# Tips for Facilitating Online Discussions

## Set clear expectations

- Providing structure, guidelines and clear expectations is important, particularly in situations where students may be new to online discussions.

- Set a start and an end date for each discussion and include one deadline early in the week for an initial post and one later in the week for additional posts and replies. That way the discussion has time to unfold as a real conversation—avoiding the possibility that many students may post everything at the last minute.

- Give points/credit for discussion participation and include a rubric, or just a list of grading criteria so students will know what you are looking for.

- Look for student posts that exemplify the qualities you're looking for in their responses to the prompt and to their peers.Point out specific positive qualities in several posts to give students a range of examples of different ways that a post can be exemplary.

## Write effective prompts

- Especially during an abrupt transition to remote instruction, as we are experiencing now, make your first online discussion a low stakes transitional conversation. For example, ask students about their expectations, concerns and prior experiences with online learning or ask them what's going on in their lives that they might want to share.

- Create prompts based on your learning objectives.
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- Aim to promote higher order thinking (analysis, evaluation, creation, etc.). Use Bloom's Taxonomy to write prompts.

- Design discussions that are relevant to your particular group of learners and the world they are living in. When appropriate, connect your prompts to current events and allow learners to draw on their prior knowledge and experience.

- Avoid yes/no and other close-ended questions that can have only one correct answer.

- Discussions can falter if the prompts are overly leading or too obvious or  if the learners can simply locate the answers in the text, rather than analyzing various sources, and injecting their unique perspectives to craft a response.

- Mix it up. Keep students engaged by giving them different types of activities in your discussion forums: e.g. case studies, debates, polls, role play, peer review, resource sharing.

- Create a "Student Lounge" (or other open topic) discussion forum where they can talk to each other about anything they want.

## Facilitate Successful Discussions

- Give students time and clear instructions about which course materials they should engage with before they participate in the discussion. Discussions often break down because learners haven't done the reading or work upon which the discussion is based.

- Decide what role you will take in the discussion and give students an idea of how often you will participate and in what ways.

- Participate so that learners are aware of your presence in the course. Learners will be usually take the discussion more seriously if you are a part of it.

- Email students individually who are not participating.

- To help get the discussion going early in the week, acknowledge those who post early and encourage others to jump in. You can even use the Announcement tool in Blackboard to send out a commentary to the whole class, highlighting any interesting points that have been made and urging others to jump in.

- Try posting a wrap-up post (in the forum or as an Announcement) that summarizes some key points or threads from the discussion, or adds something important that was not mentioned and possibly builds a bridge to their next learning experience

- A rubric will streamline the grading process for you. You may not have time right now to set up an interactive rubric in Blackboard, if that is new to you, but instructions are here.

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