# ONLINE DISCUSSIONS: TIPS FOR STUDENTS

To be successful in your online courses, you need to translate your face-to-face discussion skills to the online environment. Remember that online discussions are dialogues, not writing assignments. The following tips highlight key features of effective online discussion strategies.

## Think before you Write

Much of how we communicate online, particularly on social media, is more casual than course or classroom standards. Although being friendly to your classmates is a good thing in an online forum, maintaining decorum is also important. Avoid using common abbreviations that you might use in text messages, tweets and Facebook posts. Professors expect students to communicate the same way as if they were in class. Stick with complete sentences that are properly punctuated and spell-checked for accuracy.

## Use informative keywords in your title

To help the other participants, be sure that your title clearly indicates the content that will follow. "My ideas about today's readings" isn't nearly as clear as "Discussion #3 Personality in Animals: Animals lack anatomical structure for personality."

## Develop a thesis, argument or question

After you've done the required reading or task, think of a thesis and how to support it, then read the other postings and see how they support or contradict your idea, and write about this. Remember, though, that opinions aren't arguments. Be sure to support what you say with references to the course material or outside sources, such as readings or examples from experience.

## Make postings short, clear and purposeful

Long messages are difficult to read online. In general, write one or two meaningful paragraphs (25-50 lines of text). Another good rule is to make only one main point in each posting, supported by evidence or an example. Keep your post relevant to the material being discussed. **Be concise.**

## Add value to the conversation

Saying "I agree" does not move the discussion forward. Ask yourself why you do (or do not) agree and explain your rationale. Raise some thoughts or questions for others to respond to. Examples of probing questions could be: What reasons do you have for saying that? What do you mean by that? Could you clarify what you mean by that?

## Feel free to disagree with classmates

Don't be afraid to offer a different point of view or constructive criticism to another student's post. Individual perspectives are invaluable to the discussion process and differences of opinion can deepen your understanding of the issues being discussed.

Remember to disagree respectfully and support your point with evidence. Your contribution should help make the discussion more productive for all involved.

It is important to be cognizant of how your words might be construed on a screen compared with in-person. Online communication lacks the context that is conveyed by tone, voice and body language. Think before you type and pause before you post.

In the same sense, students should avoid confrontational statements and not allow themselves to be drawn into heated back-and-forth arguments or discussions. Stay on topic, stick to the key issues raised and avoid personal judgements or emotional responses.

## Get to know each other!

A bit of friendly chit-chat can help your personalities shine though. Give positive feedback, use first names, respond promptly, and offer help to those who need it.

## Subscribe to Alerts

It can be frustrating to read through a busy discussion forum with lots of posts and replies. Make sure to create new threads if new topics evolve in the discussion. "Subscribing" to receive email alerts or push notifications of new postings can help you keep up with the conversation without checking back into the discussion forum repeatedly.

## Enjoy yourself!

Online discussions will enrich your understanding of course material and foster co-operative learning with your peers. It can be a useful part of enhancing your learning, communications skills and social interaction which can help you succeed in your course.