

Creating & Leading Online Discussions in Blackboard

Introduction

Discussion boards can be used to facilitate interactions among students in the form of discussions, and also serve as a means to organize and manage these interactions. Discussion boards are asynchronous, meaning that messages are posted, and class members respond when they access the course website (i.e., responses are not made in real time).

Terminology

- **Forum**: A space in Blackboard used to organize discussions on related topics.
- **Thread**: A discussion within a forum consisting of an initial message and subsequent reply messages.
- **Moderator**: An individual who has the privileges to change the settings for a Forum including user Privileges settings.

Guidelines for leading online discussions

Specifying expectations

Students should be informed from the outset what is expected of them in terms of their participation on the class discussion boards. Below are some things you may want to consider explaining on the class syllabus for your students. Note that the examples that accompany each item below were used by an instructor for one of his classes at FSU.

- **Roles and responsibilities**: Describe the roles and responsibilities of students, the instructor, course mentors, etc. The following example is the description provided by an instructor to his students of the instructor role.

“The role of the instructor is to guide the progress of the course during the semester and the course mentor will assist in a variety of ways. The instructor will be active on a daily basis as a learning facilitator, including direct participation on the discussion boards, evaluating assignments and grading the mid-term and final examination. The instructor will maintain office hours via the Chat Room function found on Blackboard. Class members are encouraged to join others who might have questions or reflections to share on Wednesday evenings, starting at 8:00 pm (EST) for one hour.”

- **Class week**: Set the beginning and ending of the class week (e.g., the class week begins Sunday at 12:01 am and ends the following Sunday at 11:59 pm.)
- **Deadlines**: State the deadlines for the first substantive posting as well as for the subsequent substantive reply postings (e.g., Class members will have from Monday through Wednesday midnight to contribute comments and responses to these cases. Class members have the remainder of the week to respond to the remaining discussion board questions.)

- **Frequency of posts:** Specify the frequency that students should log on to the Discussion Boards (e.g., at least 5 times per week)
- **Substantive posts:** Describe what constitutes a substantive post. The following example is the expectation provided by an instructor at FSU to his students.

“A post can be as long as you like, however it is best to keep them fairly short and succinct. This makes your post easier for others to read and respond to. A good general rule is ½ to 1 page of writing (125 to 250 words) for a substantial post. Of course, in some discussions, it may be more appropriate to write a series of very short posts, rather than one or two longer ones. Simply saying "hello" or "I agree" is not considered a substantive contribution. Class members must support their position when posting to the discussion. At the same time, however, short comments are a natural part of any discussion—you won't be penalized for this—but in terms of your participation grade, if most of your posts are short and lack substance, this will affect your grade. The main idea here is that the discussion board should be a discussion! In other words, it's okay, and quite natural, to make short and long posts.”

- **Grading:** Up to five points will be earned for participation on the discussion boards (5 X 13 weeks = 65 points). Sixty-five postings is the minimum number of postings expected during the semester, and all class members are strongly encouraged to exceed the minimum number of required postings.
- **Netiquette:** Explain to students that netiquette refers to how you participate in online exchanges. Here are some examples of good netiquette:
 - Check the discussion frequently and respond appropriately and on topic.
 - Focus on one subject per message and use meaningful subject lines when beginning new messages.
 - Use appropriate sentence case and capitalize additional words only to highlight a point. Capitalizing otherwise is known as shouting.
 - Be professional and respectful in your online interaction.
 - Cite all quotes, references, and sources—this way everyone can have access to good information.
 - Ask permission before forwarding a class message to someone outside of the class.
 - It is fine to use humor, but use it carefully. The absence of face-to-face cues can cause humor to be misinterpreted as criticism or flaming (angry, antagonistic criticism). Emoticon symbols such as :-) or ;-) will let others know when you are being humorous.
 - The class discussion area is not an appropriate place for forwarding ads, chain letters, or other unrelated e-mail. Discussion boards should not be used for personal chit-chat.

Facilitating student interactions

To help foster meaningful student contributions to discussion boards use open-ended questions and higher order and critical thinking skills (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation).

