

# Online Discussions Doctor

13 FIXES FOR YOUR FORUM FAILS



The Center for Digital Learning & Innovation

**SEATTLEU**



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## How to use this book

### Purpose

The Online Discussions Doctor is a diagnostic tool for improving lackluster asynchronous, forum-based discussions. It's intended to help you answer the question, "Why aren't my online discussions as lively, fruitful, and deep as my classroom discussions?" This tool can also serve as a guide even if you're completely new to facilitating online discussions. The "remedies" for preventing forum fails are summaries of best practices based on educational research. Browsing through the ailments and their remedies will familiarize you with common pitfalls and strengths of online discussions, even if you don't yet have a particular nagging online discussion problem.

We are happy to sit down with you and walk through the material below or feel free to peruse these resources on your own and let us know if you have any questions. Just contact us at [cdli@seattleu.edu](mailto:cdli@seattleu.edu) to set up a consultation or find answers to your questions.

### Browsing the Document

The [Table of Contents](#) provides hyperlinks so you can jump directly to each section. In addition, the top of each section contains hyperlinked breadcrumbs to help contextualize the ailment/remedy, and for quick browsing between sections.



## I. Students don't participate in the ways I'd like

*Do students tell you that they don't get anything out of the discussions? Do you find that the student's posts lack depth?*

*Have you noticed that students aren't comfortable interacting with each other when discussing difficult topics? Are some students using strong language that shuts down conversation? Do a few students rarely receive responses from their classmates? Are student responses impersonal?*



**AILMENT: Students don't grasp important aspects of the topics that were discussed**

## REMEDY: Synthesize the Discussion

Post an announcement that summarizes the "lessons learned" and "muddiest points" in a discussion. This allows you to acknowledge any particularly valuable student contributions. Praise and recognition builds a sense of community in your course by demonstrating that student contributions matter.

### RESEARCH

- [Cutting the distance in distance education: Perspectives on what promotes positive, online learning experiences](#)



**AILMENT: There aren't connections between discussions and the rest of the course**

## REMEDY: Outcome Alignment

Connect online discussions with your overall course learning outcomes, course activities, and summative assessments. Online discussions can be a space for students to respond to course readings before having to apply concepts from the readings in later activities (group work, papers/projects, etc.). They are also a great place for students to share draft work and get feedback from their peers in preparation for an upcoming assessment (i.e., term paper, or creative project).

### RESEARCH

- [Bloom's Taxonomy](#)
- [Collaborative Learning: Group Work](#)
- [Problem-Based Learning](#)
- [Learning Effectiveness Online: What the Research Tells Us](#)



## **AILMENT: Student posts are short and uninspired**

### **REMEDY: Get Creative**

There are a variety of formats that discussions can take, each of which supports different levels of rigor in student thinking. For example, do you want students to apply a concept? Critique an event? Evaluate a piece of text? Collaborate with peers to create a final product? Even a standard discussion design where you write a prompt and students respond to you and one another, the questions you pose can be interpretive, subjective, evaluative, diagnostic, and/or meant to facilitate brainstorming.

#### **RESEARCH**

- [The Art of Asking Questions](#)
- [What the Best College Teachers Do](#)



## **AILMENT: Students aren't engaging with difficult topics**

### **REMEDY: Push Boundaries**

Start your course by encouraging students to push themselves and take risks with their discussion posts. To make this process more familiar, ask students to draw upon their unique perspectives. This approach requires you to address misconceptions, as students are actively attempting to construct new understandings through their conversations. It's also important for you to clearly articulate your guidelines for the discussion itself, regardless of the level of creativity you employ in your designs.

#### **RESEARCH**

- [Pedagogical Uses of Discussion Forums](#)
- [Engage Students with Online Discussions](#)
- ["Chain-Linked" Discussions](#)
- [Instructor and Student Expectations for Communication](#)
- [Enhancing Discussions in the Asynchronous Online Classroom: The Lack of Face-to-Face Interaction Does Not Lessen the Lesson](#)





## **AILMENT: Posts are based on opinion; analysis is missing**

### **REMEDY: Teach Critical Thinking**

Students may not have enough experience evaluating arguments to guide the development and explanation of their beliefs. In other words, they need help thinking critically. You can encourage students think more deeply in online discussions by formulating rich, open ended discussion prompts and, importantly, probing students to clarify or provide evidence to support their claim or analysis. Be careful, though, as students may start to depend on your probing questions if you intervene too often. Give them time to reflect on your few, highly purposeful, neutral, and probing discussion replies.

#### **RESEARCH**

- [Universal Intellectual Standards](#)
- [Move over Socrates: Online Discussion is Here](#)
- [The Art of Asking Questions](#)
- [Encouraging Critical Thinking in Online Threaded Discussions](#)



## **AILMENT: Inappropriate language, themes, and/or bullying occurs**

### **REMEDY: Define & Maintain Civil Discourse**

Dedicate time at the start of your course to communicating the norms and expectations that students should follow so your class can engage deeply and collectively deliberate on course topics. This conversation is important whether or not course topics are seen as controversial, as issues with group dynamics can influence students in any class. Consider assigning a reading about inclusivity and then ask students to propose and build their own “course charter” with consequences. This can be referenced when agreed upon norms have been breached.

