# 10 Reasons Students Don’t Participate in Online Discussions

## How to Remedy Each

A resource geared to educators of online courses who use discussion forums as part of their instructional plan.

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<th>Reason(s) why students may not participate in online discussions</th>
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| 1. Aren’t clear on the expectations: where to post, what post should include (length, content, links, etc.) and/or deadline for posting | More common than one might think. A course home page typically has several pages to navigate, students may remember reading the guidelines for discussions yet the due dates, guidelines for content, etc., yet forget given the volume of content on course site | − Dedicate web page/section within course site to online discussions with: guidelines, due dates, links to how-to instructions, etiquette  
− Include example of an ideal post  
− Post message at beginning of course highlighting key points and why discussions are important  
− Include due dates on course calendar & display on course site  
− Assign points with aid of rubric |
| 2. Feel they have nothing to contribute — are shy, reticent | Very common for new students of online leaning, or students unfamiliar with the course topic. Reading other posts can be intimidating. More typical for undergraduate students | − Students that feel part of a group where it’s safe to participate are more likely to be involved – this may be accomplished through introductions at beginning of course. See CoI framework – social presence  
− Provide encouragement through email or course message  
− Assign mentors to new students  
− Instructor shares personal bio or background during course introduction which sets the tone |
| 3. Experience technical difficulties and/or novice user | Some LMS platform features don't work well with certain web browsers. Some students unsure how threaded discussions work, unclear how to post a message or reply. Unaware of subscription feature, how to turn on or off, and may be bombarded with emails triggered by each new discussion post | − Include links with how-to instructions with screen shot or [short] instructional videos  
− Include 24/7 access for help/technical support via email or text  
− Include a ‘commonly asked questions’ page with questions specific to discussion forums  
− Response time to student questions should be within 24 hours |
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| 4. | Are offended by a fellow classmates’ post, or response to his or her post | Online, text communication can often be misinterpreted. Cultural differences can affect communication. Students have varying standards of what is acceptable conversation in online discussions | Students that are offended may shut down and instructor may never know – the following suggestions may help:  
- Include etiquette guidelines  
- Acknowledge possibility of miscommunication  
- Monitor discussion forum – remove offending posts.  
- Contact student by phone or video chat re. offensive or questionable post |
| 5. | Poor discussion etiquette | When a student receives a response from a classmate to a post that he or she made, in turn the student should acknowledge the classmates’ response with a reply, if not, student can become discouraged | Include ‘do and don’t’ guidelines for behaving in discussion forums  
- Remind students during course if necessary the etiquette guidelines  
- Moderate discussion forums  
- Article [here](#) provides suggestions |
| 6. | Inhibited by timing of due dates for initial discussion posts, interfere with students’ work schedule | Many students studying online have full time jobs and do the majority of their school work on weekends – if initial discussion posts are due on a Sunday, the opportunity for engaging in discussion is limited | Have discussion due dates mid week allowing for discussion to build on the weekends when students are likely completing school work, i.e. initial post may be due on Sunday, and responses due by Tuesday  
- With a good discussion topic this can allow for a full and interesting discussion to unfold over a period of several days |
| 7. | Discouraged by discussion questions that appear unrelated to course goals, and/or questions are vague and unfocused | Students, mature students especially, like to know why they are completing a given learning activity i.e. discussion activity, and how it contributes to the course goals. Students are sensitive to busy work, and sense this is so if the topic or questions are unfocused or unclear | Create questions that link directly to objectives for the respective module or study period  
- Encourage students to incorporate content, outside sources, concepts or ideas that relate to topic of given module  
- Use open-ended questions, as per suggestions in [this resource](#) |
| 8. | Inhibited by certain students that appear to dominate | Just as in face-to-face discussions, certain students can dominate the discussion and thus inhibit other students from participating | Moderate discussion forum and encourage other students to participate by the including statements such as: “that is a good point ______, I’d like to hear from others in the class…” or “what _____ says is one perspective, what do …..” |
| 9. | **Students’ initial post and/or responses to classmates are shallow and brief** | Initial posts that are brief, with little depth, i.e. lack demonstrated application of course content, or ideas and references to related concepts, does not promote deep learning. Furthermore, replies to other students state, ‘good idea’ or ‘I agree with what you wrote’ adds no value and hinders opportunities for deep learning | - Moderate discussion forums and respond to shallow posts with probing questions – ‘can you elaborate’, ‘what evidence supports your ideas’ etc.  
- [This article](#) provides list of probing questions  
- Use a rubric and refer students to expectations. Grade students accordingly for shallow, and/or incomplete posts |
| 10. | **Students’ are just not into it…** | This reason (or un-reason) is more common than any other reason listed – students don’t participate. Research suggests this is common not only in for-credit courses, but also in not-for-credit courses, i.e. MOOCs  
- Explain how students will benefit, include a short paragraph on ‘why discussions add value to learning’  
- Establish expectations on participation–due dates, quality standards  
- Include discussions forums in the overall grading scheme with a value that is meaningful (points for a credit course, or tie it to successful completion for a non-credit course)  
- Moderate: show involvement in the discussions or indicate you are reading the forums, by commenting within, or via a weekly message [summary]  
- Assign points for each discussion forum and use a detailed rubric (see example links in related post on Online Learning Insights)  
- Provide grade to students as per rubric on discussion forum contributions (or non contributions) shortly after discussion forum closes, i.e. within 7 days, rather than at end of course  
- Refer to blog, [Online Learning Insights](#) for further ideas and resources |

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