



Online Teaching Guidelines: *Discussion Facilitation*

Facilitating Your Online Discussion

Discussions encourage students to interact with and learn from one another, but they are also a key point of contact with the course instructor—i.e., you. So be an active participant in every discussion topic and don't leave students entirely to their own devices! This does *not* mean that you need to respond to every comment that students make, but **you should make 1-3 substantive posts in the active discussion every weekday.**

Here are some suggestions to help you effectively facilitate your online discussion.

- **Pose engaging and provocative discussion questions.** Lively discussion begins with good questions: if you're not interested in a discussion topic, chances are your students won't be interested either! Here's a good rule of thumb: if you can easily write a paragraph or two in response to a discussion question, it's probably a viable topic. And if you can approach the question more than one way, it will probably allow for fruitful dialogue among your students. (For suggestions on how to create effective discussion questions for your online class, see <https://wiki.academyart.edu/display/OTLIB/Writing+Effective+Discussion+Questions>.)
- In *most* classes, it's best to have **only one active discussion topic in each module.** (Please note that in classes where the primary work is discussion, more than one topic per module may be necessary.) If you want your class to address several interrelated discussion questions in a module, create a discussion topic for this conversation, begin by posing one or two starter questions, and then use your own posts to raise additional questions and deepen the conversation throughout the week. This practice encourages students to return to the discussion several times over the course of the module, and having a single active discussion topic helps keep the energy of the discussion focused.
- **Post something in the active discussion topic every day:** this is how your students know you're present and involved in the class!
- **Highlight, synthesize, and respond to key points students have raised.** Again, it's best not to respond to every single comment; instead, use your remarks as a way of synthesizing important points made by several students. You might want to **compare and contrast** the comments of different students and to respond to—and expand upon—important ideas that have been raised. You can also use this compare/contrast strategy as a way of encouraging students to engage with one another.
- **Point out the connections** between students' ideas and concepts from the module. Show the parallels and the contrasts and affirm students who have used ideas from the module appropriately and effectively.
- **Ask follow-up questions**—push the topic in new directions to keep students interested.

- **Answer students' questions.** Students often ask questions about technical or theoretical issues in the discussion. While some such questions may be usefully answered by other students, others will require your knowledge and input. Don't let a student question go unanswered for more than a (business) day, even if you think another student could answer it.
- **Offer background information** related to points students raise. Embed relevant images or videos, and be creative with the tools available to you!
- Help students see the relevance and interest of what they're learning by **bringing in relevant material** (examples, illustrations, current events, commentary, etc.) **from everyday life.** Magazines, newspapers, trade journals, and online media are all great sources.
- When it's appropriate, **share your own relevant experiences** and ideas with the class. Students are here to learn from you, and they value having the benefit of your personal experience, as related to the course content. Sharing your own struggles and failures, as well as your successes, helps to humanize you—and it helps inspire struggling students!
- **Bring the discussion back on track**, if it has strayed too far from the point.

Our example of discussion participation guidelines also includes **many more ideas about how to participate in discussions**: <https://wiki.academyart.edu/display/OTLIB/Sample+Participation+Guidelines> (see "How to Participate"). Although these suggestions are aimed at students, instructors should find them useful, as well.

More Tips for Managing Your Class Discussion

Here are some additional suggestions for making your class discussion an effective part of your teaching:

- Draft and **post your expectations** for students' discussion participation.
- Start the semester with a **posting skills assignment**, to make sure that all your students know how to embed images and videos and how use the basic formatting tools. Here's an **example**: <https://wiki.academyart.edu/display/OTLIB/Posting+Skills+Assignment>.
- **Model** the behavior you want to elicit in your students: frequent and substantive participation, engaging with others' ideas, asking additional questions, etc.
- **Recycle** your goodies: keep a running file (in an MSWord document, for example) of your well-crafted discussion posts, so that you can reuse them in future semester. You'll find that similar issues arise semester after semester, so putting in the time now to write thoughtful comments will serve you well in the future.
- **Post discussion grades** each week to encourage students to participate. Especially at the beginning of the semester, this feedback can help clarify your expectations and shape students' performance.

Additional Resources

- Learn more about **formulating your expectations** for students' discussion participation: <https://wiki.academyart.edu/display/OTLIB/Drafting+Participation+Guidelines>.
- You can download an **example of discussion participation guidelines** here: <https://wiki.academyart.edu/display/OTLIB/Sample+Participation+Guidelines>
- For suggestions on how to create **effective discussion questions** for your online class, see <https://wiki.academyart.edu/display/OTLIB/Writing+Effective+Discussion+Questions>.