

Guidelines for Online Discussions

060618

What You Can Learn from Online Discussions:

The art of "civil discourse."

You will learn how to be more fully engaged in any sort of discussion—at work, at parties, with family members or friends. You will learn how disagree respectfully and to express your own views convincingly.

A deeper understanding of the topic under discussion and a clear grasp of what puzzles you.

Learning is a 3-step process: Puzzlement, Question, Answer.

Learning exactly what puzzles is you an often overlooked aspect of learning. It enables you to formulate good questions. Good questions enliven any discussion. And good questions are the only path to good answers.

The Main Guideline: Reflect!

Some online discussions rely on *chat* technology where the conversation is simultaneous. Others rely on *threaded* technology where the conversation spreads over days. (Called *synchronous* and *asynchronous*, respectively.) Since the chat version is little different from classroom discussions, the guidelines below focus only on the threaded version.

One outstanding advantage of *threaded* discussions is that every participant has ample time to research, reflect, and edit before posting a comment.

So the threaded version is more aptly called a *reflective* discussion. (*Threaded discussion* is how programmers design it; *reflective discussion* is how users experience it.) The basic guideline for participation is simple: *Reflect!* Take your time to consider the question at hand, identify exactly what puzzles you, do any research you feel is needed, and to formulate your questions and views as clearly and convincingly as you can.

Key Learning: Move the Discussion Forward!

The main advantage of online discussions is that they last an entire week, which helps you learn how to move a discussion forward on a

particular issue. It avoids assuming that an hour's discussion can resolve most issues. This skill can be quite useful even in your workplace and home. But this benefit requires some measure of involvement by each student over the full week.

What does it mean to "move a discussion forward"? There are two kinds of comments we make in any discussion. One is to *confirm* what has been said:

"Your idea about raising children really makes sense to me."

"Thanks for sharing what was certainly a painful experience."

The other is to deepen the discussion by *moving it forward*:

"Could you say more about what you mean by 'socialism'?"

"I'm puzzled about what I'm supposed to learn in the Dow Jones, Nasdaq, and S&P 500 numbers we see every day."

"Personally, I believe that Maslow's ideal of *self-actualization* is prone to reinforce the dysfunctional American ideal of *self-sufficiency*."

We can expect both types in online discussions. But one of the main benefits of reflective discussions is that participants not only *receive* new puzzlements, new questions, and new answers; they also *give* them by "moving the discussion forward."

Of course, the more important benefit is that you learn how to move a discussion forward. Learning how to do this will make you more effective and convincing in any discussion whatsoever.

Here are several ways to do this:

- When you express your opinion, support it in a way that will make others give serious thought to it.
- Express a different point of view, even if it's not your own.
- Express a disagreement, accompanied by an explanation.
- Present something that puzzles you. Yes, this means admitting your ignorance. But the more you avoid admitting your puzzlements, the more evidence you give intelligent people to regard you as unintelligent.
- Presenting something that puzzles you is a genuine contribution to any discussion. It prompts energetic participation by others and generates relevant questions.
- Express a new insight you had, accompanied by an explanation of what comment or text triggered it.
- Ask someone for further explanation and say why this will help you.

- Widen the context by introducing new puzzlements, new questions or perspectives that connect to the discussion. For example: move toward the practical, the professional, family, career, politics, ethics, or faith.

There are also ways to kill progress in a discussion:

- Think of it as an argument
- Aim to win
- Use words that are inflammatory or demeaning

When you sense an argument brewing, and people are digging in to protect their ground, aim to move the discussion forward by saying something like, "What we're trying to do here is to understand the issue better" and follow it up with an observation aimed to combine two apparently opposing ideas.

When others use inflammatory or demeaning language, just "walk away." That is, do not respond.

These strategies work almost anytime people get nasty.

Protocols

1. First word: *Puzzled* or *Jake*

When you express something that puzzles you, put "Puzzled:" as the first word in your posting. Other participants are usually eager to enlighten you.

If you are responding to a posting by Jake, put "Jake:" as the first word in your posting. It helps Jake notice that you're talking to him and helps others follow the thread. Also, re-state the part of Jake's opinion that you want to comment on: "Jake, you said that our college needs an art museum. To my mind, ..." (This saves others having to look back at Jake's posting.)

2. What you say should be completely clear to everyone. So proofread your postings to edit out any errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation, and capitalization.
3. When stating an opinion, back it up with reasons or with the sources you rely on. This is far more convincing than just strong language.

