



An Introduction to Forums

Forums are used for asynchronous discussions between the Instructor and the students. In an online or blended course, appropriately used forums build a sense of commitment and community and allow students to reflect on and apply course material. General forums can also provide a place for students to post technical and content-related questions and clarify assignments.

Why Use Them?

- Allows students time for reflection, leading to deeper responses
- Increases participation and accountability
- Provides a record of thought processes and changes in these over time
- Provides opportunity for individualized personal student contact
- Can foster more productive in-class discussions
- Increases student writing

Forum Types

Type	Description	When to Use
A single simple discussion	Just a single topic, all on one page. The first posting, at the top of the page, is the topic for the forum, usually created by the Instructor. The students then post replies under this topic.	<p>A single-topic forum is most useful for short, highly-focused discussions. Can be used for review before a test. Post a list of possible questions. Each student must answer a certain number of questions. Each question can only be answered once, but students can add to another student's initial answer.</p> <p><i>Groups</i></p> <p>Single simple discussions cannot be set to separate groups. They can be used with visible groups. If separate groups are desired, a standard forum should be used, with the instructor copying and pasting the same discussion topic for each separate group.</p>
Standard forum for general use	Anyone can start a new topic and reply to existing postings at any time.	Create a standard forum at the start of the semester to allow students to ask and answer questions about anything related to the class. Most useful for large discussions, but be prepared to monitor, summarize, redirect, etc. to ensure students stay on track. Often used at the start of the course as an icebreaker where

Type	Description	When to Use
		the beginning of a class to post a welcome, introduce yourself and ask students to introduce themselves.
Standard forum in blog-like format	A standard forum displayed in a way that imitates online blogs.	
Each person posts one discussion	Each student can create one and only one new topic. Everyone can reply to this topic. Students are not limited in the number of responses to others.	Gives the students a little more freedom than a single discussion, but not as much as the standard forum. Can be used for peer review- each student posts their work in a new topic and the others provide feedback. Can also be used as a journal when each student is in a group of one. Also useful when you want one student to start a discussion or pose questions on a topic and everyone else responds.
Q and A forum	This is like a single-topic forum, in that the teacher creates the topic for the forum. Students then reply to that topic. By default, a student cannot see anyone else's reply until he/she has posted a reply. Caveat: Students have 15 minutes after submitting their posts to edit. They can use this time to look at the other posts, and then edit their own post.	Use when you want to pose a question and encourage the students to think independently and originally, without being influenced by other responses. <i>Tips</i> You <i>must</i> post your original question using the "Add a New Discussion" button after creating the forum. Do not post your question in the forum summary because every student answer will become a new discussion thread and visible to all students.

Forums and Groups

If you have set up separate groups for your forum, you must post your question **as a new discussion to each of the groups** and not to 'all participants'. To do this, select a group from the dropdown menu. Then use the "Add a new Discussion" button and copy/paste your prompt. Repeat for all groups. If the forum is set to "all participants" students in separate groups will not be able to reply.

If using visible groups, you may pose a question for all participants, but they will see the responses from all groups. They can only reply to discussions/responses started by their group members or the instructor.

What Makes a Good Forum Question

How do you ask a question to elicit the level of thought and interaction that you want to achieve? A well-defined question can help students recall and understand content not only on a basic level, but can also guide students to higher level thinking such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Good forum questions should be specific but open ended, exploratory, require students to think about and question what they believe, what they know, why they know it, and what they don't know. In other words- they encourage students to connect the course material to prior knowledge and experience.

Question types

Bloom's Taxonomy of cognitive levels can guide you in developing your Forum questions. Higher level thinking occurs with higher level questioning. The levels are below, ordered from the lowest to highest levels.

Factual- a list of factual questions posted in a forum can help students review for a test, ensure they have read material on schedule or check their understanding of the text in a more relaxed manner than testing.

Start factual questions with: Identify; Recall; List; Define; Label; Describe; Who; What; Where, etc.

Comprehension -use comprehension questions to encourage students to make meaning from the content. Ask questions that encourage them to translate the information into a new form or apply the concepts to a new situation/case/example in a way that demonstrates their understanding.

Start with:

- State in your own words
- Explain in 50 words or less...
- Compare x to y
- Give an example of...
- Summarize the paragraph/article/reading
- What is the author saying about...
- Is x the same as y?

