

# Best Practices for Forums



Image by Muhammad Rafizeldi  
via Wikimedia Commons

Below are tips for using online forums effectively. These tips were gathered from the experiences of real instructors, from Durham Tech and elsewhere.

As you read this list, consider: Which practices seem most important to you? How would you implement them with your students?

## Set clear expectations

- From the start of the course, provide clear and specific information on how forum participation will be evaluated.
- Also lay out guidelines or "ground rules" for expected forum behavior.
- Feel free to use or adapt this sample document: [Forum Guidelines and Grading \(PDF\)](http://bit.ly/forum-guidelines-grading) or <http://bit.ly/forum-guidelines-grading>
- For more ideas, here are [three sample discussion forum rubrics \(PDF\)](http://bit.ly/3-sample-disc-rubrics) (from Oregon Health & Science University) or <http://bit.ly/3-sample-disc-rubrics>

## Encourage participation

- Students typically won't post in the forum unless it is required and "counts" toward their grade.
- Require students to post AND to respond to 1 or 2 classmates' posts each week.
- Consider making forum participation a substantial part of the overall grade (20% or more).
- To prevent everyone from posting at the last minute, some instructors set two deadlines each week: one for students' initial posts and another (a few days later) for replies to classmates.

## Write effective prompts

- Ask yourself "what is most important for students to understand about this week's material?" Shape your questions with that in mind.
- Avoid yes/no questions or ones with strictly factual answers.
- Require students to explain their answers and to support their statements with details from assigned readings.
- Get ideas from your peers! Check out this sampling of [Forum Questions Used by Durham Tech Instructors \(PDF\)](http://bit.ly/DurhamTechForumQuestions) or <http://bit.ly/DurhamTechForumQuestions>

## Help students get started

- Begin the course with an [online icebreaker discussion](http://bit.ly/online-icebreakers) [http://bit.ly/online-icebreakers] to allow students to get to know each other and to practice using the Forums tool.
- Remember that your students may be new to Sakai. Provide a link to Durham Tech's [Forum Resources for Students](http://bit.ly/Sakai-student-help) [http://bit.ly/Sakai-student-help] so they'll know what to do.

## Promote originality and quality work

- Use the topic setting "Require users to post before reading." This way, students won't be able to read their classmates' posts until AFTER they write and submit their own.

**Topic Posting**

Lock Topic (Disable topic postings)

Moderate Topic

Require users to post before reading

## Limit email notifications

- Sakai sends you an email notification each time someone replies to one of your Forum posts. Students also receive emails when others reply to their posts. Some instructors and students ask...
  - How can I stop the Forums tool from sending me email notifications?
  - Answer: In the Forums tool, click **Watch** along the top, select **No notification**, then click **Save**.

## Learn more

- [Generating and Facilitating Engaging and Effective Online Discussion \(PDF\)](http://bit.ly/facilitating-online-discussion) [http://bit.ly/facilitating-online-discussion] (University of Oregon):
  - Provides many time-saving tips and useful ideas
- [Online Discussion Boards & Rubrics](http://bit.ly/online-discussion-rubrics) or [http://bit.ly/online-discussion-rubrics] (University of Illinois Springfield):
  - Offers a variety of useful tips and links, and answers the question: How often should faculty post?
- [Why aren't your students participating on the Discussion Board?](http://bit.ly/student-part-discussion) [http://bit.ly/student-part-discussion]:
  - Infographic with tips to enhance student engagement in online discussions