



Tips for developing discussion activities

General guide for designers and instructors

For Blackboard Vista 4.x

1. Wherever possible, integrate discussion activities with other learning experiences just as would be the case in tutorials or workshops. If students see it as an optional 'add on' to their 'normal' activities, participation is likely to be low. (This means allocating teaching time to the discussion activities.)
2. Structure your discussion activities. Use the 'topics' structure to set up your teaching. Topics can be based on specific content themes/areas, modules, weekly timetable, as well as more general themes/topics — such as 'Introduction/guidelines', 'Questions & answers', 'Course feedback', 'Quiz/assignment discussion', 'How to use Discussions'.
3. Plan for discussion tasks that will require thoughtful postings — i.e. tasks that:
 - have some complexity, ambiguity or numerous possible perspectives
 - are engaging and meaningful to students
 - are well matched to the unit's learning outcomes and assessment.

Examples include posting thoughts on a reading (e.g. journal article), poem, case study, situational problem.

4. Give involvement in discussion real value — either include participation as part of the overall assessment plan for the unit, directly assess the products of discussion, or otherwise have clear demonstrable links to assessment tasks. (See **Eight ways to incorporate online discussion into assessment**).
5. Plan to teach and support students in using Discussions. Build in opportunities in the first week or two of the course for students to use and become comfortable with the tool, including specific training and provision of support materials. Have simple introductory activities that test that students can read and post messages to the appropriate topic(s). (Your first topic might be a 'welcome').
6. For students who will not be meeting face-to-face, build in 'ice breaker' activities to ease students into the discussion setting (as well as test their competence in using the Discussions - see 5 above).
7. Make the expectations of participation clear and explicit to students. Consider:
 - student's expected time commitment
 - rules and guidelines for participation in discussion (netiquette etc.)
 - your proposed role and time commitment.
8. For effective group/collaborative discussion, keep the groups relatively small (5-7 students). With larger classes, break them into smaller groups and have them report back to the class as a whole where appropriate.

Need more information?

For more information see the following online modules and embedded tutorials: **Introduction to communication: Tools and strategies** and **Advancing communication and collaboration online**.