Making the Most of Discussion Forums

What are Discussions for?

Instructors set up forum discussions for different reasons, for example:

- to help you understand course material
- to give you practice in academic debate
- to prepare you for an assignment, where you might be asked to “discuss” or “explain” or use some ideas or concepts from the course

Participating in discussion forums take effort but this participation can be some of the most rewarding work you do in your course.

There are two main benefits of actively participating in discussion:

- by pooling everyone’s insights, knowledge, sources of information and expertise, you end up with a much better understanding of a subject than you might on your own;
- and by articulating our ideas, challenging other people’s views and being challenged ourselves, we can modify and refine our views.

To get a good discussion happening, everyone needs to construct their messages carefully, and take some responsibility for the discussion. Don’t worry if the discussion leads to disagreement or debate. As long as you check that you understand what the other person said, and offer criticism of the idea not the person, then its fine to disagree.

How Does a Discussion Work?

Typically, you start with a discussion question or topic, posed by your instructor or perhaps by a classmate.

Generally one or more people will offer their views on the question. If it stops there, that is not a discussion, just a list of opinions. Everyone needs to take responsibility for moving on.

The way to move on is to draw each other out, by asking questions like:

- “What evidence is there that ...”
- “Why do you think that ...”
- “What do you mean by ...”

The next thing is to find some areas of agreement or disagreement. You’d be saying things like:

- “I agree/disagree about ... because ...”
• “But what if ...”
• “On the other hand ....because ...”

Giving reasons is important – in academic discussion you generally need to back up your view using evidence, references or examples, rather than making assertions. Don’t be too defensive about your opinions if people disagree – the discussion is not a competition to be the most “right”, it is a co-operative effort to improve everyone’s understanding. It’s OK to change your mind after you see the other arguments!

Try to build on what other people have said, to separate fact from opinion and to look for areas the group has not covered. Try to look at an issue from multiple angles, for example, you might think about ‘who, what, when, where, and why’, or advantages and disadvantages of suggestions, or problems and barriers.

Help Keep the Discussion on Track

As the discussion progresses, it can get hard to keep track of and remember where you are going. There starts to be a need for someone to make sense of it all. Sometimes your instructor will take on that role or nominate a discussion moderator to do the job. But you can also start to do some of this, as part of taking responsibility. You can:

• **Summarize** – by bringing all the important points together into an overview. A good summary will briefly highlight decisions and areas of agreement, and acknowledge individual contributions.
  
  Example of a summarizing comment:
  
  “Sue said ... and John made the point that ...”.

• **Refocus discussion** – by pulling the discussion back if it gets too far off-topic.
  
  Example of a refocusing comment:
  
  “We seem to be off-topic now...”

• **“Weave”** – by pulling different ideas together, looking for patterns, linking the discussion to course readings, identifying holes, opening up new directions for discussion, and moving on. Weaving goes beyond summarizing, and some discussions may need several “weaves” as they go along.
  
  Examples of “weaving” comments:
  
  – “We’ve looked at ... and ..., but there’s the whole issue of ... which fits in ...”
  
  – “When we talked about ... we thought that ... but I’ve just looked at an article which says ...”
  
  – “What if we took the idea of ... and applied it to ...”