Leading Asynchronous Discussions

In GoucherLearn, please use Advanced Forums for your discussion forums, as they include special options for grading and commenting.

Best Practices:

- Provide students with clear guidelines and expectations for discussion formatting and content. Are citations required? Is a simple "As Smith says…" when citing an in-course reading sufficient? Full APA or MLA citations for all readings? How many discussion posts are required? What kind of quality expectations do you have? Yes, this is graduate school work, but especially in online courses clear expectations are essential.
- At the start of the course share a discussion forum grading rubric so students will know exactly what your grading expectations are. It may be desirable to share examples of quality student work if there's any potential for confusion.
- Provide discussion prompts that will encourage critical thinking, require further research or help students draw on personal experiences.
- Be present in the discussions, but refrain from being an overwhelming presence. Encourage student-to-student interaction, and ask questions or share anecdotes that build on the discussion and draw students further into the discussion. Facilitate but don't dominate discussions. See The Art of Asking Questions.
- Asynchronous discussions allow participants to consider responses and post prompts that require critical thinking, analysis and synthesis of course principles. Consider requiring students to initially post by a certain point in the week, with follow-ups by the end of the week. Be aware of the specific make-up of each class, though, as you may have a group of students that simply can't (due to work or family commitments) post early in the week.
- Asynchronous discussions require time and consideration on the part of students as well as faculty. Give careful consideration to how many questions/forums are assigned in any given period.
- Another way to approach discussion forums is presented in this article - *The Art and Science of Successful Online Discussions* (http://goo.gl/TrW8sd). The approaches suggested in the article to address student needs for inclusion and attention. These strategies provide faculty ways to connect with students, supporting their efforts to construct meaning and extend their understanding of course materials. Additionally these strategies help faculty guide students in the processes of comprehending content, critiquing their own and others work, and create a sense of community which promotes learning. In short the article presents a balanced way to use discussion forums in ways that support student acquisition or improvement of soft skills and critical thinking.

Activity Ideas:

- Discussion forums are useful for mini-group projects such as defining terms, investigating new websites, or evaluating web applications or other tools.
- Consider using discussion forums as a tool for peer-review writing or project evaluation. Students often benefit from fresh eyes on a project.
- Consider creating a web tour, e.g., direct students to visit and view specific websites in a specific order, and then to join an online discussion to share what they learned.
- Invite an expert to participate in a week long discussion. Present or powerpoint or video created by or about the expert at the start of the week and then post discussion starters throughout the week.
- Encourage students to share audio, video and other multimedia presentations.
- Create at Cafe or Lounge forum for students to connect and socialize in as a tool for creating a sense of community. Share your own news there too, e.g., traveling? dealing with weather issues? took a great picture? Share those with students to create an environment where students are reminded that classmates and faculty are real people with lives and interests outside of class.
- Create a scavenger hunt with items found in and outside of class, have students share their results in a discussion. The out of class items can spark great conversations.
- Ask students to post a short reflective piece on how they work and learn best online. This often leads to sharing strategies for success which benefit everyone.

Sample Discussion Forum Instructions:

The following set of initial instructions can be included in your syllabus, at least once in your course schedule, and within each discussion forum. Sharing instructions in multiple places eliminates any confusion for students and communicates a transparency in the value of online discussions.

1. Students are expected to respond substantively to each prompt posted by the instructor. A substantive post indicates clearly that the student has read this week's readings (textbook, pdf, or websites, as applicable) and has applied critical analysis to the readings and in responding to the prompts.
2. Students will respond substantively to the posts of 3 classmates. The class, as a whole, should understand that participating in discussion forums is essential for building knowledge in online classes. Discussing the week's issues, and exploring both the presented readings and how these issues and resources link to your own work and experience are essential parts of learning in online courses. Failure to participate in the timely manner detailed below, will negatively affect your success in this course.
3. Students should post their initial responses by (specify day of week) each week and follow up with responses to classmates by (specify day of week).

4. All posts will be respectful, well-written and properly cited. While occasional typos are expected as discussion posts are not writing assignments, students are expected to proofread for content, clarity and grammar.

Sample Grading Rubric:

Criteria	10 points	7 points	3 points	0 points
Quality of Initial Response	Posts illustrate understanding of the session's readings. Initial post indicates synthesis of concepts and relation to how material may be applied to real world situations.	There is an understanding of the readings, but not much critical thinking or synthesis. Post addresses some real world application.	Basic response to prompts/questions. No indication of real world application. No mention of out-of-class application or relevance.	no post
Quality of Responses to Classmates	In responding to classmates, student is 1. respectful, 2. illustrates critical analysis, 3. asks follow-up questions to extend discussion.	Responses illustrate 2 of 3 characteristics listed in the 10 point column	Responses illustrate only 1 characteristic listed in the 10 point column,	no responses to classmates
Time, clarity, accuracy, community building	Posts on time, uses clear language, accurately cites course and other readings and resources. shares insights and builds a sense of community with classmates.	Posts on time, occasional lack of clarity but still clear connection to session's prompts and questions. Shares at least one new resource or description of how material links to or is connected to real world situation.	Posts late, and as a result doesn't always contribute to class discussions in a manner that lets classmates respond. Posts lack clarity, or are inaccurate.	Posts are late or poorly written, or no posts at all.

This rubric is simply an example. Each instructor should create or use an existing rubric that accurately reflects their course design. For example, a science course would likely put more emphasis on logic and factual accuracy, while perhaps not requiring as much interaction with classmates. Consider exactly how your course is laid out and apply a rubric that makes sense for your course topics.

Consider too that a well-crafted rubric may need adjusting over time for changes in students, course materials, or because it doesn't accurately describe expectations.

Additional Examples of Grading Rubrics:

- http://www.ohsu.edu/xd/education/teaching-and-learning-center/academic-technology/upload/Assessing-Forums-with-Rubrics-Handout.pdf
- http://topr.online.ucf.edu/images/5/5e/Cato_2110_discussion_rubric.pdf
- http://topr.online.ucf.edu/images/f/f0/IDL6543_Discussion_Rubric.pdf
- http://www.udel.edu/janet/MARC2006/rubric.html
- http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/art-science-successful-online-discussions/?ET=facultyfocus:e95:258181a:&st=email