Online Discussion Tips

How to Write Good Messages

Below are some tips for writing good messages. The responsibility for quality interaction online lies with all of the participants, not just one person. Take a look at the suggestions below and then write your message.

1. Limit your messages to 1-2 screen lengths.
2. Fill in the topic or subject line for each message.
3. Does your message relate to the topic of an existing thread (use Reply) or should you start a new thread (use Start a New Thread).
4. Remember that quality is better than quantity e.g. “Me too” and “I agree” type messages add very little to the discussion.
5. Quote the relevant part of a message in yours so that others know what you are referring to.
6. If your message is not relevant to the whole group, send it privately via email.
7. Ensure a respectful tone in all messages.

Interactive Learning Skills

Below are some suggestions for getting an online discussion to move forward. Using these techniques can lead to lively, fun and interesting discussions. The roles and responsibilities below need to be shared by all discussion participants. If everyone focuses on process as well as content, online discussions can reach their true potential as a vehicle for learning. How good are your online interactive learning skills?

1. Focus on the subject of the discussion and bring it back to the main purpose if there is a topic drift.
2. Suggest people take their messages to alternative places for the “off topic” messages – e.g. Coffee Shop, one more thing...
3. Encourage all to participate.
4. Summarize several messages and raise a new point or ask a question.
5. Add a new avenue of thought to the topic.
6. Respond to another classmates’ question.
7. Weave several messages together and then push the discussion further with a question or thought provoker.
8. Present another perspective on the issue being discussed.
9. Provide a practical application for an idea.
10. Be willing to participate in a debate.
11. Illustrate your point with a story (short).
12. Actively seek out other perspectives e.g. “This is what I think but I’m sure others have another perspective to share.”
13. Provide group regulatory functions e.g. perhaps we should continue this discussion in Coffee Shop OR we seem to be getting off topic here. Could we return to...

14. Assist in devising norms for improving group functioning e.g. “While I think you raise an interesting point worth exploring I think we should take this discussion to the... conference.

15. Accept and understand diversity in learning and personal styles. Respect different points of view.

16. Develop and be alert to the need for conflict resolution skills.

**Dealing with Conflict Online**

From time to time conflicts arise in Discussions. Here are some suggestions:

1. Did you have a strong reaction to a message? Take a step back. Write your response but don’t send it. Wait 24 hours. Have someone else read it first.

2. Is there another interpretation? Perhaps clarification is in order. While online interaction can enhance learning it has some limitations. Non-verbal cues are missing.

3. Politely agree to disagree and walk away.

4. Disagreements over points of view are a necessary part of learning but personal attacks on the motivations and intelligence of others cannot be tolerated. Remember that there are people behind the words that we see and treat others with respect we all want and deserve.