

1. Give each discussion forum a **clear title** so that students will be able to locate it easily, in relation to other course activities and assignments. If you organize your course as weekly modules, use titles like "Week 1 Discussion" or "Module 1 Discussion."
2. Because discussion forums are located in the Communication area of your course, rather than within Course Documents or Assignments, you may find it helpful to post **"pointer" messages to students about the beginning of a new discussion**. Use the Announcement area, and/or send an e-mail, to inform students that a new discussion (provide the discussion title) is now available. You might also tell people how long this discussion will be "open for business." If you are organizing your course materials in weekly folders or Learning Units, post an item within the folder or Learning Unit that reminds students to participate in the associated discussion.
3. Make sure that students understand **what type of participation you expect** from them, and how you will grade their participation. Should students proofread their discussion comments before posting them? Do you want discussion to be informal, or formal? Do you want students to limit each discussion post to a few sentences?
4. Consider creating a **"Water Cooler" or "Student Lounge" discussion area**, which students can use for discussion of a social nature (topics not immediately related to course materials). If a regular course discussion begins to veer off on a tangent, you can recommend that students continue this aspect of the discussion in the "Student Lounge" forum.
5. You may also want to **establish separate discussion areas for "Technical Issues"** (where students can post questions about technical aspects of navigating the online course, and the instructor can post system reports if necessary), and for **"General Q & A"** where students can pose general course-related questions.
6. **Model the type of discussion contributions that you hope to see from your students**. Make sure that you are "visible" in the discussion on a regular basis, but resist the urge to lecture. How often you contribute to the discussion, and the tone of your posts, will influence students' degree and type of participation. Praise students who have contributed in an exemplary manner ("That was a great post, Jenny. You summarized some key points, stated your perspective, and then raised a new question. This is a great model for the rest of us, when we compose discussion comments").
7. Use the discussion board at the very beginning of the class to **create a "team spirit."** Ask students to introduce themselves, or to share their thoughts on a simple topic, during the first week of class. Remember that they may be new to the online classroom: ease them into feeling comfortable with the online discussion forum by posing a low-pressure first exchange.
8. Invite students to use the **file attachment capability of the discussion board**, if they would like to share extended reflections on the subject. This will prevent discussions from becoming a series of lectures.
9. Send private e-mail to **encourage quiet or shy students** who have not been participating in the discussion. It is usually best to contact the student privately to spur participation: the student may be experiencing technical problems or personal issues that prevent active participation.
10. If certain students are unable to participate in a particular discussion, give them a **special "discussion notes" assignment**, which allows them to benefit from the discussion and offer their own contribution. Have them read all of the discussion posts, organize a pithy summary of what was discussed, and also highlight questions or topics that were not fully pursued in the discussion (topics for future discussion). This analysis should be saved as a text document to be submitted to the instructor for grading and/or shared with all classmates.

11. If some **students are dominating the discussion**, contact them privately by e-mail with some suggested guidelines for their participation. Try not to deflate their enthusiasm, but do try to help them communicate in a more effective manner.
12. When many students participate in a single discussion, and when discussion goes on for an extended period of time, you will quickly amass a great deal of text. **Help organize the discussion** by using some of the following approaches:
 - If the discussion will cover several topics, **pre-arrange individual "threads" for each topic**. For instance: you want students to discuss 3 different questions related to a week's readings. Before students begin the discussion, start 3 different threads within the same forum, giving each thread a clear subject title indicating the question to be pursued in that thread.
 - Periodically begin a new thread called **"Recap" or "Highlights,"** in which you summarize the most important issues that have been raised so far in the discussion. You can also assign this responsibility to particular students for each discussion. (Creating a pithy summary of a discussion is more difficult than you might think! It's a great way for students to review and organize their classmates' thoughts before moving along to a new set of topics.)
 - When discussion within a thread begins to veer off topic, step in as a facilitator and suggest that participants **begin a new thread**, or gently guide participants back to the central issue.
 - Break your class into **smaller discussion groups (4- or 5-member groups work well)**, and create a separate thread for each group to discuss the topic. Students should feel free to "listen in" on other groups' discussions, but should limit their participation to their group's thread. (You can also create private discussion boards for the groups, using Blackboard's "Manage Groups" tool on the Control Panel.) After the small groups have had an opportunity to talk amongst themselves, start a new thread open to all class members which attempts to summarize and integrate the individual groups' learning.
13. Although you are the expert in the classroom, **resist the urge to tell students the "right" answer** during a discussion. Guide them to discover the answer through discussion with one another. This will result in a better grasp and retention of the course materials, as well as a more active learning experience for the students.
14. **Actively wrap up a discussion** when you want the class to move on to new material. Post a new thread titled "Let's move on" or "Wrapping up this discussion" that offers a brief summary of what has been discussed, as well as some words of encouragement or praise for the students' participation in the discussion. You can then "Lock" the discussion, preventing further replies while still allowing everyone to review the discussion's content. The Lock option is available from the instructor's view of the forum: click on "Show Tools" if you do not see the discussion tool bar.