

# Interactivity Foundation

A top-down photograph of a wooden desk. In the upper right corner, a portion of a silver laptop is visible, showing its keyboard and trackpad. In the lower left, an open notebook with cream-colored pages and a red cover is laid flat. To the right of the notebook, a small, light-colored ceramic mug filled with dark coffee sits on the desk. The background is a solid dark blue.

## The Guidebook for Student-Facilitated Discussion in Online Courses

*Student Edition*

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IF...

# Preface

Online education went mainstream years ago. According to the Department of Education, more than 5 million college students took an online course in 2012. Approximately half of these students were enrolled fully in online programs. The vast majority of academic leaders believe that distance learning is critical for the long-term strategies of higher education. Although online education is on the rise, and has been for some time, online teaching pedagogies are trailing behind the technology. Many universities have been reluctant to adopt new pedagogical approaches that are better suited for online learning and for engaging students born in the digital age.

This guidebook is designed to help address this concern. We have learned from years of teaching online courses, collaborating with online instructors, and working with professionals trained in educational technology that online courses work best when they are interactive. Although students can set their own pace and work independently, online courses are most productive when the instructor is able to facilitate interactivity between students. One of the best ways to advance interactivity is by incorporating student-facilitated discussions for collaborative learning. Our particular approach advances student-facilitated discussions, in an asynchronous text-based format where students learn how to lead their own collaborative discussion groups in the discovery of the course subject matter.

There are two editions of this guidebook: an instructor edition and a student edition. The instructor edition includes suggestions for designing the online discussion and guidelines for managing the day-to-day interactions with student facilitators and discussants. It also provides multiple ready-to-apply resources, such as example assignments and grading rubrics. The student edition offers direct guidance on becoming discussion facilitators and good discussion participants. It outlines the day-to-day work of facilitation and discussion participation, offering many illustrative examples along the way.

Both editions of our guidebook provide links to an interactive web application, the IF Wiki, where readers can share their resources, strategies, rubrics, syllabi, and addition material for a continued collaborative experience around online courses that advance the discussion. To this end, users of this guidebook are not passive readers, but active collaborators working together to build a network of educators interested in improving online pedagogy.

These guidebooks reflect and build upon the work of the [Interactivity Foundation \(IF\)](#), a not-for-profit organization with the dual mission of advancing student-empowered learning and improving nationwide public discussions. We hope this guidebook is helpful to those teaching, learning, and discussing online.



## Acknowledgements

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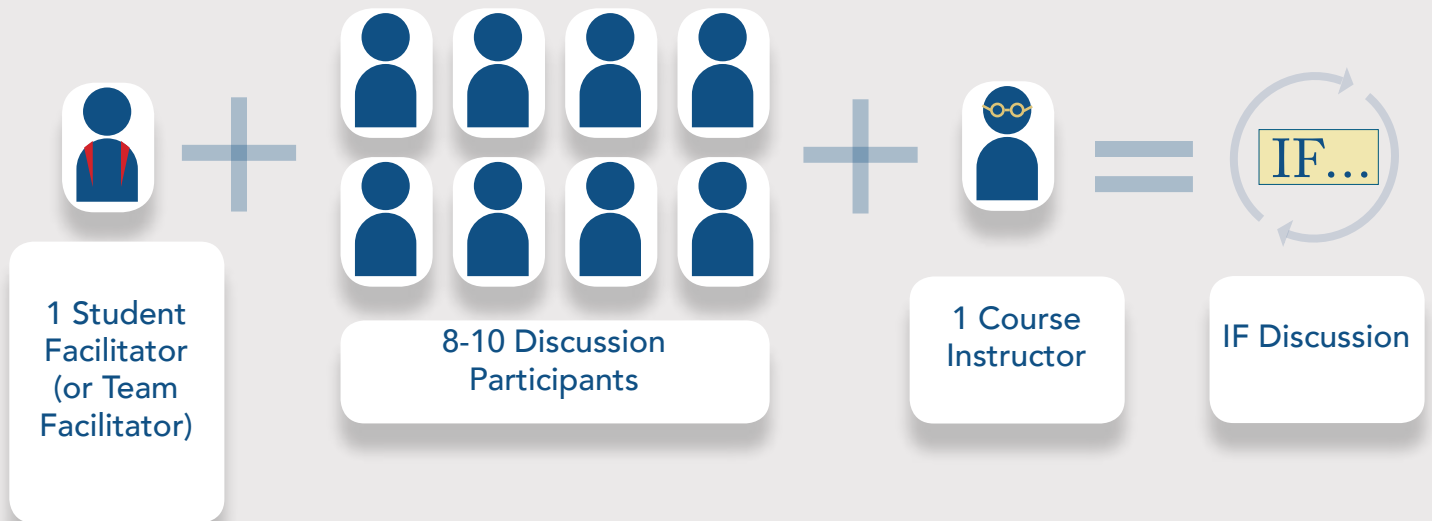
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# Chapter One: Introducing the IF Online Discussion Approach

## Topic 1.0 Chapter One at a Glance



**Each discussion requires:**



**The discussion process is organized in three distinct stages:**

**Pre-Discussion**

- Discussion facilitator and participants review all required readings.
- Student facilitator submits initial discussion prompts to instructor.
- Instructor provides feedback.

**Discussion**

- Discussion facilitator posts initial discussion prompt.
- Facilitator manages the discussion.
- Participants engage the discussion according to the instructions of the facilitator and instructor.
- Instructor coaches facilitator and intervenes if necessary.

**Post-Discussion**

- Discussion facilitator analyzes and summarizes discussion.
- Instructor debriefs with discussion facilitator.
- Instructor offers feedback to discussion group.
- Instructor and/or discussion facilitator evaluates participation in the discussion.

# Chapter One:

## Introducing the IF Online Discussion Approach

### Topic 1.1 Guiding Principles

The IF online discussion approach requires students to take ownership of the discussion for the purposes of collaboratively engaging and developing course content. **The five principles** that help to distinguish this approach from other online discussion approaches are:

**Be developmental:** Build on the ideas of others. Encourage discussion participants to contribute to rather than take away from the discussion. For example, encourage discussants to replace “yes, but...” with “yes, and...” When you respond to a comment with “yes, and...” you are being developmental. You are affirming what someone else has said and you are expressing your will to build upon it. When you respond with “yes, but...” you have a tendency to shut down the conversation or lead it in a more adversarial direction. How do you get discussants to embrace “yes, and...” in the discussion?

- Conduct a trial discussion on a topic for a short window of time (i.e., one day). Provide no guidance on how the discussion should be conducted.
- Send discussants a short description of the “yes, and...” discussion approach.
- Conduct the discussion again on the same topic. This time ask discussants to start each response with “yes, and...” Challenge the discussants to see how they can build on each other’s comments.
- Once the discussion is concluded, ask discussants to contrast the two discussions. Have them focus on both the substance of the discussion and the tone.
- Conclude by asking discussants to continue this approach in the discussions that follow throughout the semester.

See Bob Kulhan’s description of the “yes, and” principle as it applies to improvisational acting: <http://youtu.be/DphjhdIZis>.

**Be exploratory:** Examine the topic from multiple dimensions. Encourage discussants to “surround” the topic by asking questions that enables the discussion to move in various directions. For example, let’s say you are discussing the importance of mobility in society. For the purposes of exploration, you may want to engage this topic from as many dimensions as possible, such as:

- |   |                                  |
|---|----------------------------------|
| • Economic aspects                      | • Health/biological aspects      |
| • Moral, ethical, and normative aspects | • Social aspects                 |
| • Environmental aspects                 | • Psychological aspects          |
| • Cultural aspects                      | • Spiritual or religious aspects |
| • Technological aspects                 | • Political aspects              |
| • Public safety aspects                 |                                  |

In preparation for the discussion, you may ask the discussion facilitators to map the various dimensions of the topic and encourage them to craft a discussion prompt for each dimension.



**Be open-minded:** Engage the topic from multiple perspectives. Encourage students to discuss ideas that they may not particularly endorse. Teach students to examine contrasting ideas and engage diverse opinions. Some ways of incorporating open-mindedness into the discussion include:

- Role-playing. Create a game that allows students to create an avatar for themselves or for fellow classmates. Ask them to assume this new personality and participate in the discussion as if they were this person or thing.
- Remind student facilitators to ask discussants, “Who is missing from this discussion? How might X person view this discussion?”
- Encourage students to be anthropologists from another planet. How would someone with no background or context of the discussion topic respond? What questions might they ask?
- Encourage students to take a position in the discussion, then halfway through the discussion process, have them flip their position and discuss the topic from the contrasting perspective.

Open-mindedness is often best cultivated over time. When students have limited time to discuss a topic, it is a challenge to examine alternative perspectives.

**Be civil:** Discuss, but do not debate. Good discussions are often undermined by people trying to “win” the discussion or impress others with their powers of analysis. Encourage discussants to be inclusive and kind to one another. They need not agree on every issue, but they should try to understand the perspective of others AND understand how this perspective came to be. Some tips for maximizing civility in the online discussion include:

- Select discussion topics that are pressing but not divisive.
- Encourage students to think about the “future of...” a particular topic instead of looking at how it affects their lives today. This encourages anticipatory, rather than reactionary, thinking.
- Practice generosity of spirit. Encourage students to look for the grains of truth in each statement. Instead of trying to debunk ideas, cultivate an atmosphere of generosity.

**Be interactive:** Social presence or the ability to be social in a virtual space is enhanced by the willingness to engage in communication. The discussion forum is designed as an interactive exercise, however, social presence can be nurtured by:

- Creating an introductory discussion forum where each student shares information about himself or herself.
- Allowing for team facilitation and small group discussion.
- Constant debriefing between the instructor and the facilitators as well as the discussion group.

Have you participated in classroom exercises or exploratory discussion? Do you have classroom assignments that practice open-mindedness, civility, and interactivity? Please share your experiences in the [Online Discussion Guidebook—Student Edition Wiki: Topic 1.1 Guiding Principles](#).

# Chapter One:

## Introducing the IF Online Discussion Approach

### Topic 1.2 Roles in the Online Discussion

**T**here are three key roles in the online discussion: student facilitator, student discussant, and instructor. Each role has its own set of responsibilities and challenges.

#### Student Facilitator

The student facilitator serves as the overall discussion manager. Each student should have an opportunity to facilitate at least one discussion during the semester. More opportunities to facilitate, however, make for a more engaged experience that helps to develop a sense of ownership in the classroom. As the facilitator, the student will:

- Develop initial discussion questions in consultation with the course instructor.
- Provide initial instructions to the discussion group as to how the discussion will be conducted.
- Monitor the discussion and provide prompts for new discussion directions and redirect the discussion when it goes off track.
- Challenge discussion participants to explore and enhance their thinking on the topic and improve their discussion participation.
- Analyze and evaluate the discussion in consultation with the course instructor.
- Write up a discussion summary at the conclusion of the facilitation.

