



# Using Questions to Foster Discussion

## Classroom Discussion

*The discussions you initiate online can also be useful in a face-to-face classroom. Similarly, discussions that begin in the classroom can be continued online in Moodle.*

## Online versus Face-to-face Discussion

One of the easiest tools to use for student engagement in an online course environment is the discussion board. Many of the strategies that work in a face-to-face classroom also work online. However, there are a few differences as well: while face-to-face discussion questions may be spontaneous, and they may have single correct answers, online discussion questions usually have the following features:

- Online questions are planned out in advance;
- They provide motivation for thoughtful answers (as peers will be reading); and
- They often have multiple options for response.

## What Kinds of Questions Work Best?

To stimulate more discussion, Wiggins and McTighe (2013) suggest using these kinds of questions, which they identify as “essential questions”:

- They are open-ended (meaning they have no single correct answer);
- They are thought-provoking;
- They require higher order thinking (meaning application, analysis, synthesis, or creation rather than memorization and regurgitation);
- They point to important course concepts;
- They tend to raise more questions for the learners;
- They usually require answers with justification and/or evidence; and
- They often recur over time.

## Examples

The following example questions come from the [University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh](#):

- **Example 1: Promote discussion**
  - Ask students to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of a topic (such as electronic communication, for example)
- **Example 2: Promote engagement with reading assignments**
  - Using the information from (insert readings here, such as chapters 7 & 8), give your own example that illustrates a concept from the reading (such as at least three of the author’s main concepts, for example). You may use a personal experience or you may create an example.
- **Example 3: Promote engagement with the library (ensure sources are available virtually)**
  - Part 1: Ask students to use the library to find an article about a relevant course topic
  - Part 2: Ask them to provide an overview of the article and discuss why this is relevant to your social or work life, using concepts from the article and the course readings
  - Part 3: Ask them to cite the article and provide the DOI or link.  
You may also wish to ask them not to use an article that a co-learner has already posted

- **Example 4: Promote use of other sources**
  - Ask students to read an article attached to the discussion that you've posted
  - Part 1: Ask students to write a critical evaluation of the article and explain their points using examples from the article
  - Part 2: Ask them to find two sources that support their evaluation of the article and give a brief summary of both
  - Ask them to explain why they believe these sources are credible and whether they would or would not be valuable to this author
- **Example 5: Promote (asynchronous) student collaboration**
  - Part 1: Ask students to post their topic idea in the form of a proposal for their final projects (it's best if you provide a template or format)
  - Part 2: Once they have posted, ask them to find another student's project posting and read their proposal
  - Part 3: Ask them to develop two potential research questions that they may want to consider in the course of their project development. Make sure these questions require thoughtful responses rather than just looking up an answer or yes/no questions
  - Ask them to choose a classmate who does not already have multiple responses so that everyone receives a peer response
- **Example 6: Promote engagement with peer review**
  - Part 1. Ask students to post a rough draft of an assignment as an attachment on the discussion board
  - Part 2. After they have posted their draft, ask them to choose another student's draft to review; it's usually best if they download it first and add commentary and then upload the version with their comments
  - Considerations: ensure you have given students clear criteria for peer review

### General Guidelines

- Be clear about your discussion expectations and criteria, especially if it is graded.
- When possible, give students choice about which questions to answer.
- Be generous with time frames when possible and practical.
- Consider giving students input into the grading tool (such as a rubric) and asking them to self-assess with the same tool.

If you would like help developing good questions, please contact us in CELT at [CELT@tru.ca](mailto:CELT@tru.ca).

### Resources

Kearsley, G. & Blomeyer, B. (2003). Preparing teachers to teach online. NCREL; Retrieved from <http://home.sprynet.com/~gkearsley/teachonline.htm>

McTighe, Jay and Wiggins, Grant (2013). *Essential questions: Opening doors to student understanding*. Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD.

Smith, R. (2008). *Conquering the content: A step-by-step guide to online course design* (1st ed). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh (n.d.). Examples of good discussion questions. Retrieved from

<https://www.uwosh.edu/d2lfaq/teaching-resources/discussions/discussion-question-tips-and-pointers>