

Online Discussions: Tips for Students

The point of a discussion is a back and forth conversation, rather than a show and tell of ideas. This is harder to do in an online setting. Here are some tips to help you achieve this goal.

Plan your posting. Think through your ideas, read other postings to see what others are saying, and address comments that support or contradict your ideas.

Turn your thoughts into questions. Make bold or provocative statements. Check back often to see what discussion you've generated and respond to it.

Add value. Say why you agree/disagree with other postings and explain your rationale. Raise some thoughts or questions for others to respond to.

Be concise. In general, short and sweet is best. Aim for short and purposeful postings – avoid repetition and lengthy explanations. Stick to one or two main points with supporting evidence in each posting.

Make the context clear. Be specific about what aspect of a posting you are responding to. [Paraphrasing provides feedback for the poster on how well ideas were communicated].

Use keywords in your posting titles. This can include the discussion thread title and a bit about the content of the posting [e.g., Discussion #3 Personality in Animals: Animals lack anatomical structure for personality].

Be open. Different perspectives are the point of discussions and can deepen your understanding of the issues being discussed. Difference of opinion is an opportunity for learning.

Feel free to change your mind. Take a stand at first, but realize that your ideas aren't permanent. Let the new information from the discussion modify your stand and say so when it does.

Feel free to disagree. Disagree with points, not people. Support your contradicting point with evidence. Debate makes for a very productive and meaningful discussion.

Avoid emotional posting. In the heat of the moment write up a response but don't send it. Wait a day or two then re-read your response and remove all the emotional statements. Stick to the main points and support your points with evidence from the lectures/readings.

Avoid sarcasm. It is easily misinterpreted in an online environment. Stay on topic, stick to the key issues raised and avoid personal judgments or emotional responses. If you are joking, use emoticons to convey the nature of the message.

Create cohesion and community. Get to know each other! A bit of friendly chit-chat and appropriate personal stories help your personalities shine through. Give positive feedback, use light humour, use first names, respond promptly, offer assistance, and avoid negative undertones.

Enjoy yourself! Online discussions will enrich your understanding of course material and foster co-operative learning with your peers. It is also an excellent forum for developing learning, communication, and social interaction skills that are valuable in all aspects of your life.

Educational Development
Centre
410 Dunton Tower
carleton.ca/edc

Phone: 520-4433
Fax: 520-4456
E-mail: edc@carleton.ca