Online forums

Online forums as assessment

Many courses at UniSA have a space for online chat or discussion that allows students to communicate with each other and with teaching staff online. Some courses, however, include use of the online forum in the course requirements and may allocate marks for your participation. In these courses, you need to consider the online forum as you would any other assessment task; contributions – or 'posts' – should demonstrate that you've engaged with the lectures, tutorials, readings and activities, and that you've given some thought to what you are writing.

The learnonline online forums are *asynchronous threaded discussion groups*:	
Asynchronous	post at any time; no need for everyone to be online at the same time
Threaded	replies to each discussion topic appear as a list or 'thread' underneath the topic they're replying to, which allows you to follow the discussion easily
Discussion groups	course forums can only be accessed by other students in the course

What can I post?

Your course outline may specify how to use the online forum, including **what** to discuss, **how** to discuss it, and **when** or **how often** to post. If no guidance is provided, consider the purpose of an online forum. When used in a university course, online forums provide a virtual space to:

- explore the course ideas in order to deepen knowledge and understanding;
- critically discuss and reflect on course topics to develop analysis and critical thinking skills;
- develop communication skills relevant for academic and professional contexts, and
- get to know other students and learn collaboratively with them. This may be particularly important for students who are studying externally.

This means your posts can take many forms, including questions, comments, observations, reflections or responses to ongoing conversations. As long as you stay focussed on the course ideas and take your time to write posts that are clear and well-considered, you will demonstrate the kind of engagement that your lecturer is likely to be looking for. As a guide, your lecturer will probably expect you to post 1-2 times per week for each week of the course. If you are unsure, ask them.

How should I write a post?

A few basic tips for contributing to an online forum:

- Keep posts a moderate length – very long contributions may not be read by others, so present ideas in digestible screen-sized chunks;
- Stay focussed on the topic, and be sure to address any questions the lecturer has raised;
- Avoid just 'lurking' by responding to other participants' contributions. Demonstrate your commitment to learning and to other students by letting them know that their ideas have been read, even if you don't have a lot to say in response, and

- Be sure to engage in two-way interaction. If an idea or question interests you, generate a discussion by responding to it.

Communicating effectively online

Without cues such as facial expressions, body language and tone, online discussions can easily lead to miscommunication and/or misunderstanding. You should interact with other forum participants as you would in a face-to-face discussion: be respectful and courteous. Here are some tips:

- Be aware of your audience. Keep in mind the diversity of beliefs and attitudes they may hold;
- Choose your words carefully, as they may be misinterpreted. Read posts closely before saving;
- Use humour cautiously – it is culturally- and socially-specific and can cause unintended offence, and
- Be constructive. A forum is no place for tirades against the lecturer, students or the world.

Making your first post	
Introduce yourself briefly as you would when meeting someone for the first time.	
Starting a new topic	
- Say why you think the topic is relevant, important or interesting. - Draw on any relevant lecture notes, readings, or activities to help participants understand how your topic connects to the course. - Prompt others' participation by offering a question, point of view or observation. - Open a topic about something that's confusing – often others will be confused too, and the thread may help many students develop a better understanding of the topic.	
Adding to an existing thread or discussion	
AGREE	- Say you agree, and give reasons to explain why. - Give your own examples or evidence supporting another student's ideas. - Re-state, clarify or explain in your own words what they have said. - To partly agree, make a 'yes, but…' statement that reinforces what they've said, and adds a further perspective.
DISAGREE	- Explain why you disagree with their statement. - Offer a positive comment before a negative one, e.g. 'That's a really interesting perspective. My view is…' - Ask the participant to provide evidence, explanations, or further details. - Suggest possible implications or logical consequences of their ideas. - Suggest a different viewpoint to the topic. - Suggest another direction the discussion could take.

Write posts as suggestions	**Avoid absolute, definitive statements**
'It seems to me…'	'It's obvious that…'
'I think…'	'Clearly…'
'Perhaps…'	'Everyone knows that…'
'One way of looking at it might be…'	

Suggestions will encourage more posts while absolute language will discourage them.

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Other ways to contribute to a thread

- Summarise or find patterns in all the contributions that have been made so far.

- Insert links to relevant websites, explaining briefly why you've found them useful.

- Share resources such as journal articles which are relevant to the discussion.

Useful links *(all open in a new window)*

There may be resources that have been created with your lecturers, addressing assignment tasks and topics specific to your courses. Follow the links below to find out:

[Business](#)   [Education, Arts and Social Sciences](#)   [Health Sciences](#)   [IT, Engineering and the Environment](#)