UNIVERSITIES OF WISCONSIN

OFFICE OF ONLINE & PROFESSIONAL LEARNING RESOURCES

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

Tips for Creating Rubrics

- Define measurable rubric categories for your online discussion.
- Define expected results for different levels in each category.
- Share rubrics prior to the discussion.
- Use rubrics to reduce the grading time.

Rubric Category	Criteria
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.	• Number of initial postings • Number of responses • Discussion time frame
Format and writing	
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.	• Writing skill • Organization • Vocabulary • Grammar • APA, Chicago, or MLA

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.

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

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Liu, S., & Liu, S. (2007). Assessing Online Asynchronous Discussion in Online Courses: An Empirical Study (Vol. 2007, pp. 24–32). Presented at the TCC - Teaching Colleges and Community Worldwide Online Conference.
- Kanuka, H., Rourke, L., & Laflamme, E. (2007). The influence of instructional methods on the quality of online discussion. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, *38*(2), 260–271. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8535.2006.00620.x.
- Wyss, V. L., Freedman, D., & Siebert, C. J. (2014). The Development of a Discussion Rubric for Online Courses: Standardizing Expectations of Graduate Students in Online Scholarly Discussions. *TechTrends*, *58*(2), 99–107.