For a detailed description of these responsibilities, see [Chapter Two: Students as Online Discussion Facilitators](#).

#### Student Discussant

Participants are the heart of any discussion. Ideally, each discussion group will have between eight and 10 members; however, this number will depend on the specific logistics of each course and the goals of the instructor. Within the discussion, each discussant will:

- Prepare by completing the required readings and lectures prior to the start of the discussion.
- Regularly contribute to the discussion by following the established guidelines.
- Actively encourage fellow discussants to explore the topic and engage in civil discussion.
- Evaluate the overall discussion in consultation with the course instructor.
- Write up a discussion reflection at the end of the course.

For a detailed description of these responsibilities, see [Chapter Five: Students as Online Discussants](#).

## **Instructor**

The instructor serves as an administrator, mediator, and mentor in the discussion, as well as a coach for the discussion facilitators. In more traditional courses, the instructor often assumes a centralized role in the discussion. He or she is the driver of the discussion. In IF online discussions, instructors are less visible and do much of their work behind the scenes. By designing a well-organized and structured course, the instructor empowers students to take ownership of the discussion. This allows the instructor to view the discussion from a meta-perspective and revise or redirect the course as needed. To achieve these goals, the instructor will:

- Create the online course and design the online discussion assignment.
- Provide guidance on how the discussion will be conducted and evaluated.
- Help student facilitators devise a plan for the discussion and create initial discussion prompts.
- Provide feedback to the student facilitators before and during the discussions.
- Debrief with facilitators at the conclusion of the discussion.
- Intervene in the discussion when necessary.
- Evaluate the discussion facilitator and the discussion participants.
- Provide feedback to the groups in preparation for the next discussion.

For a detailed description of these responsibilities, see [Chapter Three: The Role of Instructor in the Instructor Edition of this guidebook](#).

# Chapter One:

## Introducing the IF Online Discussion Approach

### Topic 1.3 Structure of the Online Discussion

Online discussions are not for everyone and they are not suitable for every class. You can maximize the likelihood of a successful online discussion by knowing the basic factors that make for a productive online environment. Ideal online discussion environments for the IF discussion approach include:

- Small classes that engage topics conducive to exploration, prolonged discussion, and continued learning. Courses that are centered on the memorization of content or facts tend not to yield robust discussions and are not ideal for this approach.
- Large classes that can be subdivided into small discussion groups. It may be important to have adequate teaching support in such a scenario.
- Locations where basic technology needs and skills are met. If students do not have reliable and frequent access to the Internet or a computer, then an online discussion will not work. Some online classes require basic Internet access. This discussion approach, however, requires frequent checking in.

The ideal discussion size for an IF online discussion is between eight and 10 discussants. The instructor will want to divide the class into discussion groups before the course begins. The instructor should prepare for some students to drop the course or not fully participate in course assignments.

Once students are placed in appropriate discussion groups then the instructor will structure the discussion assignment around student facilitation. This works best if each week of the course is dedicated to a new discussion with a new student facilitator or small group of co-facilitators. The structure of the discussions will depend on the length of the course (five, eight, 10, or 15 weeks). A longer course offers a better opportunity for students to engage the online discussion process. We have, however, successfully used this process in courses as short as five weeks.

Once the class discussions are scheduled and the students are assigned facilitation dates, the actual discussion process can begin. The student facilitated discussion process is organized in three stages: pre-discussion, discussion, and post-discussion.

## Stage 1: Pre-Discussion

- Facilitators will want to carefully review course material for the week of their discussion. They will want to communicate with one another (if co-facilitating) and the instructor about the role course content should play in the discussion. Facilitators will also want to review all resources provided by the instructor and described in the Student Edition of this guidebook before beginning the facilitation process.
- Student facilitators are responsible for crafting the initial prompts for the discussions. We recommend that students submit an annotated set of questions to the instructor at least a few days prior to the scheduled discussion.
- The instructor will give feedback and guidance to the facilitator(s) about the discussion questions. Co-facilitators may also work together to design a strategy for engaging the class.
- Facilitators will want to communicate with participants prior to the discussion to convey any special instructions or required preparation.

## Stage 2: Discussion

- Facilitators will make sure that the discussion begins exactly when scheduled. They may want to develop a strategy for kick-starting the conversation. ([See Topic 2.9 Kick-Starting the Discussion.](#))
- Facilitators will also be tasked with keeping the discussion on track and dealing with any problems or challenges as they emerge throughout the course of the discussion. ([See Chapter Four: Managing Problem Situations and Challenges.](#))
- Discussants will contribute to the conversation according to the instructions of the facilitator and instructor. ([See Chapter Five: Students as Online Discussants.](#))
- The instructor will actively monitor and provide behind the scenes help throughout the discussion. ([See Chapter Three: The Role of Instructor in the Instructor edition.](#))

## Stage 3: Post-Discussion

- Once the discussion closes, the facilitators are responsible for reviewing, analyzing, and writing up a discussion summary. ([See Topic 2.12 Doing a Discussion Summary.](#))
- Facilitators may also be invited to evaluate fellow facilitators, participants, or the overall discussion. ([See Chapter Five: Evaluation in the Instructor edition.](#))
- Participants may be required to write up a discussion review and/or evaluate the discussion process.
- Instructors will evaluate the discussion, facilitation, and discussion participants. ([See Chapter Five: Evaluation in the Instructor edition.](#))

# Chapter Two:

## Students as Online Discussion Facilitators

### Topic 2.0 Chapter Two at a Glance

This chapter is essential for student facilitators. In this chapter, we describe the facilitation process from beginning to end, as well as identify common challenges that the facilitator will encounter. By the conclusion of this chapter, you should have a firm understanding of facilitator responsibilities.

#### Role of Facilitator includes:

- Selecting a manageable discussion topic
- Crafting discussion prompts and supplemental question
- Collaborating with co-facilitators
- Managing the discussion
- Summarizing the discussion
- Debriefing with the instructor

#### Checklist for Facilitator(s):

- ☐ Discuss with the instructor the goals for the discussion at least one week before the start of the discussion
- ☐ Communicate with co-facilitators and devise a plan of action at least one week before the start of the discussion
- ☐ Select a discussion topic
- ☐ Craft the initial discussion prompts and send them to the instructor for feedback
- ☐ Communicate with the discussion group about discussion protocol or guidelines
- ☐ Kick-start the discussion
- ☐ Maintain the discussion flow
- ☐ Bring closure to the discussion
- ☐ Do a discussion summary
- ☐ Debrief with the instructor



## Topic 2.1 Understanding the Role of Facilitator

As an online discussion facilitator, you are not teaching or lecturing to your peers. Instead, you are encouraging thoughtful, engaged, exploratory discussion. You might want to think of yourself as the conductor of an orchestra. You are not responsible for playing every instrument or performing an ensemble alone. Rather, you are charged with bringing out the best sound from each musician and maneuvering these individuals in a way that creates an overall performance greater than the sum of its parts. As an online facilitator:

- You will want to encourage discussants to clarify their points by asking: What do you mean by that comment? Can you expand on that point? Can you tell me why you think that way? Can you refer me to textual support?
- You will want to push the discussion in new and contrasting directions by asking: What about x? What if we think about this issue in another context? What would somebody from x location think of this idea? What is the counter opinion to this claim?
- You will want to encourage reflection and empathy by asking: How do you think somebody in x context would think or feel about this idea? Do you think this idea is generalizable? Who might disagree with this idea and why?
- You will want to offer positive reinforcement by noting great points/good points, interesting contributions, good use of reading material, etc. Generosity of spirit goes a long way in online discussions. Find the grain of truth, interest, or creativity in each contribution.
- You will want to keep the discussion on track. Encourage exploration of ideas, but this is not an “anything goes” environment. Be aware of the discussion parameters and enforce them.

Your goals as an online facilitator include helping your discussion group construct an exploratory and developmental discussion around particular course content, while also being aware of the individual participation of each group member. In this process you will want to encourage every discussant to actively participate and become more comfortable participating in future discussions.

# Chapter Two:

## Students as Online Discussion Facilitators

### Topic 2.2 Preparing for the Discussion

A well-facilitated, meaningful discussion requires a good amount of preparation. To prepare for a discussion you should:

- Obtain background material on the topic being discussed. You do not need to be an expert on the topic, but you do need to understand the critical issues surrounding the topic. If there are course readings or lectures on this topic, make sure that you have studied them carefully and in advance of the start of the discussion.
- Prepare thought questions that you will use in your facilitation. These thought questions are used to stimulate the discussion. The wording of these thought questions is very important (see [Topic 2.5 Framing Discussion Questions](#)).
- Send a note in advance of the discussion to your group. Offer specific direction on what they need to do to prepare. You might encourage them to focus on a particular article, or you might even survey their points of view on specific questions related to the topic to help prepare discussion questions.
- If different from what the instructor describes in the syllabus or from experiences in past discussions, be sure to clarify your expectations for the discussion. Be clear with your classmates about your expectations.
- Create a schedule for yourself. You will need to oversee the discussion and access the discussion several times a day to be effective. Put this on your calendar.

When preparing your initial communication to your discussion group, you may want to include:

- The discussion guidelines you will be using.
- A description of your role as a facilitator.
- The logistical details of how to participate.
- A participation schedule (i.e., the time line for submitting comments in asynchronous discussions or the time frames for synchronous discussions).
- A description of the results expected from the facilitation.
- Your contact information should there be problems with participation.

For general guidelines on how facilitator preparation may be evaluated by the instructor, see [Topic 5.2 Evaluation of Pre-Discussion Preparation in the Instructor Edition of this guidebook](#).

Do you have particular tips for preparing for the discussion? Do you have a sample schedule that you could share with other students? Please share your tips and resources in the [Online Discussion Guidebook—Student Edition Wiki: Topic 2.2 Preparing for the Discussion](#).

## Topic 2.3 Managing the Role of Content in the Discussion

IF online discussions offer an opportunity to balance content and process (see [Topic 2.5 Balancing Content and Process in the Instructor Edition of this guidebook](#)). Managing content in the discussion process depends on the purpose of the discussion. The discussion can be used as a tool to help students better understand the course material, however, the facilitator should make sure that the content does not become the singular focus of the discussion. A few tips for helping to manage the role of content in an online discussion include:

- Good online discussions have a manageable topic that allows for exploration of ideas, as well as reference to empirical evidence. This is NOT a space for an “anything goes” approach to discussion.
- Students should be able to express their opinions about a topic; however, they should be pressed on WHY they hold this opinion. They should be able to form ARGUMENTS in an online discussion. Please note that this is different from arguing.
- When pressed on their beliefs or statements, responses such as, “I don’t know...that’s just what I believe” or “that’s just the way I was raised” are not arguments. They are unreflective statements. As a facilitator, you may want to push discussants on this and refer to the course content.
- Course content can help students form their arguments in an online discussion. They can reference the material or follow up on arguments made in the course readings.
- It is best to cite course readings sparingly in online discussions. Yes, refer to the text but do not post long quotations that take away from the discussant’s own thoughts or interrupts the flow of the discussion. Refer to text, but do NOT use the discussion forum as a location to replicate the text.

