



### Discussion Boards: Better Practices & Tips

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**Note:** Commonwealth University's Center for Teaching and Learning, the integrated name for the teaching centers on each campus, will be developing a single website during 2023. In the meantime, the Teaching Tips will be located at Bloomsburg's [TALE Website](#) (TALE is the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Center).

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Discussion Boards are very commonly used in asynchronous distance education, yet faculty also utilize them in face-to-face classes. As Mark Lieberman recently noted, "The goal that unifies all ...efforts [at using Discussion Boards,] **constructing a learning experience around collaboration as a means to deeper understanding.**" So, the question becomes, what are some best practices and what should we avoid in creating Discussion Forums? After sharing some general advice, several BU faculty will share examples of how they use Discussion Boards. TALE's organization in BOLT has more resources.

Make sure that you have developed a clear purpose for the Discussion Board. How will the forum contribute to your learning goals. Students' welcome **relevancy and transparency** so make sure they understand the purpose, and you will enjoy reading their posts if they have a **purpose**.

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Give students a chance to "practice" using the Discussion Board by sharing previous experiences with discussion boards, their challenges, and what they like about this type of forum.

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#### Scaffold Discussion Board Postings

Discourage students from posting 30 minutes before a deadline by creating a two-post cycle. An initial post would be followed a few days later by a second commenting or analyzing other students' post, substantiating their claims, elaborating upon what they have learned since the first post. Part of the scaffolding should ask students to comment, observe, analyze their classmates' posts, otherwise it's not collaborative.

#### Create an initial post:

- Ask students to anticipate an outcome of a problem.
- Ask students about their prior knowledge or perception on the topic.
- In what ways do they anticipate challenges in studying a new topic, course, or skill.
- Discuss how they believe the course content might be relevant to their lives or careers.
- Report and discuss on the struggles that they experienced reading an assignment.
- Discuss their initial thoughts on how they might conduct a lab experiment, tabulate data, conduct a research project, embark on a unit or capstone project.

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## **Making Discussion Boards Inclusive**, Jesse Stommel, University of Mary Washington

- Build a community of care.
  - Ask genuine, open-ended questions.
  - Wait for answers.
  - Let conversation wander.
  - Model what it looks like to be wrong and acknowledge when you're wrong.
  - Recognize that the right to speak isn't distributed equally.
  - Make listening visible.
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## **Second Post**

Since the Discussion Board intends to promote collaboration and deepen learning, then a subsequent post could require students to post recommendations, observations, useful tips, share information, etc. (how you frame it depends upon the initial question and your learning goals). The professor can gain valuable insight on student perceptions and respond individually or offer an "executive summary" that is referenced in the course.

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## **The Professor's Role**

- Pose open-ended questions, problems, challenges, application questions that require students to go beyond regurgitation of readings, lectures, etc.
- Depending upon the class size and your learning goals, consider early feedback to help students get on the right track.
- Hosting and participating in a discussion board is not equivalent to an in-class discussion; so be prepared to scale back on the quantity and emphasize quality.
- Consider providing a formula for students. Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, *They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*, acknowledge that every discipline has its own writing style. Graff and Birkenstein argue that we need to model effective academic writing, show them our key rhetorical moves. So, if we provide them a framework to practice, students learn sound rhetorical moves, that they might initially mimic, and then take ownership of it.
  - For example, if the Discussion Post asks students to analyze a monograph, we provide the framing: Author \_\_\_ contradicts herself. While she argues \_\_\_, she also implies \_\_\_. However, \_\_\_.
- Be clear about deadlines and encourage a norm where students do not post at the last minute. If you are teaching non-traditional students, who are working odd hours, take this into consideration when setting deadlines. Perhaps poll students early about what is working for them.
- Consider allowing students alternatives to written text; they can post images, videos, concept maps, PPT presentations. Charles Hodges, Georgia Southern University, dedicates two weeks to a module. Week 1 students respond to the initial prompt; week 2 students evaluate each other's work by comparing similarities and differences.
- Bonnie Budd, Bryant University uses a discussion post format called **3CQ**: "a compliment, a comment, a connection (3C) and a question (Q)."

