

Online Discussion Forums

The following ideas and recommendations can improve student participation and learning in discussion forums.

- In the syllabus and as a separate course document, outline the rules for how to participate in a discussion. In the separate course document, provide an example discussion question, post, and response so students have a model.
- Assign a discussion forum for students to ask questions about the syllabus or what is expected of them.
- Assign a discussion forum for students to introduce themselves and express their personalities in order to improve student interactivity in more academic discussions.
- Organize small groups (2-4 students) to devise a group answer for a *closely* related question prior to having students participate in an academic discussion forum. The smaller group raises students' accountability, and the prior thought process can inspire curiosity and improve the quality of discussions.
- Discussion questions that ask students to analyze how component parts relate to each other and the whole, combine ideas, or evaluate premises, causes, or consequences can solicit higher engagement and deeper learning than recall or identification questions can.
- Whenever possible, avoid responding to individual posts. Faculty responses encourage students to defer responsibility for engaging each other to the instructor.
- Reply to unanswered student questions privately via email after the due date. Otherwise, students might defer responsibility for each other's questions to you.
- Look for assumptions that need questioning, common mistakes, useful information, clarifications, ground rules for evidence, alternative viewpoints, hypotheses, or tentative conclusions. Summarize them as a separate post, not as responses to specific students, and encourage students who haven't yet posted to address them.
- With a separate post, highlight differences in your students' answers and ask them to explain or reconcile the difference.
- Welcome mistakes without judgment; emphasize learning over correctness.
- Even when frustrated, remain positive and encouraging. The facilitator's attitude influences the quantity and quality of responses.
- After a discussion, summarize in an Announcement the ideas raised and what students should have learned from the discussion.