The purpose of IF online discussions is to encourage a better understanding of the course content through a better use of the processes that enable one to learn. It is important that students finish the course with a better capacity to discuss and engage others in civil conversation.

When in doubt, communicate with the instructor. You may want to discuss with the instructor the goals for the discussion. You may ask, for example:

- Which themes or topics do you expect students to better understand by the conclusion of this discussion? Are there particular readings or lectures that you would like to be the focus of this discussion?
- Which processes would you like to see developed through this discussion? Would you like to see more developmental thinking? Analytical thinking? Collaboration?

For additional information, see [Topic 2.7 Working with the Instructor guidebook](#) and [Topic 3.2 Working with Student Facilitators in the Instructor Edition of this guidebook](#).

# Chapter Two: Students as Online Discussion Facilitators

## Topic 2.4 Selecting a Manageable Discussion Topic

Not all discussion topics are created equal. Some topics seem to foster robust discussion without any work from the facilitator. Other topics fall flat regardless of the amount of energy a facilitator puts into the discussion. There are tips for selecting a good discussion topic:

- Don't choose a topic that is too broad. Discussions must begin and end. It is hard to keep an online discussion on track or have a sense of continuity if the topic invites infinite avenues of discussion.
- Don't choose a topic that is too narrow. A dynamic discussion needs room to grow. Depending on the amount of time your group has to discuss this topic, you might want to keep it specific enough to explore in detail but not so narrow that discussants are repeating the same ideas.
- Choose a topic that invites exploration. Topics that have right or wrong answers are not very engaging for online discussion. Facts, empirical evidence, and historical examples can all be very helpful in a discussion, but you do not want to select a topic that requires participants to provide only research and not their own ideas.
- Engage but do not enrage. It is important to choose a topic that your audience cares about, but you do not want to choose a topic that divides the discussion group. You need not avoid pressing issues, but it is best to steer clear of divisive, controversial issues in an online discussion. It is much harder for a facilitator to preempt hurtful comments or notice when a participant is feeling uncomfortable in an online discussion. Choosing topics that engage but do not enrage is a good policy for new facilitators.

## Topic 2.4 Example of How to Select a Manageable Discussion Topic

Course Topic: Race in the United States

Discussion Topic (1 week)	Assessment
Racism in the United States of America	Too Broad: Racism in the United States is a huge issue that spans centuries and the continent. There are many dimensions to this topic. It would be very hard to do this topic justice in a discussion that is only open for one week.
Definitions of Race	Too Narrow: There are standardized, scientific definitions of race. These definitions may help to explore the topic of racism, but a discussion focused purely on defining a single term will not offer much room for the exploration of ideas.
Racism and Law Enforcement Today	Manageable: by selecting a pressing national issue with current examples, students can readily engage the topic. It is up to the facilitator to keep the discussion on track and keep discussants engaged but not enraged so that they no longer participate thoughtfully. This topic has multiple dimensions and a discussion could move participants beyond dichotomous thinking on this issue.

# Chapter Two: Students as Online Discussion Facilitators

## Topic 2.5 Framing Discussion Questions

Quality discussions often depend on the initial questions that are used to start the discussion. There is no formula for developing the best discussion question, but there are some guidelines that you can use:

- Make the discussion question one that can be approached from as many dimensions as possible (i.e., political, moral, social, cultural, environmental, ethical, economical, psychological, aesthetically, etc.)
- Make the discussion question as neutral as possible with respect to the values it represents. You don't want the discussion question representing a certain point of view when some participants may differ with that point of view.
- Make the discussion question one that is hopeful as opposed to one that is limiting. You want the discussion participants to explore hopeful possibilities rather than being limited by some perceptions of what can and can't be done.
- Make the discussion question one that participants can relate to personally rather than one where they are asked to comment on what some expert has said.
- Provide some guidance in the framing of the question as to the dimensions that participants might explore.
- Have two to three questions prepared for the discussion but introduce these one at a time. The questions should be designed for different aspects of the topic under consideration.
- The discussion question should be one that participants can respond to without concern of being attacked personally.

You may want to try out your discussion questions on others who are familiar with such topics. It's especially helpful to have reviewers who typically see issues differently. The instructor of the course should have preliminary feedback on your discussion questions prior to the start of your facilitation.



## Topic 2.5 Example of How to Frame Discussion Questions

### Course: Immigration and the United States

Think about what might be wrong with the following discussion question: What should the United States do with respect to illegal immigrants?

This is not a good initial discussion prompt because:

- The question is asking for specific actions. As such the discussion is likely to digress into a debate about specifics and not about a broader and richer exploration of the role of immigrants in society.
- The question is likely to elicit responses that reflect a narrow range of perspectives (i.e., legal, economic, national security) and not the broader perspectives needed in such a discussion.
- The question represents a point of view that is negative by its tone and choice of words that may bias the discussion.

How might such a question be reframed? Consider this discussion question:

What are the moral, economic, cultural, social, political, national security, and other issues that the United States should consider in an examination of immigration policy?

Have you ever created discussion prompts? Were some particularly good in helping to start a great discussion? Please share your discussion prompts in our [Online Discussion Guidebook—Student Edition Wiki: Topic 2.5 Sample Discussion Prompts](#)

# Chapter **Two**: Students as Online Discussion Facilitators

## Topic 2.6 Working With Co-Facilitators

The IF discussion process allows for individual or team facilitation (see [Topic 2.4 Individual Facilitation versus Team Facilitation in the Instructor Edition of this guidebook](#)). When working with co-facilitators, proven strategies for maximizing cooperation include:

- Start communication early. Be sure to email, call, video conference, or meet with your co-facilitators as soon as the assignment is posted and at least one week before the actual discussion.
- Divide labor. Each facilitator should be the primary agent for a particular part of the facilitation. All group members may contribute to each stage of the discussion, but be sure to designate primary responsibility to one person for the preparation of discussion questions, facilitation of the discussion, and summary of the discussion.
- Be generous but honest with co-facilitators. Offer support to co-facilitators but be sure that all group members do their work. Set high expectations for yourself and for your group members.
- Lead by example. Do your best work and be sure to communicate it to your co-facilitators.

For more information about co-facilitation and to review specific criteria that you may be evaluated on, see [Topic 5.7 Student Evaluation of Co-Facilitation in the Instructor Edition of this guidebook](#).

## Topic 2.7 Working With the Instructor

**A**s a facilitator, you must work closely with the instructor of the course. The IF online discussion process requires that you:

- Submit annotated discussion questions to the instructor prior to the discussion.
- Discuss and revise these questions according to the instructor's advice.
- Facilitate the discussion for approximately one week, which means you will need to encourage participation, keep the discussion on track, move the discussion in new directions when necessary, encourage civil discourse, involve all students in your group and deal with any problem situations. You will want to discuss some or all aspects of this process with the instructor.
- Finally, as a facilitator, you will be required to summarize the discussion and provide a discussion summary to the instructor.

When collaborating with the instructor, there are a few tips to keep in mind:

- Instructors in online courses are inundated with emails. Be sure to clearly identify your email with your name and title subject.
- Be professional, concise, and polite in your email.
- Be sure to contact your instructor at least one week before your facilitation.
- Take the initiative. Propose ideas. Propose a game plan. Ask specific questions. Do not wait for the instructor to lead every aspect of the assignment.
- If your instructor is nonresponsive, keep trying and document all of your efforts.
- At the end of the day, take ownership of your discussion. The instructor is there to provide guidance, but ultimately a facilitator can make the discussion by showing initiative and creativity.

# Chapter Two:

## Students as Online Discussion Facilitators

### Topic 2.7 Example of Coordinating With the Instructor

Communicating with your instructor about your facilitation week is essential. Take, for example, the following email correspondence:

*I am in charge of the discussion tomorrow. We are going to talk about climate change. Is that ok? I'll ask something about the environment and climate change and maybe water. Does that sound good?*

How might you improve communication with your instructor? For example, you may want to:

- Be polite. Always include a salutation.
- Anticipate communicating with your instructor at least one week before the discussion.
- Introduce yourself.
- Demonstrate that you have put some thought into this assignment. Offer ideas, suggestions, and content that your instructor can consider. Present a game plan.
- Include contact information for future correspondence.

Now consider the revised correspondence:

*Dear Professor Byrd,*

*My name is Ashley Couch and I am in your Environment 101 course. I am in discussion group 7. I will be facilitating the discussion that starts on Monday, November 12. I was thinking about focusing the discussion on the new EPA policies. I was thinking about using the article that you circulated last week as the basis for this discussion. I have attached four sample discussion prompts for your review. I would appreciate it if you could review these and let me know if I am on the right track.*

*Sincerely,*

*Ashley*

## Topic 2.8 Communicating With Discussants

As a facilitator of an online discussion, you are the one who needs to make sure that the discussion is managed well. This requires frequent contact with the participants. Generally these communications will be via email, however, you may also want to consider using alternative modes of communication software ([see Topic 2.1 Selecting the Right Platform and Software in the Instructor Edition of this guidebook](#)). Communication with participants will occur in phases:

**Pre-Discussion Phase:** Communication in this phase should consist of the following:

- Introducing the discussion participants or letting others know of the backgrounds of those who will be in the discussion.
- Sharing the discussion details, including: discussion platform, log on instructions, time of the discussion (for synchronous discussions), time frame for contributions (for asynchronous discussions), and/or discussion guidelines.

**Discussion Phase:** Communication in this phase should consist of the following:

- Recaps of major points from the discussion. These will provide a sense of the discussion.
- Interventions if necessary to keep the discussion on track.
- Information that might be useful to the discussion.
- Notifications of anything involving the discussion.

**Post-Discussion Phase:** Communication during this phase includes:

- A final recap of the discussion capturing the essence of what was discussed.
- A description of where the discussion might go from here.
- A thank you to the participants.

# Chapter Two: Students as Online Discussion Facilitators

## Topic 2.9 Kick-Starting the Discussion

Online discussions aren't that different from in-class discussions when it comes to getting started. No one wants to be the first to contribute. In online discussions, getting the discussion started early can be critical to the quality of the discussion. All too often, there is a long period of no response, followed by a flurry of responses that are not developmental. To kick-start a discussion, you might want to:

- Designate one student to begin the discussion. This role should rotate among the students in a discussion group.
- Work with the designated student on the initial post. You want this post to be one that will lead the discussion in a useful direction. You may even want to review the first post to ensure it is on target.
- Following the first post, respond with some developmental suggestions for the discussions to follow.
- Establish a team rule that every student should post a comment on the first day the discussion is open.