## **Grading:**

- You may create a grading nightmare if you expect standard written English, so allow for informal writing.
- If you are using the Discussion Board to replace in class participation, you might consider grading with a plus-check-minus (range of points from full-passing-failing). Assign full points to posts that

not only draw upon assigned readings but show creative or critical thinking. Assign a passing grade to knowledgeable posts in which students may appear to struggle.

- If you provide a framework for how the posts should appear (see *They Say / I Say* above), then you can determine a grading scale based on their rhetorical moves, how well they support their claims, how well they used assigned sources in advancing their interpretation or argument.
  - Consider using a rubric. Samples in TALE's BOLT organization can be found in the Discussion Board module. Search the internet for samples.
  - Avoid basing the grade on word or character count. (Though you may want to impose a word limit to make the reading manageable.)
  - In the BU Faculty examples below, you will find Discussion Boards that require substantive work and thought. Note that they provide grading guidelines or rubrics.
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## **To Increase Student Engagement (Excerpts from Kathryn Schild, University of Alaska)**

### **Give Students a Variety of Prompts. Some ideas include:**

- Describe a process, either with a diagram, step-by-step instructions, or (captioned) video
- Take a picture/video of a real-world example, plus write a brief description explaining what it is and how it applies
- Post your questions (Use some as discussion or assignment prompts the following week, or discuss them a face-to-face/Collaborate class meeting)
- Compose your summary/thesis statement/critique/position/approach
- Write a "clickbait synopsis"/tabloid headline/dating profile/product review/advice column of this section/article/character/molecule/ process (Use the best for review sessions.)
- Read the case study, then write a possible diagnosis and a question you could use to test that diagnosis (Answer the questions based on the "actual" diagnosis, to help the class as a whole identify the underlying problem. This works especially well for non-medical issues.)
- Share observations, updates, and/or reflections on individual or group assignments, like research projects and field experiences
- Post and summarize a resource on this topic

### **Student Replies can take a Variety of Approaches. Some ideas include:**

- Write a possible test question based on a classmate's response
- Find examples from the text to support at least two other positions
- Find an example/case study/counter-example from a recent news article
- Use a classmate's position for a follow-up assignment
- Review a peer's draft work

### **Incorporate Discussion Board Postings Back into Class**

- Use discussion forums to generate new discussion topics, test questions, review materials
- Create a rated forum (Forum Settings, "Allow Members to Rate Posts") for questions and tell students to upvote the ones they share

### **Distribute Roles**

- Create groups in BOLT who either choose or are assigned a thread
- Roleplay scenarios – students post as stakeholders, authors, characters, skeptical colleagues, naive readers, et al.
- Debate or mock trial – pro, con, and judges
- Different responsibilities within a discussion – weekly facilitators, initial posts vs. replies

### Explore a Topic Rather than Soliciting Personal Positions

- Ask students to summarize source positions instead of taking their own
  - Give roleplay scenarios – students post as stakeholders, authors, skeptical colleagues, et al.
  - Ask students to present the part of a different position that they find most convincing/compelling (i.e., “if I change my mind, this would be why.”)
  - Have students try to expand each other’s position statements through questions and clarification, rather than directly debate
  - Use one of the techniques under “Distribute roles” (previous section) to structure the discussion more formally
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We **welcome additional examples** of how Commonwealth University Faculty are using Discussion Boards to promote Learning. Below is advice from BU faculty.

#### Christina Francis, English

- Create a Q & A Discussion Board Forum and Topic In this way, general questions can be posted and answered so that all students have answers to the information
- Create expectations for minimum number of posts for each assignment, both for initial posts and responses to peers
- Create expectations for what the content of the post should contain; this could include warnings about just posting 'way to go' responses to classmates, posts should contain substance, not just platitudes
- Faculty may want to disseminate guidelines for online discussion exchanges, such as "Please be aware of your language choices and tone when participating in online discussions. Electronic communication can provide excellent opportunities for more participation, but this form of communication can also be easily misinterpreted. We want to avoid such miscommunication and any accompanying hurt feelings."
- Depending on the size of the class, assigning students into smaller groups for discussion may be a better way to ensure all students are experiencing participation/response from peers

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## John-Erik Koslosky, Mass Communications

### Unit 5 Discussion assignment (MassComm 231 - Online Journalism)

Post due Oct 11 at 11:59 p.m.