Application – allows students to practice and explore new concepts, solve problems and apply what is learned to new situations.

Start with:

- What might/would happen if...
- Discuss the effects of...
- Relate the ideas of x to y...
- How would you use this information to.....

Analysis - ask students to look at the relationships between and among concepts, ideas and facts.

Start with:

- Distinguish between...

- Compare and contrast....
- What is the relationship between...
- What is the main theme...
- Identify the differences...
- What assumptions or motives or conclusions exist....
- What is the problem, what are some solutions, what is the best solution...

Synthesis – this is where creativity thinking comes in. Learners generalize from known facts, incorporate knowledge or information from multiple sources and draw conclusions- creating new ideas.

Start with: Combine, construct, design, develop, create, compose, invent, integrate, improve, rewrite, plan

Evaluation – this is judgment, which includes recognizing subjectivity, verifying the value of evidence, and making choices based on logic.

Start with: Convince, defend, judge, critique, hypothesize, support, recommend, conclude...

Try This!

- Take a core concept that you want students to really understand. Put your students into groups of three. Create a forum, using the single, simple discussion type. Assign one student from each group to develop the initial post, stating what they know about that concept, why they know it, and what they wish they knew. The next person to reply then responds and expands on to the post of the first student, sharing their knowledge and beliefs. The last student adds on, and then summarizes the whole discussion with the key take-aways. This can be useful as a way to gauge and activate student’s prior knowledge of a topic before introducing it in a lecture or reading or as an informal post-assessment.
- Use the forum to create an FAQ page for support and help.
- Use forums to make links, documents, resources available to just the students in one group.
- Create a forum for project groups (group mode of “separate groups”) to use as a collaborative space where they can share their idea, resources, etc. without allowing people not in the group to distract or copy ideas. Use a wiki for the final content.

Strategies for Optimizing the Quantity and Quality of Forum Participation

In order to get students to participate in a forum discussion, you will need to include the forums in your grading. But how do we encourage and guide students to go beyond mere participation and make meaningful contributions to the forum discussions?

1. Give students a list that describes what distinguishes a contribution from mere participation.
 - Provide recapitulations and summaries
 - Make observations that integrate concepts and discussions
 - Cite *relevant* examples
 - Ask key questions that promote thought and lead to additional relevant discussion
 - Act as devil’s advocate

- Disagree with the instructor or other students in ways that stimulate further questioning, exploration and understanding
2. Be sure the forum discussion is essential to help learners achieve course goals. No one needs busy work.
 3. For some discussions, assign students to act as a lead, starting and monitoring their group's discussions and summarizing for other groups.
 4. Provide clear, detailed instructions to the students on how they should reply, forum etiquette, your grading of the forums, etc.
 5. Explain what a good post contains and doesn't contain. Provide examples.
 6. Use the appropriate forum type to achieve what you want.
 7. Use groups. You should not have more than 6-7 students per group to maximize interactions.
 8. Give students choices. For example, provide three questions and have the students respond to one.
 9. Provide detailed individual feedback to your students after the first discussion. As the weeks progress, your feedback can be less.

Examples:

"Your primary postings demonstrated a good understanding of this week's topic and were contributed early on in the week, sparking discussion by others. Your two responses to your group members were thoughtful and positive. I especially liked the question you posed back to....."

"Your posting this week could have been improved by including a more substantive response to the question. For example, you could have addressed....."

Resources and References

Developing Great and Effective Questions: in Designing for Learning, by Dr. Boettcher

<http://www.designingforlearning.info/services/writing/ecoach/tips/tip3.html>

What Makes a Good Discussion Post: in Designing for Learning, by Dr. Boettcher,

<http://www.designingforlearning.info/services/writing/ecoach/tips/tip33.html>

Digital Approaches Appropriate for each level of Bloom's Revised Taxonomy

<http://nbccffcoach.wikispaces.com/file/view/Revised+Bloom%27s+Taxonomy.pdf>

Introduction to Crafting Questions for On-line Discussions: Penn State Learning Design Community Hub: http://ets.tlt.psu.edu/learningdesign/crafting_question

Threaded Discussions and Knowledge Construction: Designing for Learning– Judith Boettchner

<http://www.designingforlearning.info/services/writing/ecoach/tips/tip34.html>