Discussions are easier to sustain if they are started well. The process outlined above may help get the discussion started quickly and going in the right direction.



## Topic 2.10 Maintaining Discussion Flow

Just like face-to-face discussions, online discussions tend to have a flow that can be maintained by a good facilitator. As a facilitator, do not interrupt a discussion that has good flow. If participants are responding to a prompt and the discussion is gaining momentum, do not interrupt this discussion to praise discussants or to introduce new ideas. Let this thread of the discussion play out.

When there is a lull, you can stoke the discussion by introducing supplemental questions. It is a good idea to have several supplemental questions ready prior to the discussion. A good way to do this is to think about the various dimensions of the topic, such as political, social, psychological, spiritual, religious, economic, environmental, legal, technological, etc. Map out these dimensions as they apply to the discussion topic. Craft supplemental questions for each dimension—that way you are ready to lead the discussion in new directions or build on the direction that discussants want to go.

Keep in mind that your initial discussion prompt will be the most general one (i.e., What are the emerging issues concerning privacy?). Then your supplemental questions are more specific (i.e., What are the emerging privacy issues that evolve from genetic discoveries?).

You will need to be careful when you use the supplemental questions. You don't want to cut short a discussion thread. When you do use supplemental questions, you might want to use these as a teaching moment by asking a question about why the issue never arose (i.e., Why hasn't the issue of genetic information come up yet in the discussion?).

When you do guide the discussion in a new direction, it is sometimes a good idea to build upon the thoughts of a particular discussant. Include this person's name in the supplemental prompt, which will serve as a casual invitation for this person to kick-start the new discussion thread. For example,

***As Raul notes in his last post, we have been discussing privacy solely in the context of social media. Where else might privacy become a concern? Raul alluded to medical exams. What concerns do we share about privacy and health?***

# Chapter Two:

## Students as Online Discussion Facilitators

### Topic 2.11 Bringing Closure to the Discussion

Discussions tend to unfold in stages. As the discussion facilitator, you should be aware of these stages and move the discussion along when necessary.

- **Stage 1: Feeling out** – Participants are somewhat hesitant to contribute and somewhat afraid about what others will think of their comments.
- **Stage 2: Rush to Contribute** – Participants want to contribute and build on one another's ideas. The discussion moves very rapidly at this point.
- **Stage 3: Slowing Down** – Participants have contributed what they can and the discussion becomes more strained and repetitive.
- **Stage 4: Late Stage** – Some comment is made or the facilitator asks a supplemental question that triggers another surge of comments.
- **Stage 5: Time for Closure** – Participants have gone about as far as they can go. It's time to conclude the discussion.

Do not conclude a discussion prematurely. Be sure to offer supplemental questions and allow for a late surge in participation prior to closing the discussion. Sometimes the most valuable insights are offered in the later stages of the discussion. When in doubt, it's better to keep prompting the discussion when it seems to have reached an end. You might just rekindle the discussion into new territory.

Once the discussion has reached its end, you should be prepared to offer some concluding comments and to thank the discussants for their participation.

For more on concluding comments, see [Topic 2.12 Doing a Discussion Summary](#).

You need not share the entire summary with the class, but you can share some general thoughts about the direction of the discussion and the major points of interest.

## Topic 2.12 Doing a Discussion Summary

The discussion summary is important because it helps the facilitator review the entire discussion and identify strong and weak facilitation moments. It also helps the instructor understand the discussion from the perspective of the facilitator. Finally, it helps document the discussion for the entire class so that future discussions can build on it. The discussion summary is essential to the discussion process.

How do you write a discussion summary? It is best to review the entire discussion. Read through it carefully taking a few notes. Then read through it again, looking for:

- Key themes
- Areas of agreement
- Areas of disagreement
- Areas of concern
- Tone and mood
- Meta-narratives
- Key participants
- Pivots and shifts in the discussion
- The role of content
- The development of civility, empathy, connection, understanding
- The use of narrative or current events

All of the concepts mentioned above are explained in more detail in [Chapter Three: Developing a Sense of the Online Discussion](#). To analyze the discussion, you might want to ask yourself: How did the discussion emerge? Who were the key participants? What were the main topics of discussion? Which topics threaded throughout the entire discussion? Which topics or concerns were tangential and saved for later? How did the discussion move along? How did it shift? How did the tone of the discussion change? What caused this? And, finally, if you could facilitate the discussion over, what would you do differently?

A discussion summary should be concise. It is not a play-by-play account. On average, a discussion summary is a one- or two-page analysis.

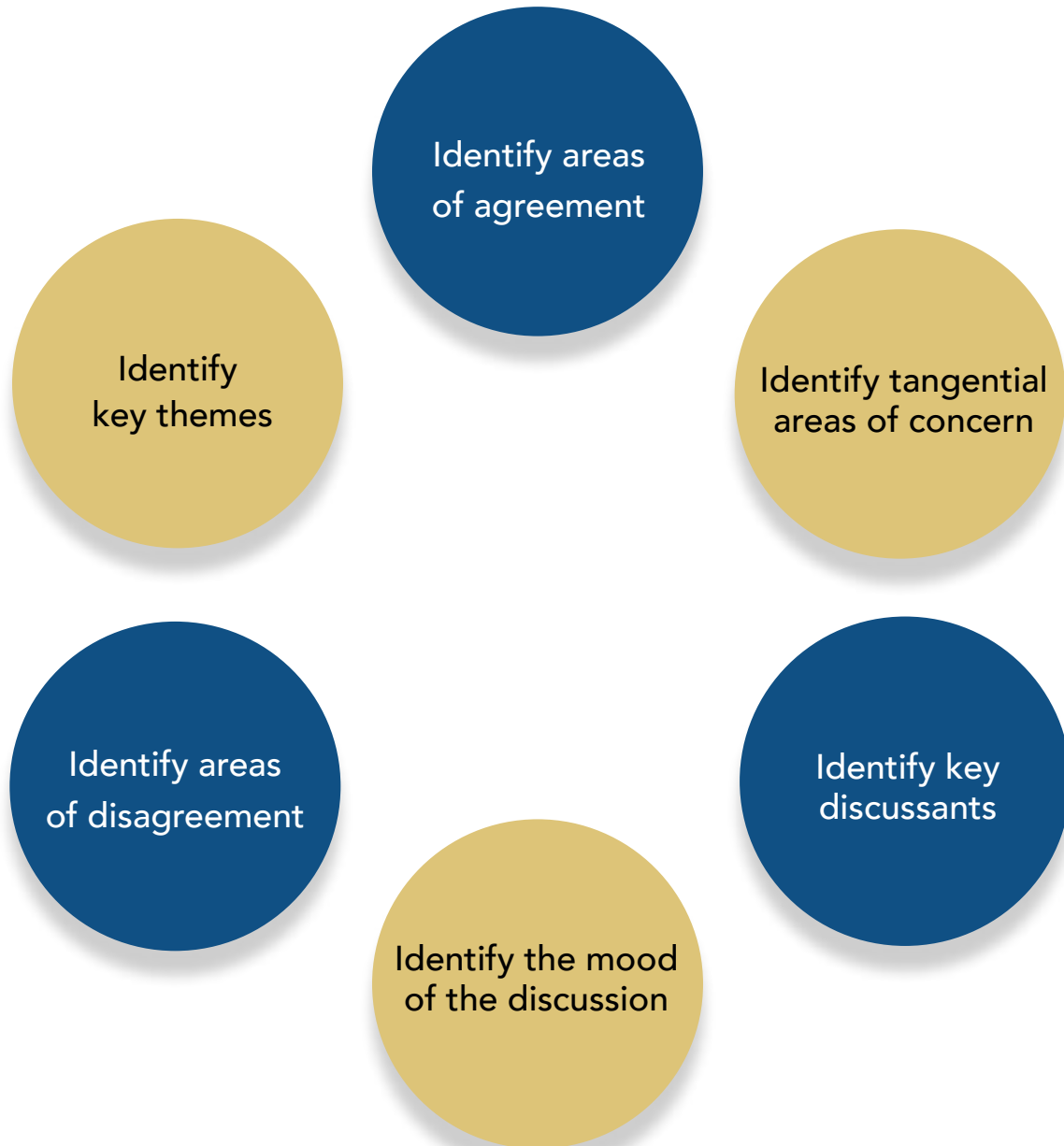
To review sample discussion summaries or to share your discussion summary, please go to our [Online Discussion Guidebook—Student Edition Wiki: Topic 2.12 Sample Discussion Summaries](#).

# Chapter **Three**: Developing a Sense of the Online Discussion

## Topic 3.0 Chapter Three at a Glance

In the last chapter, we introduced the role of the facilitator and highlighted some of the tasks that the facilitator must do in an effective online discussion. In this chapter, we go into more detail on this topic. We identify key responsibilities of the facilitator during the discussion and offer strategies for completing these tasks.

You will learn how to:



## Topic 3.1 Identifying Key Themes of the Discussion

Imagine that the discussion is over. You have a stream of comments that have been posted. The instructor wants you to produce the key themes from the discussion. Where do you start? How do you identify the themes that represent the essence of the discussion?

- Read the discussion entries in time sequence. For each entry, make up a three-to-five word description of what was said. This should be a short description of the content.
- Put a simple code (i.e., two letters) next to the discussion entry.
- Repeat this process for each discussion entry.
- At some point, the discussion entries will start fitting into the previous descriptions. For these, put the code of the previous description beside the comment.
- Once all entries have been reviewed, look at the list of the descriptions and the number of entries that were connected to each description. The descriptions that had the most corresponding entries will be the basis for the major themes.
- Take the most connected entries and develop a general theme statement for each. The theme statement should be a three-to-five sentence description that encompasses the majority of the comments.

You can send the theme statements to your discussion group for approval and to make the review process more inclusive. This is not required, but it may prove useful depending on the group dynamic.

# Chapter **Three**: Developing a Sense of the Online Discussion

## Topic 3.2 Identifying Areas of Agreement

One of the key tasks in doing the discussion summary is identifying areas of agreement. The process for identifying agreement begins with the discussion outline analysis covered in the [Topic 3.1 Identifying Key Themes of the Discussion](#). You should read that topic before continuing.

Once you make a list of the key themes of the discussion, you will then need to identify the areas of agreement. To do this, you should:

- Look at the specific online comments that are identified with each theme.
- For each of these comments, make a list of points of view that the participants shared in common. These agreements will come from explicit statements. Look for at least three statements of agreement.
- Next, look at areas of implicit, rather than explicit, agreement. You will need to read between the lines. Although the comments are not exactly the same thing, are they getting at the same general point?
- When you describe areas of agreement, don't overstate them. It's generally best to use qualifying words such as "seemed," "appeared," or "generally" when describing these areas of agreement.

