GRADING ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

INTRODUCTION

Discussions are a very common part of online courses. They are one of the primary ways for engagement and interaction to occur online. With an online discussion, the instructor provides a prompt that students respond to. A good prompt is essentially a question or problem that does not have one correct answer and is open-ended. Students then post their initial responses to your prompt and follow up with reply posts to classmates throughout the discussion period. A single discussion period is often about one week. This length allows time for students to make their initial post and then follow up with replies to other students in a timely manner to keep the discussion lively.

USING RUBRICS TO GRADE

To keep the quality of contributions high, you need to set clear expectations, and students need to understand the importance of their participation. You can accomplish both of these things and make grading discussions much easier by creating a rubric.

General categories of rubrics for online discussion are:

- Frequency and deadlines
- Format and writing
- Content
- Attitude and spirit
- Teamwork and peer review

### Frequency and deadlines

Discussion posting frequencies and deadlines are typically assessed in online teaching. Usually, an instructor will ask students to post their initial opinions or thoughts by a certain deadline and then also require that each student respond to at least two other students’ postings within a designated time frame.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rubric category</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency and deadlines</td>
<td>• Number of initial postings&lt;br&gt;• Number of responses&lt;br&gt;• Discussion time frame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Format and writing</td>
<td>• Writing skill&lt;br&gt;• Organization&lt;br&gt;• Vocabulary&lt;br&gt;• Grammar&lt;br&gt;• APA, Chicago, or MLA</td>
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Many institutions emphasize improving students’ writing skills throughout the course of study. Writing format, organization of information, and proper citations are also frequently required by the instructor in online courses, and can be assessed in online discussions. Of course, you’ll want to clearly outline your expectations about format and writing in the rubric if they are a significant part of the activity.
### Rubric category

#### Content

Content has large weight in discussion rubrics. Instructors ask students to write their statements, thoughts, and ideas on a specific topic while providing supporting materials in details. Frequently, instructors will ask students to provide examples to support their statements and ideas in both original postings and responses to other students’ postings. These requirements help students to learn from their peers. The rubric should clearly state what level of detail you expect.

- Complete information on a specific topic
- Details and examples
- Constructive responses

#### Attitude and spirit

Discussion in online courses also needs to be monitored to maintain a positive learning environment for all the students. You can include these expectations in a rubric.

- Being positive
- Meaningful discussions or sharing of ideas

#### Teamwork and peer review

For certain discussion topics, it will be ideal to create small groups and allow students to collaborate in group discussion areas. For example, with some discussion topics, an instructor may want students with similar interests and career goals to have in-depth discussion. However, for certain topics, the instructor can group students from different backgrounds together so that they can have a wider discussion and help each other expand their horizons. In each of these cases, a peer review process should be used to ensure student participation in the group discussion. Check with your instructional designer about the details of using a peer review process.

### Grading Tips

Here are some tips to help you manage your own workload regarding discussions:

- Give solid feedback to students early in the semester.
- The instructor is not required to read every post.

### Additional Resources


### Other Types of Discussion

Discussion in online courses can be used in many different ways. These include:

- Student self-introductions
- Questions for the instructor
- Off-topic conversations
- Sharing projects