Responses due Oct. 18 at 11:59 p.m.

**The basics:** For this discussion assignment, you'll begin to analyze a journalism website, with our goal of a robust discussion in two areas:

1. How different organizations are distinguishing themselves on the web
2. How journalism operations are thinking multi-media and mobile

Choose a site that has been a winner in one of the recent Online Journalism Awards contests. You can find recent years [here](#) and [here](#). These will be awarded on a **first-come, first-served basis**. So, if you see someone has posted about a site already, you'll need to choose another.

**The specifics:** For this post, get an overall feel for the visual aspect of the site, but try to zoom in on what you would consider an interesting or pronounced aspect. Address the two areas above. You may find it helpful to seek answers to the following questions:

- Examine the overall appearance of the site. What is the organization trying to say about itself with the look and feel of the homepage?
- How visible/pronounced are different forms of media on the homepage? Text, video, graphics? Why?
- Do they use prominent space to direct you to non-textual media, such as video or podcasts? Why?
- Look at the site on a desktop/laptop computer and on a mobile device. How does the experience match up/differ? Why might that be?
- What strikes you as most interesting about this site? Why?

**The writing:** Review the principles of web writing slides and start to apply some of those tips.

- Write tight.
  - As needed, break up ideas into separate sections.
  - Where appropriate, share images via screenshot and drag-and-drop or the "Insert image" function in D2L/BOLT
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## Angela Hess, Biological & Allied Health Sciences

Samples from Biology 205-Introduction to Nutrition

### Example 1:

Choosing nutrient dense foods is an important component to healthy eating. On page 3 of your lecture guide there is a segment called "Nutrition for Life" - Use this space to think about your last meal. List your last meal and next to each item indicate whether you think it is nutrient dense or not. For any food that is not nutrient dense, what nutrient dense food could you replace it with? To this discussion post - share your meal and your analysis with the class.

Respond to at least 2 other posts and provide additional ideas for swapping non-nutrient dense foods with nutrient dense ones.

For full credit, you must have your initial post by Wednesday 12/18 and your two replies completed by the due date; 12/21 by 11:30pm.

You must make your post before you can reply to a classmate's post.

A scoring rubric for discussion board posts can be found in the module "Discussion board grading rubrics".

### Example 2:

Now that we have spent some time learning about what constitutes a healthy diet I would like you to:

1. identify a healthful change that you would like to make with respect to your diet.
2. list at least 2 ways you could change either your food choices/habits in order to move toward this healthful change. Choose things that you feel you will be able to accomplish by the end of this course.

Respond to at least 2 posts - you could offer words of encouragement or provide additional suggestions for how to change to a healthier habit.

For full credit, your initial post must be completed by Thursday December 26th. Your responses must be posted by the due date; 12/28 by 11:30pm.

A scoring rubric for discussion board posts can be found in the module "Discussion board grading rubrics".

### Example 3:

View the Dateline NBC video on nutritional supplements. After having viewed this video, what are your thoughts/feelings about using nutritional supplements? Explain why you feel this way.

Your post should be thorough and thoughtful - this will require more than a 1 or 2 sentence post.

After you make your initial post, you must respond to at least two other posts.

For full credit, your initial post must be completed by Wednesday January 8th. Your two responses are due by the due date: 1/11 by 11:30pm.

A grading rubric can be found under the module "Discussion board grading rubrics".

**Rubrics are located in TALE Organization in BOLT → Content → Discussion Board**

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### Dennis Frohlich, Mass Communications

In spring 2019, Dennis created and moderated a Discussion Board on conducting Online Discussions. It included videos, rubric samples, and how to scaffold. BU faculty can access his resources by going to the TALE organization in D2L/BOLT and search content by "Discussion Board".

