

Writing Across the Curriculum
BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Tips for Using Online Discussion Forums

Given the current situation, many of us have had to quickly transition to online teaching. One of the most versatile tools in the online arsenal is the online discussion board or forum. Below we give suggestions on how one can use online discussion boards to get the most out of their online classroom.

Minimize requisite computer skills.

Discussion boards are flexible enough to be used for journaling, discussion, brainstorming, and assessment while keeping the skills students (and professors) require for effective navigating of the online classroom minimal and constant. Because discussion forums carry an implication about their purpose, it is important to:

Make Expectations Explicit.

If a response should use outside sources, tell students! If you want them to cite the text in response to a prompt, indicate that. Not all entries in online discussion boards serve the same function, just as not all writing activities in the class are the same.

Share Assignment Purposes.

Because online discussion boards can be used to encourage discussion one week, check understanding the next, and encourage early thinking about a paper assignment the next, it is important to inform students about assignment purposes. When students understand why they are being asked to complete work, they are more likely to approach the assignment with those goals in mind.

Consider Your Role.

How often are you going to participate in online discussion? There is no right answer, but you should consider how your participating relates to your assignment goals. If a discussion assignment's purpose is primarily to encourage critical thinking, one may wish to take a more hands-off approach, guiding the discussion from time to time but allowing students to be the primary shapers of the discussion. If, instead, the discussion board is being used to as a way to communicate important content, then one might want to take a more active role.

Choose your Questions.

While no questions are inherently better than others, some are better suited to spark online discussions. For instance, open-ended questions tend to spark more discussion than close ended ones. You may also want to consider the range of questions you ask over the course of the semester. By including questions that involve a range of skills across Bloom's taxonomy (see link below), one can encourage students of different skills levels to engage in discussion.

Vary Assignments. Utilize High-Stakes and Low-Stakes Prompts.

Online writing can be daunting for students: how formal is it? How much time should they spend? As with in-person classes, it can help to have some assignments that are quick, low-stakes writing—personal reflections, perhaps. Some, though, may be more formal, graded high-stakes writing.

Encourage Clarifying Questions.

Too often professors bristle when asked questions that are “explained in the syllabus or on the assignment sheet.” As online interaction limits nuanced verbal interactions, encourage students to include clarifying questions in their discussion posts. Public clarifying questions and answers serve to help other students who have similar questions and reduce the number of times you have to repeat yourself.

Anonymity Helps. So Do Discussion Leaders.

On occasion it may be valuable to allow for anonymous posts, if the goal is simply to produce reactions and material for discussion. However, it may also be worthwhile at time to assign students the role of facilitators and moderators so they have experience in spearheading the conversation. It may even be helpful to award extra credits to students who go above and beyond in participating and leading the discussion.

Grade Selectively.

Not every post has to be formally graded. Some can be skimmed, as you might with free-writes in traditional classrooms. Consider, too, employing a portfolio-based grading system, in which you or students would select a few entries to grade. You may also consider simplifying your grading. A three-point scale may be all you need to suit your purposes.

Employ Pairs or Groups.

It can be exhausting for both students and teachers to read every entry in a discussion board—neither party has to, not all the time. Assign working pairs or groups that respond to one another, and perhaps encourage them to work together over the semester to develop meaningful connection. You may also ask small groups to work amongst themselves as a form of low-stakes assignment, and later report to the class at large as part of a more formal (high-stakes) assignment. Much of this can be accomplished with the groups feature on Blackboard (see link below).

Stop!

Unlike classrooms, in which the start and end times are clearly demarcated, online discussion boards can feel always “on” (especially in the current moment, when many of us are in front of our screens). Be okay with recognizing when you—and the students—need to take a break. Encourage students to schedule time each week to dedicate to discussion. You may also wish to let students know approximately how long they should spend on each assignment. (Remember, make expectations explicit.)

Further Reading:

<https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/five-tips-for-improving-online-discussion-boards>

https://help.blackboard.com/Learn/Instructor/Interact/Course_Groups

<https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/blooms-taxonomy/>