

# Facilitating Online Discussions

Using online discussion boards is a great way to encourage class participation and allow students to express themselves in a different way. Below are some considerations for creating boards and facilitating discussions, and some guidelines for use that you may wish to share with or adapt for your students.

## Creating Discussion Boards

- For information on the technical aspects of setting up a discussion board, please see the Avenue wiki at <https://wiki.mcmaster.ca/avenue/discussions>.
- Consider the purpose of a discussion board. Is it to replace in-class participation? A place to ask questions or engage in wide-ranging conversation? Are students required to post or is participation supplemental? Will you assess participation, and if so, how?
- Consider the range of Avenue permissions you might grant to students. It is generally not advisable to allow anonymous posts (although Avenue does allow for this feature), but you may wish to consider whether a moderator needs to approve each post and whether users can start threads of their own.
- Some students may not want their legal name to be displayed to their peers. While Avenue does not allow students to change their display name, students can add a preferred name through Mosaic by going to Student Centre > Names. This will trigger a change in Avenue. It is helpful to tell students about this feature when introducing the discussion boards in order to mitigate privacy concerns.

## Facilitating Discussions

- Share your thoughts about how you expect students to use discussion boards and how their participation contributes to their ability to meet course outcomes. Communicating the value of this type of participation helps students understand how it fits into the broader course context.
- Be explicit about your expectations about how students use language. People communicate virtually differently than they do in face-to-face interactions and may be accustomed to using slang or less formal linguistic constructions. You may have different expectations for a course devoted to grammar, for example, than a creative writing course.
- To create a sense of community, consider posting an introductory thread so people can get to know each other a bit more. You might provide a few prompts that ask people (including the instructional team) to share something non-academic about themselves, such as their favourite book or movie. You can also suggest (but should not require) that everyone share a photo of themselves.
- As in any learning environment, it is always helpful to establish from the outset that disrespectful or prejudicial comments are not appropriate and will be removed. If you

do remove content, it is ideal to also follow up with the student who posted it to discuss the situation.

- Your active participation in discussions enhances instructor presence and encourages student participation. You do not need to respond to every post, but you might consider aiming to engage with each student a certain number of times each term or to make sure you post at least once on each thread.
- See this resource from the Association for Psychological Science:  
<https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/five-tips-for-improving-online-discussion-boards>.

## Guidelines for Students

- If you wouldn't say something while standing in front of someone, it probably makes sense not to say it online either.
- It can be hard to determine tone online. What you may mean as a joke or sarcasm might be interpreted as meanspirited. This doesn't mean you can't use humour, but try to consider how others might feel if they don't think it's funny.
- You may disagree with or not understand content in another person's post. That's normal! When responding, it's best to try to engage with the idea rather than the person. For example, instead of saying "what you wrote doesn't make sense," you could say "that idea is confusing to me" or "I'm having trouble understanding what you wrote."
- Before asking a question, consider reading through other posts to see if another person has asked or answered the same query.
- When responding to another post, it can be helpful to quote some or all of the text so it is clear what you are referring to.
- For additional tips, see this resource from George Mason University:  
<https://writingcenter.gmu.edu/guides/guidelines-for-posting-to-discussion-boards>.