4. Show respect for positions you take issue with. Mention the merits of opinions you disagree with before pointing to their shortcomings.
5. Show respect for the dignity of persons or groups whose behavior or views you find offensive. State your criticisms fairly, and support them with evidence. (Inflammatory postings will be removed.)
6. If another student's posting seems deliberately sarcastic, demeaning or inflammatory, it is better not to respond at all.
7. If you want to thank or praise others, state why their posting is significant. (If *all* your responses to others are just a "Thanks" or "I like that," you are not moving the discussion forward.)
8. Avoid using rhetorical questions. These are not questions. They are opinions disguised as questions to stir discussion. They seldom lead directly to good answers. For example, notice how rhetorical questions stall a discussion:

How long can this continue?	<i>Two months.</i>
Can small businesses ever succeed?	<i>Yes.</i>
Don't you think he ignores the problem?	<i>No.</i>

9. Prefer questions that ask for clarification or explanation.

Clarification: "Angie, you mention 'taking care of Number One.' Did you mean this as a good thing or a bad thing?"

Explanation: "Joe, I like your point about earning the trust of your employees. What are some good ways to do this?"
10. When you cite a source, for this course it is sufficient to tell us where we can find it. This holds both for papers and discussion postings. When referring to outside sources, use any format—such as APA, MLA, or any variations you prefer. When referring to in-course sources, here are some examples:

- *A lecture:*
(Lecture on "Thinking about God," 5th paragraph)
- *An assigned reading:*
(Tolstoy's "Confession" in Doc Sharing," p. 5)
- *A student's posting:*
(Bob Sledder's posting 9/13/15)
- *An outside source listed as required or recommended reading:*
(Charles Taylor, "A Secular Age," p. 221)

- *An outside source not listed within the course:*
(Robert Alter, "The Psalms," W.W. Norton, 2007, Ps 147.)
 - *The Bible:*
Normally just the book, chapter and verse (Mt 13:23). If the translation is relevant, add it (Mt 13:23, *New English Bible*).
11. If you include an Internet link to a source, don't just recommend it. Tell us what we will find there. Explain what how the material there relates to the discussion. If the item is down a few layers from the home page, let us know where to click.
 12. Up to the second-last day of each unit, feel free to pose a question to anyone. Visit the discussion site on the last day to ensure that you have responded to any questions directed to you.

Evaluation

Failure to follow the above protocols may result in a loss of points. Besides these protocols, I will use the following guidelines for grading your postings:

Overall, the discussions benefit everyone only if everyone contributes at least some minimum. So, unless otherwise directed, join the discussions no later than Tuesdays, on at least three different days, and respond to at least two other students for each topic. (There will be usually just one or two topics). Since postings made after the end of the discussion on Friday are not part of the discussion, they will not count toward your grade.

- **Failure: (E):** No postings (0). Insufficient number of postings **and** failure to respond to the startup question (50%)
- **Inadequate (D):** Insufficient number of postings, or postings clustered on only one or two days. Postings that do not respond to the start-up question or to questions someone else asks you.
- **Adequate (C):** Minimally: Participation in the discussion on at least three different days. First posting by Tuesdays (unless otherwise indicated). Answers most parts of the startup question in the first posting. Simple agreement or disagreement. Or very brief postings. Or opinions without support.

- **Very Good (B):** Minimally: Meets participation criteria for “Adequate.” Additionally:
 - Makes direct reference to course materials (readings, lectures) when the content of a posting is either supported by or in opposition to them.
 - Responses to at least some other students go beyond simple agreement.
 - Very brief postings or opinions without support.
 - Answers all parts of the startup question in the first posting. Includes at least one posting that “moves the discussion forward.”
- **Outstanding (A):** Meets all criteria for “Very Good.” Additionally: In at least one posting, demonstrates critical thinking, cites additional sources, or adds to the class's body of knowledge.
 - Critical thinking may focus on legitimate vested interests of various authors or on some sort of illegitimate bias.
 - Citations of additional sources should explain what value they add to the discussion.
 - Adding to the class's body of knowledge may refer to data or commentaries that support or contradict some assumptions in the discussion. It also may be a specific suggestion to someone who seems interested in pursuing a certain line of thought.

Are these criteria for this class only? Not at all. The grade is a rough indication of how well you are learning how to carry on a reflective discussion with anyone, anywhere, anytime.

In this respect, imagine a verbal discussion going on about some topic, and notice how each criterion is a measure of how well anyone has learned how to discuss *reflectively*.

- Tad Dunne
 Professor of Humanities
 Siena Heights University

Any party is free to distribute, modify, or build upon this work. Entire copies or verbatim copies of major sections must clearly attribute its creation to myself.