

The Discussion Forum

Collaboration and Discussion

The online discussion forum is an important, integral part of the class this semester. You should not consider it as somehow external to the work of the course. Anyone unable or unwilling to engage in serious, out-of-class work on the forums should drop the class immediately. The discussion forum is an essential *and* necessary part of the hard work of critically engaging the material of our class. It is a site for thinking, for sharing thoughts, for sharpening intellectual ability. It allows students to engage each other, to engage the material of the class, and to think and discuss outside of the confines of the classroom.

The forum is, in other words, a space for collaboration, a space for the production of group knowledge. Creating knowledge collaboratively forces us to exceed our own limits. By confronting the thoughts of others, and by having our own thoughts confronted and responded to by others, we grow intellectually. Collaboration takes as its foundation the idea that thinking is impossible as long as we remain confined within our own limits. Real learning, synthetic learning, occurs only when one is in the presence of others. Just as classroom discussions draw upon the insights and analyses of the class members to produce understandings, so too will the forums draw upon each member in order to allow all members the chance to think collaboratively.

I want you to learn a lot in this class—every good teacher wants to produce a class where its members are transformed by their experiences. While this is the ideal, I understand that education is hardly ever ideal. I have recognized through experience that real learning—not just sham memorizing—is hard work, and quite rare in one’s life. I want to make this class a place where real learning can occur, but we also think that the classroom itself isn’t perfectly able to accomplish the task. No matter how much we do in class, there remains several intractable problems—issues of time, of personality, of shyness, of thinking off the cuff, of intimidation by others, etc. An online forum can solve many of these problems—you are free to contribute only when you have the time to think deeply, only when you have something to say, and you can truly command the attention of all who are interested.

I have used forums before, and we know that any discussion online is not automatically a positive learning experience. Please use this document to shape your participation in the forums, and to help you to form a productive and collaborative group with your peers. And if you’re transformed by the experience—I’ll count myself lucky to have played a part. But the real credit goes to you—the forums, like the class, are what you make of them.

Quality Posts, Quality Discussion

You will find the forums immensely valuable as you prepare for the work of the class, but their usefulness depends on the degree of thought and effort you put into them. It isn’t easy to create the kind of online discussions that produce valuable knowledge—these discussions don’t just “happen” independent of the work of their participants. It’s important to remember the differences between an online discussion and a face-to-face conversation. Online discussions introduce problems of interpretation, tone, and nuance. Students are often amazed to see how their attempts at participation are (mis)understood by their peers. For that reason, we urge you to think about your post, before and *after* you make it. If you find it not to your liking, delete it or edit it—you are free to control your participation.

Creating a quality post is a difficult skill that is learned best through practice. In general, a quality post is a post which engages with the material of the semester and the other voices in the discussion thread. Any post which is not a quality post may be removed by your professor—just as in class, any remark that is unproductive is disregarded as a basis for discussion. As you’ll see, however, just because a post is about the material of class does not ensure that it’s part of a good discussion. Discussions are complex, somewhat random, and rapidly shifting. There isn’t an easy 1-2-3 procedure for ensuring good discussions, as I’m sure you’re aware from the classes you’ve been in. However, there are some pretty easily identifiable ways to ensure that a good discussion *does not* occur:

- (a) ignoring the group dynamic and posting remarks that are more-or-less speeches, or directed at no one;
- (b) turning a blind eye to some participants and instead engaging only with a select few who agree;

(c) treating one's peers as somehow less able to think or reason or grasp the material than oneself.

These errors prevent discussion and collaboration, turning the forums into individualistic exercises. The solution to these problems is for you to be cognizant of your peers, to remind yourself of the public nature of the forums, and to imagine how your readers might respond to your words. The more you think of how others read you, the more you are able to control and produce writing that accomplishes your intentions.

As you'll discover, there's an etiquette involved in any discussion. Online forums, like any discussions, rely on participants who read (listen) and think before they write (speak). Before you make a post you should be aware of the kind of topic you're in. You should not simply read a topic and post a response, ignoring all the posts that have preceded your own. It's important that you consider each and every post carefully to discern the direction of the analysis. Whatever you do, your post should place itself within the continuity of the discussion. You want someone who comes after you to read the topic, all the posts (including yours), and still be able to make a good contribution. The quality of your posts necessarily hinges on the quality of the discussion you're posting in. If a topic has gone awry, try and fix it in your post by summing up what you see as its most important features. This type of thinking is discursive thinking, and it is key to any good discussion.

