



# Contributing to a discussion forum

NOTE: These tips apply to forums that are used for formal assessment purposes, not to forums that might grow more organically from students themselves.

## How will the forum be used in my class?

This will depend on your teacher. If the forum is being used for assessment purposes, your teacher will start threads on class topics and expect you to post replies. Sometimes, the forum is simply used as a communication space for the class ... check with your teacher.

## How long should my forum post be?

There is no one, set answer to this. Some posts might say all they have to say in a couple of sentences; others will need to be lengthier. The trick is to be concise and focused. If your post is rambling and incoherent, and forum members can't follow your train of thought, then you haven't actually added anything to the discussion. Watch for putting too much into the one post: one or two points per post is a good rule of thumb.

## How formal should my English be?

Discussion forum language is less formal than essay language; you must still use correct spelling, punctuation and grammar, but some lapses will be tolerated. Use simple, jargon-free language, and make clear statements about your ideas, reflections, opinions, commentary, whatever.

## Can I use paragraphs?

Yes, break your text up. Write short paragraphs, even to the point of breaking an otherwise unified and coherent paragraph up into several bits. Your post should be easy to scan.

## Should I mention other members' posts?

Absolutely -- it's part of moving the discussion forwards. Be sure to reference earlier posts and demonstrate the links, e.g., "I think the point that Chris makes is a good one because it shows xyz."

## Can I start my own thread?

Normally, yes. Most teachers want students to engage with the class themes so starting a thread about a topic that interests you will probably earn you marks. What won't earn you marks, however, is starting threads on frivolous or irrelevant topics, or topics that have been covered elsewhere on the forum.

## How should I title my thread?

Use a catchy title for any threads you start. The idea of an original discussion forum post is to get people to read it, so make your post title interesting. But also make sure that your title accurately reflects the content of your post and what the thread is going to be about.

## Can I link to other material outside the forum?

Sure, but don't go crazy. This is a discussion forum, and too many links to outside websites will intrude upon the flow of the conversation. It's always best to leave links or suggestions for further reading for the last part of your post. Doing this will keep the discussion moving forwards and gives forum members a chance to consider your own ideas before moving onto those of other sources you suggest.

## How much of my opinion should I really express?

It's the same as with any scholarly form of communication: 'opinion' in this sense does not mean 'what I think off the top of my head', but rather 'here is my considered viewpoint after weighing the appropriate evidence'. Be sensible in what you post: unsupported rants won't win you any marks, but a thoughtful response to the issues raised in the thread will.

## Should I construct my post in Word first and then copy it into the forum?

No. There are two reasons for this. First, the cognitive style you adopt in Word will be different from the style you adopt when contributing straight into a discussion forum online. We tend to associate using Word with writing essays, which may encourage you to adopt an inappropriately formal style and tone for your discussion post. Second, you are likely to come across formatting problems: the transfer across formats may mean that when

you paste into the forum things look 'wonky' and you just end up reformatting things, anyway (and it's also a form of double-handling).

### **What if I'm writing a long or complex post? Wouldn't Word be useful, then?**

Maybe, but only to paste *into*, and not *from*. In other words, if you are writing a long or complex post, it would be a good idea to copy what you've written and just 'store' it in Word or a text editor until you have finalised your posts and published it. Once you've done that, you can then save your post as an html document (see below) as proof to your teacher that you published your post when you said you did.

### **Should I make a copy of my post?**

Yes, it is essential that you do so. Although your teacher is backing up the class site regularly, you, as a student, are still expected to retain a copy of your own work -- just as you are expected to retain a copy of other assessment items, such as essays. The easiest way to keep a copy of your online work is to save the page where your work appears as an html file.

To do this, go to the page you want to save and, in your FireFox or Internet Explorer browser, go to:

- \* File > Save Page As
- \* Download the page to your hard drive (or flash stick or other drive) and keep it safe.

Each time you publish something new on the class site, you should make a copy of it. Saving as html, rather than as a Word doc, also proves to your teacher that you published when you said you did ... and that you didn't put everything together after the due date.