

Online Discussion: Tips and Strategies

Prepare for discussion

Articulate and communicate the purpose (not just the topic!) of discussion.

Consider both the content you want students to learn and the skills you want them to apply and develop through the online discussion. Sharing the learning goals will help students understand why you're using discussion and how it will contribute to their learning. These learning goals will inform the strategies and digital tools you use during discussion.

Determine whether you would like to host a live (synchronous) discussion via Zoom and/or **an asynchronous discussion** via CourseWorks's Discussion tool.

Select the type of discussion activity that best meets your learning goals and allow students to explore course topics at a deeper level. Types of activities include: building a discussion around readings or video content, reflection questions, debate, question forum, small group discussion, etc..

Set the tone for online discussion

Establish an inclusive climate that welcomes and supports contributions from different voices, perspectives, and experiences by establishing online discussion guidelines that communicate expectations for online etiquette.

Encourage student ownership of course policies by involving them in revising, contributing to, or co-creating the agreed-upon guidelines. Post the guidelines online in CourseWorks, and refer to them as needed.

Sample discussion guidelines include:

- Contribute respectfully
- Constructively critique ideas, not individuals
- Allow everyone the chance to contribute
- Refer to classmates by name

Communicate expectations for participation

Articulate participation expectations. Specify what students should include in online contributions, the number of contributions you expect, the types of interactions (e.g., students direct their responses to you, or students must interact with each other, they are required to build on the information shared by peers), the language/terms students should use, the writing style you expect (e.g., including references or more informal conversation), and when students are expected to contribute if the discussion is asynchronous.

Share the criteria that will be used to evaluate discussions. Identify and communicate the elements of a quality contribution and how students' contributions will be evaluated. Consider using a rubric to help your students understand the requirements of the discussion.

Maximize student engagement in online discussion

Encourage students to take an active role

Ask students to volunteer or assign them to roles such as facilitator, discussion starter (e.g., designate 2-3 students per discussion to spark the conversation with a question, quote, an example, or link to previous course content), note-taker, summarizer, etc..

Students can be encouraged to:

- generate discussion questions
- respond to peer comments/questions
- bring in outside readings or experiences
- share course-related materials (e.g., articles, video clips, other media)
- relate course topics, make real-life connections to the topics discussed

Form discussion groups to foster interactions online

Whether teaching a large or small class, consider using discussion groups to encourage students to interact with one another (e.g., to talk about the reading, to brainstorm ideas, to debate, to share examples). Keep discussion groups small and conversation focused. Ask a member of each group to create a group summary of the discussion to share with the whole class.

Resources:

- Groups can be created in CourseWorks (Canvas Guide): [How do I create a group discussion in a course?](#)
- Groups can be created in Zoom Breakout Rooms (Zoom): <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/206476093-Getting-Started-with-Breakout-Rooms>

Plan to ask questions that advance student learning

For asynchronous discussions, prompts can include a link to a journal article, chapter excerpt, case study, or video clip.

Draft open-ended questions that inspire a range of answers. For asynchronous discussions, consider prompts that ask students to engage in specific actions (e.g., find, compare, explain, identify, connect). For live discussions, vary question complexity over the course of the discussion. If there is one right answer, ask about the process to get to the right answer.

Things to Avoid for live online discussions:

- Yes/no, vague, or leading questions

- Filler questions (“Do you understand?” or “Do you have any questions?”).
- Answering your own question before pausing to give students time to think/respond
- Making assumptions about students’ shared values or life experiences
- Asking students to speak for an entire social group

Facilitate the discussion

Clarify your role. Tell students what they can expect from you and/or your TA(s) in online discussions.

Be present and play an active role in guiding the discussion but let students do most of the contributing. You can do this by modeling contributions, asking questions, using students’ names, giving feedback, and affirming student contributions. In addition, if facilitating a live online discussion: actively listening, pausing to give students time to think, and repeating questions. For asynchronous discussions, log in daily to read and respond to student posts.

Intervene when necessary. Manage discussion dynamics, make sure all students have the opportunity to contribute to the discussion, ask students to explain or provide evidence to support their contributions, redirect/keep the conversation on track, and revisit discussion guidelines as needed.

Provide timely feedback. Focus the feedback on the learning and the criteria you identified to evaluate discussion contributions.

Close the Discussion

Bring an online discussion to a close. Give students an opportunity to reflect on and share what they learned. Enlist a few students per discussion to be “discussion wrappers” and ask them to wrap up the discussion by identifying and posting themes, extracting key ideas, or listing questions to explore further.

References and Further Reading

Barkley, E.F. (2010). *Student Engagement Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty*. Jossey-Bass.

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Darby, F. *How to Be a Better Online Teacher. Advice Guide. The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Howard, J.R. (2015). *Discussion in the College Classroom: Getting Your Students Engaged and Participating in Person and Online*. Wiley.

Howard, J.R. (2019) *How to Hold a Better Class Discussion: Advice Guide*. Chronicle of Higher Education. <https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/20190523-ClassDiscussion>

Simon, E. (2018). 10 Tips for Effective Online Discussions. *EDUCAUSE*. Retrieved from <https://er.educause.edu/blogs/2018/11/10-tips-for-effective-online-discussions>

Support

For assistance with discussion pedagogy, please request a Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) consultation by emailing ColumbiaCTL@columbia.edu

For assistance with the instructional technologies mentioned (Discussion Tool in CourseWorks, Zoom), please contact the CTL Learning Designer assigned to your school or department.

Find contacts at <https://ctl.columbia.edu/faculty/faculty-contacts/>, or email the CTL at ColumbiaCTL@columbia.edu.