When you describe areas of agreement, be sure to describe each of the points of view fairly.



## Topic 3.3 Identifying Areas of Disagreement

Areas of disagreement are an important part of the discussion summary. The process for identifying areas of disagreement begins with the discussion outline analysis covered in [Topic 3.1 Identifying Key Themes of the Discussion](#).

As you saw in the previous topic, you need to make a list of the key themes of the discussion. To identify the areas of disagreement you will need to:

- Look at the specific online comments that are identified with each theme.
- For each of these comments, make a list of points of view where the participants disagree. These disagreements will generally come from explicit statements. You should look for points of view where there are at least two or three participants who represent at least two sides of the issue. You might also want to include points of disagreement that come from single participants.
- Make general statements that represent the different perspectives on the issue. These statements should identify the area of specific disagreement.
- Also look at the themes for areas of disagreement. Some of the themes may represent very different perspectives.
- Finally, look at any conceptual differences that exist. These would represent different ways of thinking about the topic. They could mirror political differences that are deeper than differences on themes or specific aspects of the themes.

When you describe areas of disagreement, be sure to describe each of the points of view fairly.

# Chapter **Three**: Developing a Sense of the Online Discussion

## Topic 3.4 Identifying Tangential Areas of Concern

**A**ny discussion is likely to generate a number of threads that are tangential to the discussion. Should those threads be explored in the discussion, there will be insufficient time to fully explore the original discussion topic.

These discussion threads are important to note because they could become fruitful topics for future discussion. To identify tangential areas of concern you should:

- **Make note of the tangential topics.** You might want to think of this as creating a “parking lot” for ideas or a separate place where you keep track of tangential ideas. As the facilitator, you will need to intervene when these tangential topics arise and indicate that they are being put into the parking lot to be revisited later.
- **Review the parking lot topics.** You will want to take note of the origin of the topic or how it came about in the discussion.
- **Identify possible dimensions of the topic.** Ask yourself: What are the concerns that arise from the topic?
- **Create a statement of the topic as an area of concern.** This consists of a discussion question or questions that might be used should further discussions be of interest for this area of concern.
- **Include the areas of concern and their descriptions in the overall sense of the discussion.**

These areas of concern could become future topics for discussions when the course is offered again. Or, if the course is organized around weekly discussions, these topics could be explored by new facilitators in future weekly discussions. This will add continuity to the overall class discussion experience.

## Topic 3.5 Identifying the Meta-Discussion

Facilitators and really good discussants are trained to recognize the meta-discussion and meta-narrative of an active discussion. You should know the difference between these two concepts.

- Meta-discussions are discussions about the discussion. They might be about style, participants, the forum in which the discussion takes place, and so on. Most discussions tend to have some examples of meta-discussion. Analyzing the meta-discussion is key for the discussion facilitator. The facilitator should be aware of the meta-discussion and modify the discussion appropriately. When writing up an analysis at the end of discussion, reflections on the meta-discussion will be important.
- Within a discussion, too much of a meta-discussion can take away from the overall experience. As a facilitator, you want discussants to stay on task or topic. Exceptional discussants may recognize issues pertaining to the meta-discussion, but as the facilitator you will want to keep meta-discussion to a minimum. It tends to be best for the facilitator to be aware of the meta-discussion and use this insight to better direct the discussion.
- Meta-narratives, meanwhile, are grand narratives that inform knowledge or experience for a group of people. Identifying the meta-narrative is important insofar as it helps the facilitator to better understand the assumptions of the discussants. Ask yourself: Who are my discussants? Do they share ideas, assumptions, or a worldview that will influence what can and cannot be said in this discussion? How will I facilitate this discussion in a way that acknowledges the meta-narrative of the discussion group while also pushing individuals to reflect on their own assumptions about the world?

In short, the meta-discussion is made up of the discussion, such as insights about personality clashes or timing of the discussion, while the meta-narrative is the worldview of the group that shapes what can and cannot be said within the discussion. A good facilitator is aware of both.

# Chapter **Three**: Developing a Sense of the Online Discussion

## Topic 3.6 Identifying the Mood of the Discussion

**T**he mood of an online discussion develops over a series of posts. Early contributions are key for setting the mood of the discussion. It is best to take notice of the development of mood before it is too late to do anything about it. How do you do this?

Pretend that you are a meteorologist. You are charged with forecasting tomorrow's weather based on data, regularities, and tendencies. As a discussion forecaster, you need to be very sensitive to small indicators that will shape the overall mood of the discussion:

- Are contributions positive? Are participants using positive language and noting good contributions? Do you see more "yes, and..." statements than "yes, but..." statements?
- Are contributions exploratory? Are discussants engaging the topic on a conceptual level? Are they hung up on factual correctness? Are they disagreeing over minor details?
- Are discussants interacting in a civil manner? Are discussants referring to one another by name? Is anyone being dismissive? Is there hostility in the discussion? If so, where is it originating?
- Are discussants continuing the discussion by asking clarifying questions and following up on responses to posts?

As a facilitator, you cannot control the mood of the discussion just like meteorologists cannot control the weather, however, by taking notice of early signals you can better direct the discussion and address particular issues before they contribute to an overall negative mood.

## Topic 3.7 Identifying Key Discussants

Each discussion will contain different types of personalities and styles of participation. To get a better sense of the discussion, it is important to identify the key discussants. When facilitating, ask yourself:

- Who contributed first in this discussion? What type of contribution was it? Thoughtful? Factual? Reactionary?
- How did others initially respond? Was there hesitation or confusion? Were participants eager to contribute?
- Who is pushing the discussion in new directions?
- Who is encouraging others to participate?
- Who is silent?
- Is anyone telling personal stories? What affect, if any, are these having on the discussion?
- Is someone dominating the discussion? How are they doing this? Are they overwhelming the discussion with contributions or using strong language that discourages others from contributing?
- Is someone repeatedly taking the discussion off track? How so?
- Does someone have an agenda? What agenda? For what purpose?

Identifying key discussants is important for managing the discussion. Key discussants can be both negative and positive for the overall discussion. There are strategies for dealing with all sorts of discussants. (See [Topic 5.5 Identifying Your Discussion Style and Succeeding](#).)

# Chapter **Three**: Developing a Sense of the Online Discussion

## Topic 3.8 Elevating the Discussion

Each discussion can reflect different levels of engagement. Discussions with greater student participation that practice our guiding principles and offer thoughtful engagement with the topic or text tend to be of higher quality. To help elevate any discussion, try to encourage the following:

- Every participant is actively engaged out of interest and not just satisfying a course requirement.
- The discussion demonstrates a deep understanding of the topic.
- There is a genuine building upon the ideas of each discussion participant.
- The discussion is at a conceptual level and goes beyond expected points of view.

How do you elevate the discussion?

- Start with a question that is at the right level. This should help keep the discussion from superficiality.
- Establish discussion rules that encourage conceptual explorations and discourage personal anecdotes.
- Provide frequent feedback to participants to give them encouragement when they demonstrate the level of discussion that is desired.
- Intervene in the discussion when it starts getting into familiar and banal perspectives. Challenge the discussion participants to think beyond the superficial.
- Encourage a fast pace to the discussion by continually asking follow-up questions. This will keep the discussion from becoming stale.

Do you have tips for elevating the discussion? Please share your strategy in the [Online Discussion Guidebook—Student Edition Wiki: Topic 3.8 Elevating the Discussion](#).



# Chapter Four:

## Managing Problem Situations and Challenges

### Topic 4.0 Chapter Four at a Glance

In Chapters Two and Three, we describe the role of the student facilitator and offer a detailed description of the facilitation process. However, no matter how much you prepare or how well you communicate, challenges will emerge throughout the discussion process. In this chapter, we introduce some of the common problems that emerge in online discussions and offer advice for how to overcome them.

Challenging Situation	1st Course of Action	2nd Course of Action	3rd Course of Action
What do I do when the discussion gets off track?	Post a new question to redirect the discussion.	Communicate with the discussion group about the need to redirect the conversation.	Call a time-out and debrief with the discussion group.
How do I keep a discussion from stalling out?	Post a provocative comment.	Post supplemental questions that may move the discussion in new directions.	Post additional content such as articles or videos.
What do I do when someone dominates the discussion?	Establish and remind discussants of discussion guidelines.	Communicate privately with the dominant discussant about discussion goals.	Recommend that the instructor intervene and talk privately with this discussant.
How do I diffuse a hostile discussion atmosphere?	Identify the source of hostility.	Redirect the conversation in a civil manner.	Confront the offending party.
What is the best way to address "free-riders"?	Communicate with the offender and be specific.	Create a game plan for moving forward.	Communicate with the instructor.
How do I encourage more than superficial comments?	Set clear guidelines.	Offer frequent feedback.	Create discussion activities that encourage deeper thought.
What do I do when discussants post personal stories?	Create a separate discussion space to share personal stories.	Model how personal narratives can be generalized in the discussion	Provide corrective feedback and remind students of discussion guidelines.
How do I collaborate with my co-facilitators?	Start communicating early in the semester.	Create an action plan and divide labor.	Debrief with co-facilitators to learn from the process.
How do I maintain my own personal space and build community?	Take introductory assignments seriously. Make an effort to introduce yourself and read the introductions of others.	Communicate regularly with classmates but do not feel obligated to socialize outside of class space.	Make an effort at social presence while online. Communicate using the discussion platform.
Should I correct factual errors in the discussion?	Allow discussants to address the factual error.	Address the factual error by referring to empirical evidence. Then move on.	Invite the instructor to step in and address the factual error.



## Topic 4.1 What Do I Do When the Discussion Gets Off Track?

You have probably seen a news program with a panel discussion on some topic. The discussion quickly digresses into a series of disconnected comments and the original intent of the discussion is lost. This can happen in an online discussion as well.

As the facilitator, you need to intervene when the discussion goes off track. What does off track mean in this case? A discussion can go off track if one or more of the following occur:

- The original focus of the discussion is lost and the discussion has gone in a direction that is unlikely to return to the intended focus.
- Participants in the discussion are not offering developmental comments that are building on others' insights. Instead, the discussion is simply a series of disconnected points.
- The discussion has become disrespectful and not all students' comments are being heard.

What do you do as a facilitator to correct these problems?

