

Successful Synchronous and Asynchronous Discussions:

Plan, Implement & Evaluate



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➤ What is the purpose of your discussion?

Synchronous and asynchronous communication tools serve different purposes in Web-based courses. Consider your instructional goals and plan the structure of interactive communication to achieve your purpose.

➤ How do you plan discussions?

Synchronous	Both	Asynchronous
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use for real-time debates, games, tutoring, brainstorming, just-in-time learning or office hours that require timely feedback or decisions. Use the real-time connection to enhance social presence. Consider whether discussion should be "impromptu" or "preparatory." "Impromptu" is spontaneous and does not require participants to prepare specific content in advance. "Preparatory" means participants are given instructions and an assignment to prepare prior to the discussion. Prepare an instructional agenda. Assess typing speeds and keyboarding skills prior to the first discussion. Consider typing speeds in assigning discussion groups. Conduct a trial session prior to the first discussion to assure students have the required technology. Synchronous environments require computers to be Java enabled. Ask participants to meet in a designated "homeroom area" to make any necessary changes to groups and to receive last minute instructions. Then, participants proceed to their smaller, more manageable groups to conduct their discussions. Also meet participants in the "homeroom area" after the chat to provide further instruction, reflection, or post-chat assignments. This also assures that all participants have attended the entire online session. Establish beginning and ending times for discussion. Consider the time zones of international participants in assigning groups. Establish a discussion group size that allows for meaningful discourse (about 4 to 6 participants). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider the purpose of your discussion (e.g., assess learner comprehension, develop critical thinking skills, apply textbook theories to context) and use the best communication tool to achieve your cognitive or affective objectives. Consider individual circumstances for activities that may be accomplished in either synchronous or asynchronous discussions (e.g., guest speakers, interviews, problem-solving, case studies). Create a learner-controlled environment—empower learners to take responsibility for active discussion. Form focused questions with unique answers; learners should benefit from reading the responses of their classmates. Encourage learners to keep up with textbook and course readings to create meaningful discourse. Plan for higher levels of thinking in open discussion questions. Assess student participation as a required part of their grade. Consider students who do not participate as absent. Share examples of well-written discussion postings. Limit class size to achieve goals and manage the workload. Present rules of netiquette to assure quality discussion; take time for participants to learn to use the technology. Use formative evaluation to assess discussions (i.e., a satisfaction with discussions survey or a one minute paper analyzing discussions sent to the instructor through email). Develop a participation assessment tool or grading rubric prior to the discussion. Share the tool with the participants before the discussion begins. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use for discussions that require learner reflection, critical analysis, or more than one meeting. Use for discussions that require references, supported comments, or a somewhat formal writing style. Plan discussions or assignments in which reflective writing will help students to organize and clarify their thinking. Use for maximum student convenience with access 24x7. Limit time frame with a start and end date. Consider the amount of time required for online discussions to avoid bulletin board overload. Consider collaborative or smaller discussion groups if the message board becomes overwhelming. Use to involve reticent or international students who may be hesitant to participate in real-time discussions; also helpful for sensitive or controversial topics. State posting requirements (i.e., number, length, distribution). Establish a discussion group size that allows for meaningful discourse (about 10 to 20 participants). Consider qualitative & quantitative aspects of posts in assessments (i.e., frequency, regularly, emotional support, clarity, contribution, references).

➤ How do you implement discussions?

Synchronous	Both	Asynchronous
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide clear instructions for sharing a facilitator role when participants conduct discussions without an instructor as the facilitator. Keep sentences short and on the topic. Refer to the person by name when responding to his/her specific questions or comments. Encourage learners in preparatory discussions to post statements that transcend their opinions. Ask students to suspend discussion if it moves too fast to respond to questions or comments. Direct learners back to homeroom for closure following a chat. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explain the instructor's/facilitator's role in the discussion; facilitator can be instructor or student. Enforce rules of netiquette to create a respectful environment. Model desired behavior (friendly, informal, concise). Encourage students to help one another learn to develop a learning community. Identify "teachable moments" and intervene in the discussion as necessary; insert expertise or additional questions to generate higher levels of thinking. Consider the need for a social connection among learners. Use 'action cues' or emoticons (emotional icons) to communicate non-verbal cues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use clear, concise, and specific subject lines. Proofread responses for grammar, spelling, and clarity. Use private emails to provide discussion feedback, support, and encouragement to learners; let students know their postings are being read. Allow students to explore topics without "giving answers" or "summarizing" discussion; hold facilitator comments to the end or a lag in the discussion. Encourage learners to interact with one another in thoughtful and reflective postings. Include references to support opinions or comments. Summarize for reinforcement and closure – unite threads of discussion.

➤ How do you evaluate discussions?

Synchronous	Both	Asynchronous
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review user statistics in the course management system for hits to synchronous chat. Analyze archive for questions, statements, and critical thinking. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyze participant feedback from formative evaluation. Administer end-of-course evaluations including specific questions about interaction, learning, and satisfaction achieved through discussions. Analyze discussions based on their purpose; consider the process and the outcomes. Evaluate participation with the assessment tool or grading rubric that includes both qualitative and quantitative aspects of the discussion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review user statistics in the course management system (i.e., number of hours accessed course, areas accessed, times accessed, number of original and follow-up postings). Analyze discussion for questions, reflection, critical thinking, citations, initial and follow-up statements.