Best practices for discussion forums
Use the following strategies and resources to maximize learning in your class’s discussion forums.

Before class begins

Getting started
- Understand that research suggests online discussions can be more inclusive for ESL speakers, women, minorities, shy students, and students who have difficulty speaking in front of a group (Wright & Street, 2007)
- Approach with the mindset that online discussions are informal, low-stakes writing assignments
- Think about what instructor and student roles and responsibilities will be in the discussion; define these in the syllabus and reiterate on the first day of class
- Decide on a grading strategy, recognizing that grading participation (and/or responses) motivates students to interact:
  - Integrate forum responses into higher stakes writing assignments as drafts
  - Grade students on a small number of posts and responses they select as their best
  - Set up a system for peer interaction and evaluation as graded participation so students practice recognizing characteristics of good online discussions
  - Provide participation points for posts and responses, optionally adding these to the Sakai gradebook
- Explicitly connect discussion topics to learning objectives and course activities

Setting expectations
- Clearly define in the syllabus expectations for the quantity and quality of posts
- Provide a rubric with graded posts
- Establish ground rules on etiquette; provide examples
- Give students “advice from previous students” on how to do well in online discussions

Setting up forums
- Create discussion topics using the Sakai Forum tool (not the Discussions and Private Messages tool) to allow for threading and easier grading
- Create a forum specifically for administrative questions about the course
- Make the first topic a space for structured personal introductions to build class community
- Create deadlines to help students keep the discussion moving (ex: post by this date, respond to “x” number of others by this date)
- Break students into groups of 4-12 and create a forum for each group

During class
- Post responses that reinforce to students that they have the responsibility to maintain the discussion activity
  - Interact as another learner, rather than an authority
  - Monitor and interact with the discussion every few days (not every day) to allow students to lead
  - Contribute probing questions as responses to posts to model critical thinking
  - Reach out directly to the quieter students and ask them to contribute their perspectives
- Integrate online discussions into classroom discussions
During class (continued)

- Use Sakai forum settings to require students to post before reading others’ posts for their first response to a discussion prompt
- Continue giving students opportunities to learn what constitutes a good online discussion
  - Highlight good posts early in the semester
  - Set up a forum topic where students post their own ideas about what constitutes a good discussion post
  - Have students do anonymous, ungraded assessments of peer postings using a grading rubric
  - Consider assigning students roles within a discussion group (ex: facilitator, investigator, provocateur, devil’s advocate, synthesizer, summarizer)
- Explicitly connect discussion topics to learning objectives, or ask students to make this connection
- Address inappropriate comments as soon as possible, offline and directly to the student
- Have students post synthesis and summary statements to close out a discussion thread

Additional resources

Consultations
- To think about how you might apply these strategies in detail, set up a consult with the Center for Faculty Excellence: cfe@unc.edu

Facilitator resources
- Facilitating Online Discussions – UNC Chapel Hill
- Generating & Facilitating Engaging and Effective Online Discussions – University of Oregon
- Mastering Online Discussion Board Facilitation – Edutopia

Student resources
- Writing a Successful Discussion Post – Walden University
- Writing a Successful Response to Another’s Post – Walden University

Reference