

## Strategies for Online Discussions

Discussions are an important part of learning. Through discussions, students develop content knowledge while also practicing valuable and transferrable communication skills. Discussions also foster a sense of community for the class, which is especially important in an online environment where learners and instructors don't occupy the same physical space. Although you're no longer meeting face-to-face, your class can continue holding discussions in an [asynchronous](#) format through the **Discussions** tool within your CourseLink website.

- **Create discussion forums and topics** as needed to organize class discussions. You might wish to organize discussions according to week, unit, assignment, and/or course topic. Refer to the [OpenEd Support & Documentation website](#) for information on how to [create a discussion forum](#), [create a discussion topic](#), and more.
- **Consider using group-restricted discussions** if you have a large class. Information on [creating and using groups within CourseLink](#) can be found in the [OpenEd Support & Documentation website](#).
- **Create an Ask Your Instructor forum** so that students have a place to post questions of a non-personal nature where all members of the course can benefit from the answer.
  - Clearly state your response time for questions that students post in Ask Your Instructor. If you will be unable to respond within that timeframe due to illness, technological barriers, etc., let students know the new expectation for response time.
  - Encourage students to read the questions and answers within this forum regularly, and before posting a new question. If you have already answered a question, direct students to find the answer within the forum.
  - Note: In an announcement or email, you should also inform students on how to reach the instructor or teaching assistants **in case of emergencies** (i.e., when response is critically needed within hours).
- **Provide clear expectations** for students regarding frequency, length, and content of discussion posts. If your face-to-face course included a graded "participation" component, you can continue to assess student contributions and participation through online discussions. Just be clear and consistent in communicating your expectations regarding graded discussions to your students. Information about assessing [online discussions](#) can be found in the OpenEd Support & Documentation website.
- Provide students with best practices for posting, such as:

- Give your posts brief but descriptive and intriguing titles (e.g. "argument in favour of raising minimum wage" instead of "my weekly post")
- Put forward an argument or question when posting
- Read others' posts and reply to your peers

You may also wish to refer students to the [University of Waterloo's Online Discussions: Tips for Students](#).

- **Create discussion prompts and/or questions** to get students started. Review Stanford University's advice on [Designing Effective Discussion Questions](#) for suggestions.
- As discussions occur, read all new postings and try to **show a daily presence** in the Discussions forums. Recognize that students will participate over the weekend.
- **Respond substantively** to all questions addressed to the instructor and comment on student postings when appropriate.
  - Be opportunistic in leveraging students' postings to confirm/rephrase views, request references/proofs, extend/direct the topic, stop digression/misunderstanding, prevent off-topic ranting, ask for relevant experiences, and to motivate students to think deeper and critically.
- Praise student insights and accomplishments publicly in the Discussions to **encourage wanted behaviours**.
- **Discourage unwanted behaviours** (not individuals) in public; connect privately using email to personally address individuals in advanced cases (e.g., disruptive behaviour to the class, or weaker language skills).
  - Postings, emails, and written communication in general may cause misunderstandings and ill-feelings. Reach out to students and try to resolve any problematic behaviour or sub-par performance issues in person, on the phone, or via web-conferencing software (e.g., Skype).
- **Provide a quick summary** to students in weekly [Announcements](#), highlighting any insightful postings.