Topic Creation

Creating a good topic, one that will elicit responsive and engaged discussion, is one of the most important and, thus, delicate tasks of forum participation. Creating a new topic thread requires more than simply tossing out an idea or opinion off the top of your head. When you create a topic you suddenly become "in charge" of the direction the discussion will take. Thus, you need to think about whether the topic you have in mind is worth the time and mental energy of the class. Since the task of the class is to think collaboratively about the texts and issues of the class, topics which invite collaboration—participatory thinking—are to be desired. This doesn't mean that you can't ask a question to help you figure out a particularly troubling moment in the text. In fact, this is one of several primary functions the forum provides: help. But a topic asking, for instance, whether or not your online peers "like" this or that idea, this or that writer, is largely unimportant and counterproductive to the role the forum ought to serve. Such a question (and there are many others like it) does not require thought. And, frankly, this kind of question or the bald statement of an opinion (and an opinion is different than a thoughtful perspective) cannot address the issues of the course. Here are some guidelines:

1. Does your topic have the potential to enhance our understanding of the issues of the class?
2. Does your topic have the potential for others to actually respond to your post? Is the topic starter open-ended? Does it address an issue complex enough to generate an actual discussion, something that might invite multiple and alternative perspectives? Make sure you've left room for others to respond, to engage your idea.
3. Make sure that others will actually *want* to respond to the topic. In other words, try to create topics that will provide new avenues of exploration, new ways of looking at a text. If, on the other hand, you're simply searching for an answer, make sure that your question indicates why getting an answer is important.
4. Finally, *do not* create a topic without first verifying that the issue at hand is not being discussed in another thread. In fact, when you create a topic you need to have a general knowledge of all threads dealing with the same text/author. Redundancy is counterproductive to good discussion.

My Role in the Forums

As your professor, my role will be to do more than merely evaluate your participation in the forums. I will also endeavor to assist you in building a productive forum for collaborative thinking. However, my role in this process is markedly different than your own. While I will occasionally post and begin new topics, the real responsibility for the forums will rest on your shoulders. Just as you are responsible for your own learning, so too are you responsible for the forum that makes possible that learning. For the most part, my assistance to you will come in the form of nudges—criticism and praise, assistance and interventions.

Early on in the semester, I will be a frequent participator: I'll create new topics that model the sorts of questions which can prove productive in a discussion forum; I'll write posts that respond to these topics; and I'll engage with others in a discussion. I will also make a point of responding publicly to good and bad posts, to help model the sort of community you should build. As the semester progresses, however, I will turn much of the work over to you. More and more, I will

be a silent reader of a discussion where students are the initiators and the beneficiaries of the learning. Throughout the semester, you can count on me to be present on the forums, to read and remark, and to respond to especially good or bad developments. The goal, however, is to build your authority as thinkers, readers, and writers. That goal necessitates my gradual disengagement.

A User's Guide to the Forum

Location

The discussion forums are located at our class website, thinkingtogether.org. You can also reach it directly by going to thinkingtogether.org/forums.

Logging On

All users must register and log on in order to use the forums. Choose an anonymous username that you like and a password you will remember.

How to post in a topic

After logging in, you'll see a list of current classes in the group "Fall 2005." Clicking on your class brings up a screen with topics for you to read and respond to. Clicking on a topic brings up a screen with the posts. At the top and bottom of this screen are several "button" links. Clicking on "add reply" brings up a screen to add your post to the bottom of the topic. Type the text of your reply and click "add reply" to return to the topic.

How to quote one person or several

When responding directly to one person's words, it's best to use the "reply" feature. At the bottom of each post you'll find the following icons: Quote Reply . Clicking on Reply allows you to write a response that begins by quoting the post you're reading. The same screen appears for "add reply" except that the text box for posting already has the quoted post in it. Note: you don't have to quote the entire post—just the part you want to reference. Quoting several individuals together works similarly except it uses the "quote" button. Click the button on each post you want to quote, and then click on the button at the top or bottom of the page. The reply window opens with each of the selected posts quoted within.

How to edit your own post

After you make a post, you are returned to the topic screen with your post added at the bottom. Sometimes, you'll notice a mistake you made—a typo, or a word you forgot to include, or perhaps you've changed your mind about the wording or idea. You can change your post by using the button at the bottom of your post. You can edit one of your posts whenever you choose—immediately or weeks later.

How to start a new topic

You can start a new topic when none of the available topics meets the needs of the inquiry you're pursuing. To start a new topic, click on the button, found within each topic and on the main page for the class forum. You'll be asked to give a title for the topic, a description (which appears under the title), and to make the first post in this new topic. Take the time to think of an appropriate title and description for the topic.

How to send a Private Message

You can use the built-in messaging system on the forums to contact any member, including your teacher. At the bottom of each post is a button for sending a private message (PM) , which you can use to send a message to the author of the post. Another way you can do this is by clicking on any member's name and bringing up the profile card, which has a link in the right frame to send a private message.

How to send an email

You can also use the forums to send an email to any member. Just click on the button to send an email to any user.

Extra Features

The forums have many additional features for user customization. You can add a signature, an avatar, or a photograph—just try it out to see how it works. These features are available on your profile card. Click "My

Controls” at the top of the page and find the “Personal Profile” menu on the left of the next screen.

A Guide to Your Grade

I believe these forums are integral to the task of learning, and as such participation is required and graded. You are required to participate with two posts each day that there’s a class. There is a quantitative and a qualitative element to the grade. Students who meet the numeric requirements become eligible for the qualitative assessment under the following guidelines:

30+ posts= 80–100

25-29 posts= 70-90

20-24 posts= 60-80

15-19 posts= 50-70

Additionally, for each week you fail to make at least one quality post, I will deduct 5% from your participation grade. So, for instance, if you have 30 quality posts by the end of the semester, but you failed to make a post during Week Two, you will score somewhere between 75 and 95, rather than between 80 and 100.