The instructor of the course will need to establish at the beginning of the semester the facilitator's responsibility to intervene. The facilitator may want to:

- Post a new discussion question that redirects the conversation back to topic.
- Issue a time-out notice. The notice should simply state that the conversation needs to take a different direction. You can ask the instructor to temporarily freeze the discussion forum to give everyone a moment to cool off.
- State the reasons for the time-out notice. Give a broad overview at first and then give specific examples of what went wrong.
- Give specific directions on what needs to be done now. This could involve one or more of the following: a reframing of the discussion question, guidance on how to build on others' comments giving specific examples, or a warning about what might happen should disrespectful comments continue.
- Provide reinforcing feedback once the discussion has restarted to ensure that your guidance is appropriate.

Getting the discussion back on track is one of the important measures of a facilitator's effectiveness. Don't be a bystander in the discussion.

# Chapter Four:

## Managing Problem Situations and Challenges

### Topic 4.2 How Do I Keep a Discussion From Stalling Out?

There will come a time in every discussion when it slows down. Comments tend to become repetitive. When this happens you need to decide whether to conclude the discussion or do something to revive it. In most cases, you should try to revive the discussion at least once.

What are some things you can do to keep a discussion from stalling out?

- Make a provocative comment that is sure to generate a lot of response. The comment could represent a view not represented in your group discussion.
- Dig deeper into the topic. Have the group explore one of its points to a greater level of detail. This could be a point that most of the students support, but one that needs fuller explanation in order for it to fully develop.
- Use a supplemental question(s) to generate additional comments ([See Topic 2.10 Maintaining Discussion Flow](#)).
- Post additional content such as a short news article, video clip, or image that supports a particular discussion thread or moves the discussion in a new direction.
- Challenge the thinking on one of the points that everyone seems to agree with. You can do this by giving an example of where their thinking might not work.

If one or more of these strategies doesn't revive the discussion, you may have reached the end of the discussion.

## Topic 4.3 What Do I Do When Someone Dominates the Discussion?

All of us know people who take over a group discussion. They are the first to speak up. They have strong opinions. They tend to intimidate others. They can even be prone to ridiculing the opinions of others. The dominating person may not even be aware of what he or she is doing. Here are some suggestions for dealing with a dominating discussant:

- Establish discussion practices prior to the first discussion that discourage the behaviors displayed by dominating students.
- Rotate the first response among the students. This gives every student a chance to start the discussion. (See [Topic 2.9 Kick-Starting the Discussion](#).)
- Provide corrective feedback to the dominant discussant through email or another form of private communication.
- Use the strategies from [Topic 4.4 How do I Diffuse a Hostile Discussion Atmosphere](#) to alleviate dominating behavior.
- You may want to communicate with the instructor of the course before taking any extreme measure that might backfire.

Overall, the key to dealing with a dominating discussant is to provide corrective feedback early in the discussion. This responsibility tends to rest with the facilitator or the instructor. You will want to communicate with the instructor if this concern arises and decide together how to address the challenge.

# Chapter Four:

## Managing Problem Situations and Challenges

### Topic 4.4 How Do I Diffuse a Hostile Discussion Atmosphere?

There are many ways to diffuse a hostile or aggressive atmosphere. As the facilitator you will want to:

- Identify the source(s) of aggression or hostility.
- Engage the source of aggression in a non-aggressive and civil manner.
- If the aggression is coming from a small group of students, try to separate these students in future discussions.
- Acknowledge whatever strengths there might be in the aggressor's statements and then attempt to engage this person in friendly dialogue by asking clarifying questions.
- If the hostile comments are seemingly innocent and perhaps just a poor choice of words, then giving the offender a way out of the discussion without losing face might be a good strategy: "I hear you saying.... perhaps you don't mean to suggest that. ...Perhaps you meant. ...which is a really interesting point."
- If the comments are overtly hostile, then it may be best to remind this person directly of the guidelines of the discussion and inform the instructor.

Do not under any circumstance replicate aggressive or hostile speech. All of your comments are documented in public domain and could be read in isolation (i.e., out of context of the larger discussion). Be sure that every paragraph you write can stand alone and represents civil discourse.

## Topic 4.5 What is the Best Way to Address “Free-Riders”?

A free-rider is someone who benefits from resources, goods, or services without paying the cost of the benefit. In an online course, the free-rider might be:

- A group member who does not contribute to the group project but receives credit for it.
- A discussant who does not contribute to building the discussion, but chimes in at the last minute to receive credit.
- A co-facilitator who does not work with other facilitators to manage the discussion, but still claims credit for behind-the-scene work.

Whatever shape the free-rider, peers must politely confront him or her. The instructor can reprimand a free-rider, but this requires peers to report the student. This, albeit sometimes necessary, shifts responsibility from students to instructor. In a student-centered course, not only do students assume positions of authority but also responsibility. It is best for students to develop skills for dealing with the free-rider. Guidelines for dealing with a free-rider include:

- Identify the free-rider.
- Be direct, but polite. Explain your surprise and disappointment in this person’s performance. Give specific examples.
- Propose a game plan for moving forward that includes this person. Prepare, however, for this person not to complete his or her work. Do not make the group vulnerable or dependent on this person.
- Document all exchanges and nonresponses with this person.
- Submit a formal letter to the instructor detailing your attempts to identify the problem, address the problem, and reach out to this student. Make this letter available to the student. Be able to defend all of your claims. Be transparent.

Before engaging in any of these strategies, be generous. We don’t always know the problems that others are carrying with them. Think of the worst day of your life and ask yourself if you could finish x project under such circumstances. Assume the best of your peers and make allowances. However, generosity of spirit has a limit. If you cannot identify extenuating circumstances then proceed with other strategies for addressing the problem.

# Chapter Four:

## Managing Problem Situations and Challenges

### Topic 4.6 How Do I Encourage More Than Superficial Comments?

**H**ave you ever seen a politician not answer a question? Have you ever tried to have a conversation with someone who just didn't want to talk? Perhaps their answers were vague, not on point, or uncomfortably short. How do you avoid comments like these from dominating your discussion?

In most cases, discussants will give good responses when they know what is expected of them and how they will be evaluated. (See [Chapter Five: Evaluation in the Instructor Edition of this guidebook](#).) To encourage a higher level of discussion try:

- Setting clear guidelines. Share examples of high-quality posts and grading rubrics.
- Offering frequent feedback. As the facilitator, identify and acknowledge really good posts.
- Creating a discussion atmosphere that discussants want to engage. Sometimes it is hard to contribute thoughtfully to a discussion that seems irrelevant. Try to pick topics that are important to the discussion group.
- Relating the discussion topic to current events. Sometimes online discussions feel like busy work. Try to make them relevant to the discussants.
- Creating discussion activities that encourage students to think deeper about an issue.

### Topic 4.6 Example Moving Past Superficial Comments

Ask discussants to imagine their responses to being in a prism.

- Light entrance – The comment starts with an acknowledgement of the contributions of others. You want discussants to build on the comments of others.
- Light processing – The next part of the comment represents the discussants' own thoughts on the topic. You are looking for new insights here.
- Light reflection – The final phase of the comment should be a thought or question to be asked of the other discussion participants. You want discussants to help their classmates by giving them something to respond to.

How do you move the discussion past superficial statements? Do you have exercises that encourage discussants to dig deeper? Please share your ideas in [the Online Discussion Guidebook—Student Edition Wiki: Topic 4.6 Going Beyond the Superficial](#).

## Topic 4.7 What Do I Do When Discussants Post Personal Stories?

**M**ost people have a tendency to internalize any topic by connecting it to their own experience. In a discussion, participants will often tell their story. They mean well, but their stories sometimes have a very limited connection to the topic. Stories can also take the discussion in a direction that isn't very productive. One story generates other stories and the discussion topic is lost. You can limit the use of personal stories by:

- Establishing a discussion rule that limits the use of personal stories. The rule might be something like this: "As you think of the topic, it's fine to connect to your personal situation, but when you comment try to limit them to what you think about the topic rather than the story that shaped how you think."
- Provide a separate discussion board for sharing of stories. Participants can share their stories, but not distract from the main focus of the discussion.
- Provide corrective feedback when storytelling begins to take on a prominent role in the discussion. This could be to the entire group or to the individual offline.
- Should a discussant describe a personal story, issue a follow up posting that reads, "What general points can we get from your story that connect to our topic?"

**Discussants** will respond properly by limiting their stories if they are asked to do so, but they need to be asked. An alternative approach is to embrace storytelling in the class by encouraging students to share their stories through an assignment that is specifically designed to engage personal stories.

**Facilitators** might encourage discussants to reference the personal stories in the weekly discussion, but not use the discussion forum as the primary location to share the story. In this way, personal narratives might help inform the discussion, but they will not take over the discussion.

Have you used personal narratives successfully in the classroom? Do you have classroom exercises that encourage developmental or exploratory discussion? Do you have classroom assignments that practice open-mindedness, civility, and interactivity? Please share your resources in the [Online Discussion Guidebook—Instructor Edition Wiki: Topic 4.7 Using Personal Narrative](#).

# Chapter Four:

## Managing Problem Situations and Challenges

### Topic 4.8 How Do I Collaborate With My Co-Facilitators?

There are many ways to communicate in online courses. Good communication leads to a potentially great collaboration. Be sure to contact your co-facilitators early in the semester. Life tends to be extremely busy for online students. What are the best ways to communicate with co-facilitators?

- Email. Email all collaborators and be sure to specify in the heading the topic of collaboration.
- Social media. Online students communicate and collaborate via Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, to name only a few virtual spaces for interaction.
- Document Sharing. Use document-sharing software (such as Google Docs) for group work.
- Schedule face time. Video conferencing is easy and free. Use Skype or Google Hangouts or one of the many other free software packages to talk to collaborators.
- Meet in person. It is not required, but meeting in person is always a possibility.

When collaborating with others online, be sure to:

- Plan well ahead of time. **Do NOT** wait until the last moment. This won't work in online classes.
- Be detailed. You have to use more detail in online discussions than in-person discussions.
- Be professional and polite.

Collaboration depends upon communication and planning well in advance.



## Topic 4.9 How Do I Maintain My Own Personal Space and Build Community?

**M**aintaining personal space in online courses is tricky. On the one hand, most students feel anonymous in an online course—at least initially. There is no automatic or organic community in online classrooms. Strategies for building community in an online classroom are designed to make students visible and present in the class. This visibility has many benefits, but one should also be conscious about keeping boundaries in online spaces. A few points to keep in mind:

- You should never be required to meet with online classmates in-person. If you do, be sure to meet in a public place.
- Social media sites have made it possible for classmates to know more about you than you ever thought possible. Don't assume that you are unknown to your classmates or instructor.
- Propose using online document sharing software (such as Google Docs) when working with classmates. This will limit incoming emails and be a more efficient use of time.
- Do not overshare. It is good to let your personality shine in online courses, but it is not a location to vent all of your personal problems. Keep a professional persona in online courses.

