



Instructional Strategies for Online Discussions

FIRST-YEAR WRITING PROGRAM

Think Creatively! Online discussions are a springboard for imaginative ways of engaging students with course content while addressing specific learning objectives. Here are some examples:

- *Role-playing.* Assign each student a specific role, then give her/him a problem to solve or an issue to discuss. This form of collaborative problem solving and discussion deepens understanding of the issue.
- *Debate.* Divide students into small groups and ask each group to debate an issue. After a specified amount of time, assign new roles and new groups. Critique these debates in-class.
- *Electronic Journals.* Create a private discussion topic for each student in the course that is accessible only to the student and instructor. This forum can be used for reading responses, documenting field experiences, and for general reflections on learning.
- *Course Administration.* Use the discussion board as a place for course-related Q&A, and/or as a “bulletin board” where students can exchange news and other information.

Connect the Online Environment to Classroom Activities. Online discussions have the potential to engage students in active thinking and problem solving even after the class session has ended. You can maximize this potential in the following ways:

- *Keep track of questions or issues raised during class.* Use these as the basis for online discussions.
- *Challenge students to find answers to their questions through discussion.* Review these during the first ten minutes of the next class session.
- *Create a Course Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) list.* Instructors can use the discussion board to relate answers to questions that students routinely ask. Questions may relate to course administration (e.g., Can I use online sources for my term paper?), or to content (e.g., Where can I find more information about careers in this field?)

Make Sure Your Expectations Are Clear. Students will follow your lead; if you set expectations for frequency and quality of participation early on and enforce these expectations consistently, everyone will get more out of the online discussion. Here are a few things you can do:

- *Provide a rubric.* Determine what constitutes a high quality and a low quality discussion posting. Consider evaluating factors such as quantity, quality, style, etiquette, and substance. Distribute the rubric to students prior to the assignment.
- *Give examples.* Provide examples of high quality discussion postings and explain what makes the examples good.
- *Be consistent.* Though the assignment or topic of the discussion may change throughout the semester, keep consistent expectations about how students should participate.
- *Provide an in-class orientation to the discussion board.* If possible, reserve time in a computer lab and spend 15-20 minutes showing students how to post and read discussion board comments. Point out how you plan to organize online discussions.
- *Provide time/date restrictions on posting.* At least initially, provide a specific window of time during which students are required to post a new comment and/or a response. For example, “By Friday at 5pm, you must post one new comment, and respond to one comment.”