some. We can also turn our thoughts into questions or play devil's advocate. Remember, though, that our opinions are not arguments. Be sure to support what is written with references to course materials or outside sources, such as readings.

### Use keywords in your title

Online discussions can generate a number of messages, so you need to consider efficient ways to make your contributions. To help the other participants quickly understand what your post is about, be sure that your title clearly indicates the content that will follow. "My ideas about today's readings" is not as clear as "My opinion on Freud's theory of mourning and melancholia." Your title could even summarize the opinion, argument, or question that you raise, as in the following: "Freud's theory of mourning and melancholia: A false divide."

### Encourage discussion

If you are the first to post, try to encourage discussion. We often get others thinking (and writing) by making bold statements or including open-ended questions in our messages. Those who post first are most often responded to and cited by others. Remember to check back and see if and how others responded to your ideas.
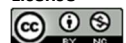
**Make postings short, clear, and purposeful**

In general, it is best to limit our writing to one or two meaningful paragraphs. Another rule of thumb is to make only one main point in each posting, supported by evidence and/or an example. Be concise (Vonderwell, 2003).

**Your stance need not be forever**

It can be intimidating to take a stand on an issue, especially when we put it in writing, which we associate with permanence. Remember that we are allowed to change our minds! Simply indicate that with the new information raised in the discussion, you have changed your opinion - maybe even state which argument convinced you. Learning is about change.

**Other practical considerations for discussion board postings**

It can be frustrating to read through a busy discussion forum with lots of posts and replies. Make sure to create new threads if new topics evolve in the discussion. Subscribing to receive email alerts of new postings can help participants keep up with a conversation without checking back into the discussion forum repeatedly. We can configure the tool to receive alerts whenever a new post appears or receive a daily summary of the posts.

## Responding to other posts

### Make the context clear

Although an informative title helps, we might also consider including a quotation from the original message that we are responding to in our post. If the original message is lengthy, cut out what is not relevant to your response. And if the original has many paragraphs, you could place your comments between the paragraphs to give readers the context for your ideas (Vonderwell, 2003).
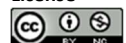
**Add value to the conversation**

Saying "I agree" does not move the discussion forward. Ask yourself why you agree and explain your rationale so that others have more to respond to (Vonderwell, 2003).

**Ask probing questions**

Consider the following questions to reflect upon your own writing before posting your reply to the discussion:

- What reasons do you have for saying that?
- Why do you agree (or disagree) on that point?
- How are you defining the term that you just used?
- What do you mean by that expression?
- Could you clarify that remark?
- What follows from what you just said?
- What alternatives are there to such a formulation? (Roper, 2007)

**It is okay to disagree with your classmates (so long as you do so respectfully)**

To air different perspectives or help others clarify their thinking, we may need to contradict a classmate. Remember to disagree respectfully (no name-calling or obscenities) and support your point with evidence, and do not feel bad about offering a different interpretation. Your contribution should help to make the discussion more productive for all involved.

**Work to create group cohesion**

Discussions are about group learning. When we function well as a group, we will be more open to all the benefits that this type of learning can offer. Give positive feedback to one another, use light humour, avoid comments that could be taken as insulting, use first names, respond promptly to each other, and offer assistance. Be careful of words like 'always', 'never' etc. as these 'all or none' words often raise our defenses. Also remember the lack of nonverbal and vocal cues in the online environment. We need to label our emotions (e.g., "I'm confused about this" or "I feel strongly") because otherwise it is not clear how we feel.
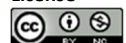
**Be aware when postings prompt emotional responses**

When we feel emotional about a message, we should wait before responding. It is very easy to write something in the heat of the moment and then wish we could retract it. If we send it to the discussion, the damage is done. Even waiting overnight can give us enough distance to respond in a calmer and more professional manner.

## Developing a positive perspective

### Engaging in online chats

Like Twitter in the classroom, online chats can provide an opportunity to ask questions or make comments during an online lecture. Try to make your comments concise and clear. Remember to be respectful and professional: don't write anything that you wouldn't speak in class. Also, avoid clogging up the chat with links to extraneous resources. Stay focused and aim to add value to the class experience.

### Be open to new ideas

Discussion is about hearing what others have to say and working to shape and re-shape your own thoughts and perspectives. Different perspectives can further everyone's understanding of the issue or concept being discussed—they represent opportunities for learning.

### Enjoy yourself

The online environment comes with many benefits, including learning from your peers in addition to your instructor. Use the time productively to hone lifelong skills and refine your ideas about the course content.

# References

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