



Tips for Successful Online Discussions

The purpose of using discussions in an online course is to provide opportunities for students to **interact**: (1) with each other, (2) with the content, and (3) with the instructor. This tip guide will cover things to consider for successful online discussions.



1. Know Your Role

As an online instructor, you set the tone in your course. The first discussion topic or post can be pivotal in getting your class off in the right direction.

As an online instructor it is necessary to **facilitate**, **guide**, and **participate** in the Discussion board.

Instructor Presence Examples:

- **Set the tone.** Contribute by posting useful information that is high quality, referenced, related to the topic, academic, *prompts engagement*, thus becoming a guide of what is expected.
- **Be responsive.** Come up with a regular schedule for when to respond. In a discussion board, this does not mean you have to reply to literally every post from every student. Instead, respond to an individual student or multiple students at once or weave together student contributions.
- **Be strategic.** Avoid contributing too early to the Discussion Board. Post or reply to a student(s) when it will enhance the learning experience.
- **Be observant.** Respond to comments that have not received a response. Ensure that all contributions are validated – move the discussion along with questions for other students to consider.
- **Be present.** Post or reply to let students know that you are enjoying the discussion dialogue.
- **Be clear.** Post or reply to clarify any misunderstanding that will guide the learning in the appropriate direction. It can be helpful to establish an FAQ section where you clarify expectations, discussion rules, and other course questions.
- **Be the guide.** Avoid dominating the conversation or giving students the answer. This is the opportunity for students to dialogue and to make the connection for critical thinking to occur. Be the guide on the side and point the way.

Instructor Reply Examples (To Prompt Engagement):

- Steve, how do you believe that this discussion topic is related to your professional goals? I appreciate your reflection.
- Maria, apply what you learned from this activity to some aspect of your life and share your findings. Thanks!
- Antoine, it is clear you are making deep connections to the material presented here. If you were to suggest resources for someone interested in learning more about this topic, what would you suggest?
- Shante, which source(s) did you find most valuable to support your answer to this discussion prompt?
- Anthony, if we wanted to extend this discussion beyond what has been shared so far, what additional questions could we ask?
- Rena, your insights on the challenges of leadership in business suggest we might see similar patterns in other professions. Could you expand on your thinking in this area?
- Julie, as you have noted, Bruno's perspective on this issue is quite different than yours. Are there any elements in his perspective with which you might agree?

Note: Use the student's name in the response to personalize comments.

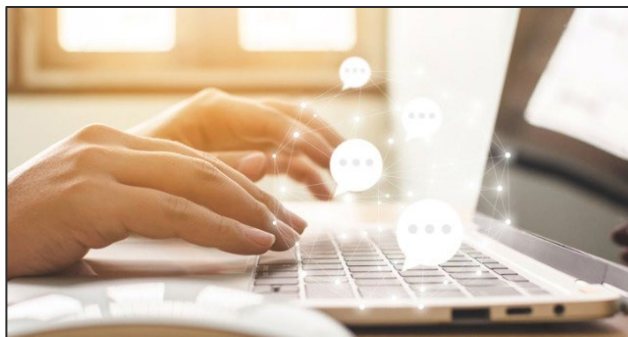
2. Create a Discussion Schedule

Keep students on track by creating “consistent” start and end dates for weekly discussions. Setting due dates to posts will allow students to plan their time effectively before discussions close. **Helpful Tip:** Consider including your discussion schedule in your CCO and/or Course Orientation Module.

Discussion Schedule Example:

The discussion board will give you the opportunity to apply and analyze the course material that was provided during the scheduled module(s). In this course, post accordingly:

- **Initial posts:** will be due Tuesdays at midnight and should contain 250 words.
- **Responsive posts:** after you have read your classmates initial posts, pick two peers to pose a substantive comment due Fridays at midnight.



3. Create Discussion Prompts That Are Meaningful

Rather than promoting rote memorization of facts, you want to create discussions around prompts that help students to think critically. Avoid prompts that read like exam questions. Ask questions that are meaningful. Discussions should connect to the learning material and provide a means to apply the learning. Consider creating discussions that focus energy on critical concepts, principles, and skills. This creates more opportunity for students to use critical thinking and to learn more on the subject from each other.

Discussion Prompt Examples:

- Make the prompt relevant to your course content.
- Make the prompt current, such as a recent news story.
- Give learners the option of choosing between multiple prompt questions. *For example, Week 2 Discussion contains three prompt questions, but have students choose one question to respond.*
- Invite students to connect course concepts to their own experience or background knowledge.
- Provide context for the discussion, linking to relevant resources, and emphasizing the relevance to students’ learning experiences.
- Debates: where students are taking or assigned a specific position.
- Role play: where students assume a fictional or non-fiction person and speak from their Point of View.

Note: For additional information, review the following video titled [Change the Prompt, Not the Tool: Developing Effective Discussions](#).

4. Provide Timely Feedback

When your discussion has closed, it is time to provide feedback to each student. Timely feedback is essential to supporting student learning and growth. Also, each feedback interaction is an opportunity for an instructor to better understand the students thinking and approach to a task. Knowing how your students learn is fundamental to ensure they succeed.

Note: The most effective feedback is focused, clear, and considers motivation and learning, not justifying a grade.



Things to Consider:

- Feedback improves learning. Provide feedback to students after the discussion closes (this is 1 to 2 days after).
- Use feedback to teach rather than to justify a grade and what you'd most like the student to address in future work.
- Consider linking the connection of the outcome and readings to the discussion.
- Balance suggestions for improvement with affirmation of successes.
- Recognise what the student has done well and identify what has been misunderstood or not understood.
- Be specific and explicit about feedback, providing examples when possible.
- Offer your guidance about future steps for improvement.
- Use audio and/or video feedback to personalize and reduce chances of misinterpretation of text comments.
- Use rubrics to make grading more efficient and make expectations clear to students.

Best Practice: Use the [SpeedGrader](#) to deliver individual feedback and grade. The SpeedGrader will help to smooth the process along in a timely manner.

5. Summarize the Discussions

Consider creating a weekly summarization and post in the discussion or announcement that highlights the main points and the important conclusions that the group talked about during the week. Putting in direct examples from the discussion is very useful and gives credit to high quality interactions. This helps students to summarize their own learning, as well as lets them know clearly that they are being monitored throughout the process.

Best Practice: Your summary might end with another nudge that bridges this week's discussion to the next module topics.



For additional support, please reach out to the Office of Academic Affairs SPS.