#### **RESEARCH**

- [Inclusive Pedagogy Toolkit](#)
- [Netiquette: Make it Part of Your Syllabus](#)
- [Creating Inclusive College Classrooms](#)
- [Notes on Class Discussions](#)
- [Dialogue Across Difference](#)



## **AILMENT: Many students don't receive any responses**

### **REMEDY: Encourage Inclusivity**

Some students may not receive responses to their posts or questions from classmates, which may cause them to become discouraged and drop out of discussions altogether. In your course announcements, make sure to point this out and encourage students to respond to their "orphaned" classmates.

Also, make it a point to send encouraging messages to less active students when you see them participate in meaningful ways.

#### **RESEARCH**

- [Enhancing Discussions in the Asynchronous Online Classroom: The Lack of Face-to-Face Interaction Does Not Lessen the Lesson](#)



## **AILMENT: Responses rarely include personal experience**

### **REMEDY: Start with Building a Community**

Devote one question during the first week for all students to introduce themselves and share their personal pronouns. Consider assigning introductory video posts, as most LMS platforms include webcam integration. Collect, consolidate, and share a summary of all students in the class (including pictures, workplaces, experiences, interests, etc.). This “cheat sheet” will also help you ask students specific and/or customized follow up questions.

#### **RESEARCH**

- [Demonstrate Relevance](#)
- [Balancing Quality and Workload in Asynchronous Online Discussions: A Win-Win Approach for Students and Instructors](#)



**AILMENT: Conversations are chaotic; it's like everyone is talking at once**

## REMEDY: Split Students into Groups

Smaller discussion group sizes (4-6 members) positively impact student learning. This is especially true when you assign student groups specific tasks such as real life problem solving, gathering evidence, etc. Consider assigning specific roles to mitigate issues with unequal contributions. Smaller groups support increased learning when team members are invested in a common goal with mutual benefits—such as preparing something to later present the class. In addition to these intrinsic motivators, individual accountability can be supported by clear evaluative measures. Students can also use your rubric for self and peer evaluations.

### RESEARCH

- [Pedagogical Uses of Discussion Forums](#)
- [Engage Students with Online Discussions](#)
- [Online Discussion Boards & Rubrics](#)
- [Fostering knowledge construction in university students through asynchronous discussion groups](#)



## II. Online discussions are too time consuming

*Find yourself grading online discussions late into the night? Do you find yourself leading all the online discussions in your course? Does it seem like you have to read and respond to every student post to make sure online discussions go well?*

*Are students posting at the last minute before the due date? What can you do to help them better manage their time so they devote adequate time to online discussions?*



### **AILMENT: Grading takes forever**

## **REMEDY: Use Rubrics**

Rubrics communicate expectations for participation and streamline grading. Students can use your rubric to self assess or review peer contributions as well.

### **RESEARCH**

- [Online Discussion Boards & Rubrics](#)
- [Using Rubrics to Promote Thinking and Learning](#)
- [Rubrics for Designing and Evaluating Online Asynchronous Discussions](#)



## **AILMENT: I am leading every discussion**

### **REMEDY: Let Students Lead**

Assign one or two students to lead a discussion (or discussion group) and write a summary of the lessons learned to share with the rest of the class. This will build intrinsic motivation for students, as they are asked to assume more ownership over the discussion. They can even grade each others' work.

Make sure to provide students with guidance on what makes a good discussion prompt (i.e., open ended questions that can have multiple interpretations or solutions). Use the Question Formula Technique (QFT) for a step by step process for helping students formulate their own questions.

#### **RESEARCH**

- [Student Discussion Facilitators](#)
- [The Right Questions](#)
- [Should You Let Students Lead Discussion Boards?](#)
- ["Chain-Linked" Discussions](#)
- [Beyond Student Perceptions: Issues of Interaction, Presence, and Performance in an Online Course](#)
- [Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions](#)



**AILMENT: Reading and responding to every post is a waste of my time**

## REMEDY: Intermittently Reinforce

Intermittently insert reinforcing or clarifying posts (after the first two weeks of actively posting). Focus your time on scanning posts and make note of non participation, which should deduct from an overall course participation score. Individual discussions do not need to be graded, but keep detailed notes of any participation score deductions.

### RESEARCH

- [Sage, guide or ghost? The effect of instructor intervention on student participation in online discussion forums](#)





## **AILMENT: Students aren't completing discussions on time**

### **REMEDY: Create a Consistent Schedule**

Make sure discussion due dates are consistent (i.e.: Fridays at 11:59pm) and that students know that they will not receive points for participating after the due date has passed. Set two due dates for each discussion board: one for the original post, and another for peer responses. Consider offering bonus points for exemplary posts that go beyond minimum requirements.

#### **RESEARCH**

- [Notes on Class Discussions](#)
- ["Chain-Linked" Discussions](#)
- [Scheduled Studying](#)
- [Theoretically Based Pedagogical Strategies Leading to Deep Learning in Asynchronous Online Gerontology Courses](#)