Just as many students seek privacy in online classes, other students seek a greater community—even if it is an uncomfortable experience at first. For example, the first day of any class can be scary. Walking into an unfamiliar classroom, finding a seat, and not recognizing any of the faces staring back at you can be an intimidating experience. It is particularly hard for shy students. Some students find refuge in online classrooms. They can avoid the awkward and anxiety-riddled experience by enrolling in an online course. They can remain in the safety of their own rooms and avoid exposing themselves to uncomfortable situations like the first day of class.

The problem with this strategy is that college is about more than just learning content. It is about extending yourself and growing as a person. Uncomfortable situations can be good. By the end of the semester, that initially scary classroom might feel like a home. Experiences are shared, friendships develop, and the classroom ends up feeling like a community.

Developing this sense of community in the online classroom is not as easy, but it can be done. A few tips to help develop a community in an online classroom include:

- Take introductions seriously. Most online discussion boards have an introductory post. It's sort of like the first day of class in a small classroom and the teacher asks everyone to say something about himself or herself. This is your opportunity to present yourself to the class. Don't blow off this opportunity in online classrooms or in-person classrooms. First impressions matter so make a good one.
- Read the introductions of your classmates. You wouldn't leave the room when students are introducing themselves in an in-person classroom so don't disrespect your classmates in an online class. Take the time to learn about your classmates and respond to their posts. You will most likely see these students again in the online community.

# Chapter Four:

## Managing Problem Situations and Challenges

### Topic 4.9 How Do I Maintain My Own Personal Space and Build Community?

- Always submit your work early to shared discussion forums. We know this is difficult, but if you want people to read your thoughts and thus get to know a little bit more about what makes you tick, then you need to maximize the possibility that they will engage your work. Posting late decreases your chances that any serious student is going to read your work. Post early and you increase your chances that other students will read your work.
- There are many ways to express yourself and build camaraderie in in-person classrooms. Body language, clothing, physical appearance—all say something about you before you even speak a word in an in-person classroom. It is harder for people to “get you” and to remember you in online classes. You need to express yourself almost entirely through your writing. So work on your writing. Be a serious writer and also develop a voice that will help your classmates connect with you.

## Topic 4.10 Should I Correct Factual Errors in the Discussion?

**"That's wrong!"** It's a simple phrase, but it can have a chilling impact on a discussion. One of the challenges of facilitating a discussion is knowing when to correct a factual error that one of the participants made. As a facilitator, your role is to support the discussion, to keep it flowing, and to be neutral. How do you know when to correct a factual error and whether it could have an adverse affect on the discussion?

Here are some general guidelines that might help you answer the question:

- Let the participants decide for themselves whether a statement is factually correct or not. All of us are exposed to factually incorrect statements every day. Wait and see if this particular error is noticed by the discussants.
- When you feel the discussion is being unduly influenced by a factual error, interject a question that takes the discussion away from the factual basis to a broader perspective, i.e., "Let's think of this issue from another perspective."
- Don't let the discussion digress into a debate about facts. When this happens, try to raise the level of the discussion, i.e., "Let's think about this issue more broadly."
- When a discussant continually interjects factually incorrect information, then ask for a citation. Ask the discussant to share his or her sources.
- When in doubt, ask the instructor for advice. Your instructor will talk to the discussant off-line, correct the error in the discussion, or guide you in moving forward. Should the discussant continue, the instructor might remove him or her from the discussion or explain to the student how this behavior will negatively impact his or her discussion grade.
- Discussions where factual statements become key parts of the conversation are rarely that productive. That is not to say that facts are not important but to suggest that bickering over factual details is not the best use of the discussions space. You might want to establish a tone upfront that the discussion is about the perspectives of the participants and not about facts as perceived by someone else.

Don't worry too much about students getting the readings or content wrong. The instructor should also be monitoring and engaging the discussions. If someone, for example, gets really off track with the reading material then you could encourage him to refer to the text or support his claims with textual support. You are not, however, expected to be an expert on all things pertaining to the discussion content. You should worry more about the discussion process than the discussion content.

Have other challenges come up in your discussion? What were they? How did you address this challenge? Please share your ideas in the [Online Discussion Guidebook—Student Edition Wiki: Topic 4.11 Challenging Situations](#).

# Chapter Five: Students as Online Discussants

## Topic 5.0 Chapter Five at a Glance

Role of the discussant:

- Effectively convey your ideas and opinions.
- Learn from the ideas and opinions of others.
- Learn not just facts from others, but why they think the way they do.
- Revisit your assumptions, ideas, and opinions. Revise your thoughts.
- Help others to move past their assumptions and biases.
- Explore contrasting and new ideas in collaboration with others.

Succeeding with different discussion styles:

Discussion Style	Main Issue	Turning Issue to Advantage
A "whatever" student	Indifference	Practice engagement and nurture curiosity
A student with a learning challenge	Processes information differently	Utilize university resources
A student with introvert tendencies	Turning too inward undermines social presence	Create an avatar for online discussions
A non-traditional student	A feeling of disconnection	Share life experiences to elevate discussion
A shy student	Does not engage fully	Use attention to detail to elevate discussion
A student with a passion for learning	Awkwardness in casual, social interaction	Use analytical skills to elevate the discussion
An academically struggling student	Low grades	Prioritize course work and use the discussion group to stay on course
A student that tends to dominate	Alienate others	Use self-confidence to help others engage discussion
An international student	A feeling of disconnection	Share cultural information to enhance the discussion
An undisciplined student	Time management	Create a routine and use the discussion group to help stay on course

## Topic 5.1 Understanding the Role of the Discussant

There are many reasons for participating in online discussions. The role of the discussant may vary according to the type of discussion and the reason for the discussion. Nonetheless, the following suggestions help participants to more deeply engage in their role. Consider the following goals:

- Effectively convey your ideas and opinions.
- Learn from the ideas and opinions of others.
- Learn not just facts from others, but learn why they think the way they do.
- Revisit your assumptions, ideas, and opinions. Revise your thoughts.
- Help others to move past their assumptions and biases.
- Explore contrasting ideas in collaboration with others.

How might you achieve these goals? Try the following approaches:

- Ask questions to draw out others' thinking and to check whether you understand them.
- Try to find the grains of truth in the arguments of others with whom you do not agree.
- Reflect on how your biases, assumptions, and emotions might affect your thoughts. Reflect privately but also feel free to share this information.
- Balance constructive critique with open curiosity and appreciation.
- Reflect and comment on the nature and quality of the dialogue itself. You can try to nudge it toward an even higher quality.
- Be sure to prepare for the discussion.

# Chapter Five: Students as Online Discussants

## Topic 5.2 Preparing for the Discussion

Relying on your wits to get you through a discussion does just that— it gets you through the discussion, but you do not excel in it or develop personally. Try preparing and see how the quality of the discussion and your personal knowledge on the subject and process improve.

Ways to prepare for a discussion include:

- Actively read all course material prior to the start of the discussion. Taking notes and annotating the text is a good tip for active reading. If you are still reading or preparing for the discussion after it has already started then you cannot be present in the discussion. You will not be able to fully appreciate or build on the contributions of your fellow discussants. So try to finish all of the readings before the start of the discussion.
- Read the initial discussion prompts and give yourself time to turn these questions over in your head. Think about these questions throughout the day. Use sticky or electronic notes to keep you thinking about the topic throughout the day.
- Poll your friends, significant others, parents, or even children about the topic. Get into the right state of mind prior to posting any contribution.
- Write your initial response to the question in a word document. Pretend like you are writing a short essay. Craft a well-written post. First impressions in online discussions are just as important as first remarks in an in-person discussion. Students will decide if it is worth their time to read your additional posts based on this first impression. So make it good.

## Topic 5.3 Crafting a Good Discussion Post

**H**ow do you get the most out of online discussions? How do you get a good grade in online discussions? Professors grade online discussions differently, but if you use the strategy below you should get a good grade AND feel like you learned something new.

- Be developmental rather than critical or defensive in your contributions to the discussion.
- Be respectful of your peers. As you read the posts, think of these two questions: How can I build on these comments? How can I use my own point of view to support what the others are saying?
- Be thoughtful in your response. What you don't want to do is parrot what others are saying.
- Be yourself in your posts. Often discussion forums are the only interaction that you will have with your classmates and instructor. Make an impression! If you have a good sense of humor, don't be afraid of showing this in your post. Of course you want your contributions to the discussion to be serious and thoughtful, but by no means must you be mechanical. You can still be yourself and connect with your classmates through online forums.
- Set aside time each day to contribute to the discussion. You really can't understand the flow of the discussion or make useful contributions if your participation is erratic. It works best when you do this at the same time each day. Normally you can find a good time to do this when you are free from other things you need to do.
- Ask your instructor for a grading rubric prior to the discussion. If one cannot be provided, ask the instructor what he or she is looking for in an exceptional discussion board contribution.

Sometimes online discussions feel like busy work. They especially feel like this when the instructor is not present in the forum. Nevertheless, treat these discussions as serious exchanges of ideas that are documented for all to see. The instructor can go back to these forums when he or she is writing a letter of reference for you or when you request a second review of your final grade in the course.

# Chapter Five:

## Students as Online Discussants

### Topic 5.4 Creating an Avatar for Yourself

Avatars can be very useful in discussions. You should think of an avatar as a persona that you adopt. Avatars are especially useful when certain points of view would otherwise be missing from the discussion. Some attributes that you might consider when selecting an avatar for yourself include:

- Think of a perspective that would otherwise be missing from the discussion. There are several possible dimensions to this: age, experience, femininity/masculinity, rural/urban background, political perspective, national origin, marital status, career, etc.
- Select a persona that is different from your own but one that you feel you can represent well.
- Develop a description of your avatar. Make your description interesting, but not bizarre.

Once you have selected your avatar, consider how to use him, her, or it in the discussion:

- Be serious in your discussion posts. You don't want to make your comments so extreme that they aren't treated honestly.
- Be respectful of your avatar's role. You really want to take on the persona for your avatar.
- Don't go out of character. Don't interject comments that indicate your avatar is saying this but that's not how you feel.

Finally, when avatars are used, you should treat it as you would any other person. Being an avatar or responding to another person who is adopting the role of an avatar does not give you the license to violate the rules that have been created for the discussion.

Have you ever used an avatar in an online discussion? Please describe this avatar and share with us the experience in the [Online Discussion Guidebook—Student Edition Wiki: Topic 5.4 Creating Avatars](#).



## Topic 5.5 Identifying Your Discussion Style and Succeeding

Listed below are different types of discussion styles. Skim through this list and pick out the top three that best describe your style in discussions. Be honest with yourself about this and take the recommended steps to improve your participation in discussions and succeed as an online learner.

If you cannot easily identify your style in a discussion, ask a friend or family member to review the list of possibilities. Perhaps they can help you best identify your tendencies and habits in a discussion.

