Writing Good Online Discussion Messages and Responses

You can make a big difference to the effectiveness of your online discussion forums by constructing your messages well. Here are some tips for writing good messages.

- **Limit your messages to 25-50 lines of text (1-2 screen lengths).** Long messages are difficult to read online.

- **Fill in the topic/subject line for each message.** Use informative keywords in the topic/subject line. To help other participants, be sure your title clearly indicates the content of your message. “My thoughts on the reading” isn’t nearly as clear as “My thoughts on Smith’s article”.

- **Use REPLY if** your message relates to the topic of an existing thread.

- **Start a new thread if** you want to introduce a new topic or issue with a new and relevant subject line, don’t reply to an existing message.

- **Construct your messages well.** If you can write your messages clearly and make it easy for people to see how they are included in the discussion, then it’s more likely people will read and consider your messages, and everyone will find it easier to follow what’s going on. Use simple language!

- **Be clear what point you are making.** A good way to force yourself to be clear is to put a one sentence summary at the top of a longer message. For example: “This message is to explain why…” Keep to one subject per message. It’s much better to send several messages if you have a number of topics to write about, because then people can replay to whichever topic they want and the separate discussions are in separate threads rather than all jumbled up.

- **Give reasons for your opinion.** It’s hard to discuss something with someone if they just state what they think without any justification. Use the word “because” freely! Examples can also help.

- **Invite responses to your messages.** To encourage responses, you can say things like:
  - “Do you agree with me here?”
  - “Have I left anything out?”

- **Write friendly responses.** Be specific about why you found ideas useful or interesting. If you disagree with some aspect of someone’s comment, do so in a respectful and considerate way.
  
  If you don’t understand some aspect of a classmate’s posting or response, ask for clarification.
If comments from your classmates bring out strong reactions from you, give yourself some
time to consider their points of view before responding. Communicate your concerns honestly.

- **Try to respond within 24 hours (48 hours maximum).** But pay attention to your instructor’s
expectations or requirements for a particular forum discussion. **Be guided by the time
frames included in the activity or assignment directions.**

Adapted from:

B. Plumpton, *How students can make conferencing work.*
http://www.open.ac.uk/pc4study/documents/how-students-can-make-conferencing-work-
scr.pdf
Retrieved from the web, November 2009.