Tips for a Quality Online Discussion

Online Discussion will be a main learning activity of your course. As such, here are a few tips and examples for bringing a higher level of quality and enjoyment to your online Discussion participation.

Start Strong With the Initial Posting

The initial posting is where Discussion begins. Here are some tips for making the most of it.

- First, check your course Syllabus for the Discussion requirements, such as due dates and specifications about citing or referencing sources.
- Then, look for any Discussion rubrics or evaluation criteria to help guide you in shaping your posting and knowing what to include.
- Next, read the Discussion assignment thoroughly, making sure to note all of the aspects of the assignment that your Instructor will expect you to address in your initial posting.
- Finally, compose your Discussion posting in a word-processing document so you can craft it according to all of the criteria and check your spelling and grammar. When you are ready, copy and paste your initial posting from the document into the designated Discussion area.

Frame Your Comments as a Response to Something That Has Already Been Said

Because the best group Discussions are genuine conversations rather than a series of disconnected monologues, the single most important thing you need to do when joining a class Discussion is to link what you are about to say to something that has already been said:

- I really liked the point Aaron made earlier when he said that ______. I agree because _____.
- I take your point, Nadia, that _______. Still, . . .
- Although Sheila and Ryan seem to be at odds about ______, they may actually not be all that far apart.

In framing your comments this way, it is usually best to name both the person and the idea to which you’re responding. If you name the person alone ("I agree
with Aziz because _____ “), it may not be clear what part of what Aziz said you are referring to.

**To Change the Subject, Indicate Explicitly That You Are Doing So**

It is fine to try to change the conversation’s direction. There’s just one catch: You need to make clear that this is what you are doing. For example:

- So far we have been talking about _____. But isn’t the real issue here _____?
- I’d like to change the subject to one that hasn’t yet been addressed.

If you try to change the subject without indicating that you are doing so, your comment will come across as irrelevant rather than as a thoughtful contribution that moves the conversation forward.

**Disagree Respectfully**

A rich Discussion often occurs when participants disagree. It is important to be aware of your tone and choice of words when disagreeing with someone so that the disagreement of ideas does not become a personal attack. Here are some examples for how to disagree in a respectful manner:

- Although I accept your main point, Marc, that _________, I disagree that the main reason for this is _______. Based on research from _____, I see the problem like this . . .
- I respectfully disagree with your point of view on _______, Pia. My reasons for disagreeing are _______ and _______ based on ______.
- Although your personal experience with the problem is valuable, I disagree that the implications of the problem are as wide reaching as you state.

You may need to disagree with participants in Discussion and support the reason for your disagreement. If you are not accustomed to disagreeing directly in a conversation, consider starting with the “I respectfully disagree” example above to build your comfort level with this situation.

**Help the Conversation Grow**

It is important that you respond to participants in such a way that helps the conversation become more thoughtful and more engaging. One way to do that is
by asking open-ended questions—questions that cannot be answered with a simple response of YES or NO—for more information or for clarification:

- Rafael, in your example of _____, I don’t quite understand how the two pieces relate. Would you explain further or provide another example?

- I am interested in your point about ______. What evidence do you have that supports this?

- You offer clear examples of problems related to ______. What solutions would you suggest for solving ______?

- Of the several possible solutions you have offered in your posting on _____, how would you prioritize those solutions? Which one do you believe is the most important, and on what do you base your choice?

- What are the implications of ______?

A rich and satisfying Discussion is based on all participants moving the conversation along. This task is not the sole responsibility of the Instructor. In fact, your Instructor may not contribute to every Discussion thread or topic. The Instructor will be looking to you and your classmates to address the topic at hand in a thoughtful way. Be sure to review your Syllabus and course rubrics to better understand the expectations for your participation in each type of assignment.