### A. Succeeding as a “Whatever” Student in Online Discussions

Have you ever been in a discussion with family or friends and respond to a comment with “whatever”? When you give such a response, you are essentially dismissing what the person has just said. Obviously, a response of “whatever” is not appropriate in online discussions, but there are other ways to display the “whatever attitude” that is wise to avoid. Here are some ways to avoid being a “whatever” student:

- When you participate in the online discussion, make note of what others have said and then build on their comments.
- Try to put aside your own beliefs for a period of the discussion and see if you can appreciate what others are saying. Once you have a good sense of how others think then contribute your own beliefs. Your contributions in the early stages of the discussion should probably be questions you ask of others rather than expressing your own thoughts.
- Begin to value learning from others. Curiosity can be a very valuable personality trait and online discussions can help you develop a genuine appreciation for what and how others think.
- Make the discussion worth engaging by introducing issues that you find interesting. These issues should pertain to the topic of the discussion. You should be able to find a way to include your passion or interests in a way that contributes to the discussion.

### B. Succeeding as a Student with a Learning Challenge

There are a number of learning challenges that many students face, such as ADD, ADHD, and dyslexia. Other learning challenges can come from physical impairments associated with sight or hearing. As a general guideline, if you have a learning challenge then:

- Notify the instructor about your challenge. Universities have a requirement to support students with learning challenges.
- If ADD or ADHD is an issue, you might want to establish an online discussion routine. For example, set your phone to let you know when you need to contribute to the discussion.
- If ADD/ADHD/dyslexia is an issue, you might want to write out your discussion posts before you submit them. Take the extra time to reread them or have someone else read them before submission.
- If a physical impairment is an issue, you will probably need to contact your campus accommodation office for help. In some cases, you might be provided with technology to help you with the discussion. In other cases, you may need someone to help you access the discussion posts.

The key to all of these challenges is to work with your instructor and university resource offices to see what accommodation you might need.

# Chapter Five:

## Students as Online Discussants

### Topic 5.5 Identifying Your Discussion Style and Succeeding

#### C. Succeeding as a Student With Introvert Tendencies

Many students are introverts. Sometimes introverts might not be comfortable or interested in hanging out with classmates. They might choose to sit by themselves in class and study alone. Online classes might be really appealing to those who desire more alone time, but online classes actually require students to associate with others more than one might think. To succeed in online discussions as someone who has tendencies to turn inward, try to:

- Use the opportunity of online discussions to connect on a minimal level with other students. If you happen to be introverted out of fear of others or shyness, then online discussions offer an entry point for you to start connecting with others.
- Create an avatar for yourself. You can comment as your avatar rather than as yourself. (See [Topic 5.4 Creating an Avatar](#).) You might find that you really enjoy thinking of how your avatar would respond to comments and you are still able to maintain a general sense of privacy.
- Review the comments you make that seem to get the best responses from your classmates. What did these comments have in common? Perhaps they address a classmate directly or they connect the discussion topic to a current event. Use these online forums as practice sites for developing communication skills.

Your best approach to doing well in an online class is to think of it as a way for you to learn how to connect with others. You may want to maintain your privacy or remain relatively isolated, but there is little risk in making connections online and pushing yourself beyond your comfort zone.

#### D. Succeeding as a Non-Traditional Student in Online Discussions

If you are older than most college students, married, a parent, or someone invested in a full-time career, then you may feel a little out of place in a college classroom. Many non-traditional students seek out online classes because they offer more flexibility and are easier to accommodate busy schedules. Online discussions may be a particular challenge for non-traditional students if they seem irrelevant or like busy work. Succeeding as a non-traditional student involves:

- Sharing your life experiences in the discussions. You probably have had experiences that others have not, and many students would appreciate learning from your experiences.
- Being tolerant of your classmates. It would probably be easy to get angry at the naiveté of some of your classmates. Your best approach is to elevate the contributions of others.
- Creating a routine of when you are going to contribute to the discussion. Since your time is probably more constrained than that of traditional students, you will need to find times to contribute (i.e., break times at work, early morning before the children wake, etc.).

While the discussion component of online classes can be taxing, they are also an opportunity for you to shine in these classes and feel like you are part of a college community.

## E. Succeeding as a Shy Student in Online Discussions

Shy students tend to be reluctant to speak up in class, but these students tend to be active listeners. They tend to value what others say and really listen to determine how they can contribute. Here are some suggestions for how you can succeed in an online discussion as a shy student:

- Try to comment early in the discussion. Your comment could be just a factual complement to the discussion question. It doesn't have to be your own comment.
- Later in the discussion you can be the organizer of the discussion. This can be very valuable to the discussion participants.
- Experiment with contributing your own thoughts. This experimentation will help you learn how you can contribute. It can be based upon such things as when to contribute, how strong to make your comments, how to build on what others say, how much of your own personal story to put into your comments.
- Set a personal goal of contributing a number of comments that are x% over the course requirements.
- When the discussion is done, give yourself a grade for your discussion comments. You can do this by ranking your contributions in comparison to your classmates. You will probably be surprised to see how well you ranked.

Online discussions offer a safe haven for shy student to contribute in class. It is empowering to recognize that online discussions give you the opportunity to move outside your comfort zone.

## F. Succeeding as a Student with a Passion for Learning

Some students have a passion for knowledge and love to have intense intellectual conversations. Sometimes these students are so excited to discuss and share knowledge with others that they might not notice that others are less interested in the topic. Sometimes peers view this student as a show-off. This is unfortunate and a common misunderstanding that can be exacerbated in online discussions. There are ways to communicate your excitement for learning without inviting reproach from your classmates:

- As a serious student, you will surely be prepared for the discussion. You have most likely read all of the required reading prior to the start of the discussion and maybe even read relevant texts beyond the assigned reading. Even though you are excited to discuss the initial prompt, there is no need to rush into the conversation. Practice patience and observe the conversation before contributing. Take notice of the contributors and the direction of the discussion.
- When you submit a discussion post, be sure to include comments on what others have said by referencing what you learned from them.
- Use the discussion as an experiment to see how you can raise the quality of the discussion. The general idea is not to "win" the discussion with your analytical skills. Instead, think of yourself as one person in a prolonged discussion. Help make it a robust experience for everyone involved.
- See what you can learn from others. This can be a very important addition to your intellectual development because it is valuable to connect with others who may not have the same intellectual interests or capabilities.

As a student passionate about learning, the insights from online discussions may not be as much about the course content as how you can be more effective in working with others. Make this your goal.

# Chapter Five:

## Students as Online Discussants

### Topic 5.5 Identifying Your Discussion Style and Succeeding

#### G. Succeeding in Online Discussions as an Academically Struggling Student

Some students use online classes to catch up. They might need to meet a GPA requirement or increase their earned credit hours. Unfortunately, these students have a tendency to treat online classes far too casually and they don't get the grade or credit hours they need. If you are struggling academically, the following suggestions for using online discussions may help to improve your academic standing:

- Check out the syllabus and see how much credit is assigned to the online discussion portion of the class. You should have the goal of achieving all of these points.
- Develop a schedule for completing your discussion posts. You need to make these a part of your routine. Setting up reminders on your phone can help.
- Do more posts than are required.
- Make every post more than is expected. You can do this by building on what others say and giving more than perfunctory responses.
- Use content from the reading in your discussion post. This demonstrates your preparation and helps establish you as a serious student.

None of these suggestions are hard to do. They just require being more attentive to the course requirements. If you develop discipline in your online courses, it should help you in all of your future classes as well.

#### H. Succeeding as a Student Who Tends to Dominate the Discussion

Some students like to take charge and control the direction of a discussion. They tend to comment more than others and often in a tone that seems aggressive. There's certainly a place for being a discussion leader, but you should also learn how to adjust your role in discussions. Being dominant in the discussion may be fun, but this can adversely affect the overall experience of everyone involved. To limit aggressive tendencies, try to:

- Let the discussion unfold before you contribute.
- Build on what others are saying and don't try to steer the discussion in another direction.
- View your role as one of helping others develop their confidence in the discussion. If you are going to be a leader in your career or community, then you need to help develop the talents of others. This is a good practice.
- Refrain from using words that are so strong others shy away from commenting.
- End each of your discussion posts with a question that invites others to comment.

Online discussions offer a great opportunity to adjust your style of interacting with others. Think of the discussion as a way for you to test different approaches with people.

## I. Succeeding as an International Student in Online Discussions

International students can often feel intimidated by online discussions because of language barriers and the cultural context of the discussion topic. The reality is that international students can be very important contributors to online discussions. Online discussions can also be a good way to develop language capabilities. Some strategies you can use to participate in online discussions include:

- Share insights from your native country. These can be very valuable in making the discussion more interesting and useful.
- Don't get hung up on language. Your classmates aren't going to be concerned about spelling or grammar if your comments contribute insights.
- Don't be afraid to say what you think. Online discussions are a safe haven for new ideas, but they are not a place to say whatever you like. Say what you think, but practice civility, exploration, and generosity in the discussion forum.
- Be careful to observe the requirements for the number of posts, the time for posts, etc. You may find that online discussions are more formal or casual than you are accustomed.
- Don't be afraid to ask for clarification if you don't understand a discussion post.

Online discussions have the benefit of language development that you may miss in a more traditional class. Use this forum as a place to develop both your language skills and your discussion skills.

## J. Succeeding as an Undisciplined Student in Online Discussions

You can be undisciplined, very bright, and succeed in many college classes by doing well on tests, but you can't do that in online classes. The discussion component of these classes requires regular contributions. If you lack personal discipline, you might really struggle in online classes. You can do well in online discussions by:

- Placing reminders on your phone to participate in the discussions.
- Having a conversation partner in the class who can push you to contribute to the discussion forums.
- Developing a personal rule that says you can't do some regular activity without doing the online part.
- Developing a personal reward system for doing each online post. The reward in this case could be watching something on TV, playing a video game, etc.
- Using the One-Up Rule to develop the discipline to do your posts. See the One-Up Rule in University Survival.com <http://www.universitysurvival.com/student-topics/using-the-one-up-rule-to-develop-discipline-2/>

You shouldn't take an online course if you struggle with discipline unless you are committed to changing your approach. Online courses are great for those who have the curiosity and discipline to be self-learners. Many of us require the classroom environment (and rules) to excel at learning.

Do you have a discussion style not described in this chapter? Please describe your discussion style and share tips for how you maximize or adjust this style to excel in online discussions. Share your thoughts with us in the [Online Discussion Guidebook—Student Edition Wiki](#).

## Notes

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What else would you like to contribute to this guidebook? Do you have ideas for additional topics or revisions of the current topics? Please help us to improve this guidebook and make it accessible to all students engaging in online discussions. If you have additional ideas, please let us know by going to our *Online Discussion Guidebook—Student Edition*.