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### Rebecca Willoughby, English

#### Discussion Expectations (general, casual)

- Define the purpose of the Discussion Board. Are you generating ideas, responding to texts, posting questions for the consideration of others? Make that clear.
- Articulate the tone of the Discussion Board. Should students pay special attention to form, or is there a particular form you want their posts to take? Is the tone casual, or more formal? Should they be paying special attention to the writing itself (having a thesis, specific points, spelling, grammar, etc).
- Define clear expectations for student USE of the Discussion Board. Are they to be interacting with other posts, or just putting up their own posts? If you're after interaction, in my experience it's helpful to define how you'll evaluate that interaction—the number of posts, their quality, their content. Will you assign points just for completion, or are you going to be evaluating the posts themselves?
- Be organized: create forums and threads that connect directly with your course design, whether that's weekly, or by topic. Remember you can link Discussions to specific content areas in your BOLT course, assign due dates, open and close them at specific days/times. ***Any deadlines for posting should be prominently displayed in several places***—use the News feature, the module, etc.



- In an online ethics course, I taught recently, this was how I broke down their Discussion Board participation:

DB posts have a couple parts:

- *Your initial post—20 points possible.* These points are earned because you used the terminology from the ethical tools in the textbook in your response, because you've shown you understood and engaged with the scenario represented in the case study, and I can tell you've thought a little bit about the conflict or dilemma within the context of your own life, or the implications it might have for you or others. These should be 250 to 300 words, *minimum*. [You should type in Word and copy/paste into the DB box to gauge your word count, as D2L does not have a word count feature].
- *[At least] Two responses to others' posts—10 points possible for each.* These points are earned because you've read and responded to someone else's ideas about the situation at hand, because you've perhaps lent additional ideas and/or expertise or experience to that response, because you've shown a connection between your ideas, the week's material, and someone else's thoughts on that material. These responses can be as long as they need to be, but should be longer than a single sentence, and should be more in-depth than just "I agree with you."
- You may do more than two responses if you want, but you will not earn extra-credit for additional responses.

These videos also contextualize how students should be treating/speaking with each other in online, educational environments:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DwdqQjCfWSc>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tVqWcrMPxfY>

## Robin Drogan, Exceptionalities Programs

### Example 1:

Please write a discussion post to answer one of the following questions. Make sure that your post is a unique contribution and shares adequate information for us to understand your perspective.

1. What were some of the supports in place for Samuel that ensured that he was included successfully? In school and in the community?
2. Why is inclusion important for students without disabilities as well? How is this importance demonstrated in the film?
3. How do you define inclusive practice and name three ways that the film supports your perspective?

Once classmates have posted, please respond to at least two posts (if possible respond to a classmates post to question that you did not initially respond to).

### Example 2:

In your groups and based on the Chapters 1 & 2 reading, select three of the questions to focus on. Reflect by answering the question and responding to someone else in your groups post.

1. On pages 11 and 12 of your SEL textbook, choose the one most important summary tip and explain why you believe it is essential in an administrative position.
2. Provide an example of a related service and how it can support a child with a disability to receive FAPE.
3. Explain the significance of the term Least Restrictive Environment.
4. Give one example, a student with a disability may be removed to an alternate educational setting for 45 days, without regard to whether the behavior was a manifestation of the child's disability.
5. Give an example of an accommodation that you can implement for a student who is struggling with the following: organization; completing homework; focusing in class; etc.

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The Bloomsburg University Instructional Media and Design Center makes these resources available to students and faculty:

D2L/BOLT Help to Students who have been assigned a Discussion Board:

<https://bloomuimdc.freshdesk.com/support/solutions/folders/35000128496>

D2L/BOLT Help for faculty to create a Discussion Board:

<https://bloomuimdc.freshdesk.com/support/solutions/folders/35000200753>

My thanks to the faculty who sent me their ideas in the midst of preparing to teach through the disruption of the COVID 19 Pandemic: Christina Francis, Rebecca Willoughby, Angela Hess, Robin Drogan, Dennis Frohlich, and John-Erik Koslosky. We welcome adding more examples to colleagues from Commonwealth University.

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#### Sources:

Mark Lieberman, "Discussion Boards: Valuable? Overused? Discuss." *Inside Higher Ed*, 27 March 2019.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2019/03/27/new-approaches-discussion-boards-aim-dynamic-online-learning>

Kathryn Schild, University of Alaska, "Better Blackboard Discussions."

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