

Tips for online discussions

Quick reference guide

Overview

Asynchronous online discussions hold much promise, as they offer opportunity for three forms of interaction essential for engagement: student-content, student-student and student-instructor. To get the most out of online discussions, consider the following basic tips.

1. Approach online discussions as conversations, not quizzes

- **Quiz approach** = Ask one question, expect every student to answer, and assess individual answers. This approach is ineffective and leads to dry, repetitive, and inauthentic discussion. Not recommended!
- **Conversation approach** = Start with a topic or open-ended question. Expect all participants to pay attention throughout (i.e. read all posts), and expect everyone to participate at some point in the conversation. This approach requires care and attention, facilitation by the instructor and can be highly effective. Recommended!

2. Ditch the post-once, reply-twice structure

- Many educators set up online discussions that require students to post once and reply twice. This approach leads to forced, inauthentic communications. Not recommended!
- Instead, provide expectations for the number of days per week students should log in and participate, either in a new thread or in response to an existing one. This approach allows conversations to flow more naturally and will more closely mirror in-class discussions in depth and engagement. This approach also encourages good listening behavior, because students are more likely to read more posts if they are visiting the discussion several times each week.

3. Be an attentive, but not overbearing, host

- As the instructor in an online discussion, your role is similar to the role of a dinner party host. You set the agenda and arrange the "menu" and flow of the event.
- As any good host would, you include all guests in the conversation at some point in the duration of your time together.
- If it's a large party, you might talk with small groups of guests rather than with each guest individually.
- As the host, you would not feel the need to take part in every conversation throughout the duration of your time together – how could you? Instead, you trust the guests to engage with each other in addition to engaging with you.
- Also, as host, if you sense that conversation is lagging in one area, you would do your part to keep your guests engaged by introducing a new thread to the discussion, and/or by calling on your guests to share their thoughts and experiences.

There are many more advanced ways to use online discussion forum spaces (see for example [Actively Engaging Students in Online Asynchronous Courses](#)). Even educators new to online and remote teaching can benefit from adopting these basic tips for approaching online discussions.



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