Interactions amongst students on discussion boards can be encouraged by specifying the nature of students' initial post and subsequent reply posts. For example, using a technique called "advocacy and inquiry," the instructor requests that the first substantive post class members make be in the form of taking a position (advocacy) while subsequent replies to other class members postings be in the form of asking questions and being open to clarifying questions on his or her position (inquiry).

Another means to foster student interaction is in using groups combined with the use of discussion boards. For example, one instructor at FSU had three scheduled debates during a semester, in which class members were arbitrarily assigned to small groups which were assigned to take either the "for" position or the "against" position. Each debate was based on a current topic of importance to the course material, and guidance was provided to students as to the types of discussion board posts that were appropriate and that paralleled the structure of a face-to-face debate.

Brief instructions for creating discussion forums in Blackboard

Below are the brief instructions for adding a forum to your course. For more detailed instructions refer to page 4 of this reference guide.

1. Login to your Blackboard course website: <http://campus.fsu.edu>
2. Click on **Control Panels**
3. Click on **Discussion Board** in the **Course Tools** area
4. Click on the **Add Forum** button
5. Provide a title and a description for the forum (also change privileges if desired)
6. Click on **Submit** and then click on **OK**

To modify or remove a discussion forum

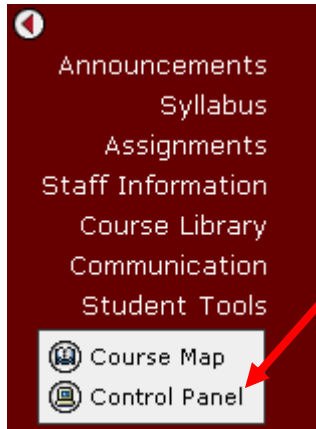
1. Follow steps 1 – 3 above for creating discussion forums
2. Click on either the **Modify** or the **Remove** button, as appropriate
3. If modifying an existing discussion board, then make the desired modifications
4. Click on **Submit** and then click on **OK**

Detailed instructions for creating discussion forums in Blackboard

Step 1. Login to your Blackboard course website at: <http://campus.fsu.edu>

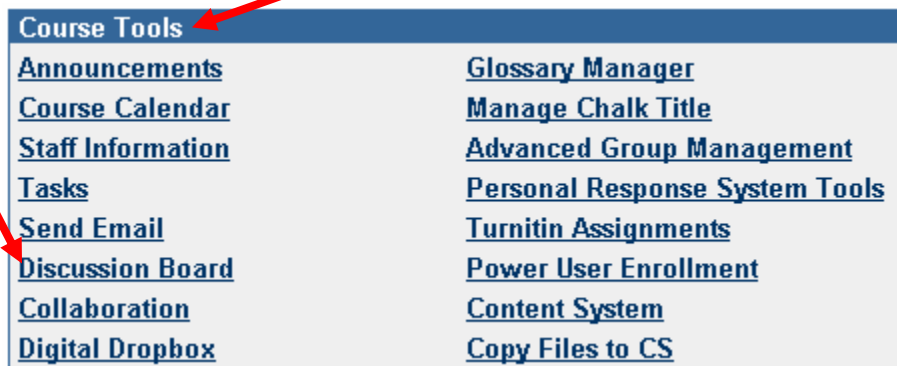
Step 2. Click on Control Panel

After you login, find and click on the [Control Panel](#) link on the left side of the screen.



Step 3. Click on Discussion Board

In the new webpage that opens, find the [Course Tools](#) area, then find and click on the [Discussion Board](#) option.



Step 4. Click on the Add Forum button

In the new webpage that opens, find and click on the [Add Forum](#) button.



Step 5. Provide a Title and a Description (or directions) for the forum

The screenshot shows a form with two main sections: 'Title' and 'Description'. The 'Title' field is a single-line text input, highlighted in yellow, with a red arrow pointing to it from the text above. The 'Description' field is a larger multi-line text area, also with a red arrow pointing to it from the text above. Below the description field is a toolbar with radio buttons for 'Smart Text' (selected), 'Plain Text', and 'HTML'. To the right of these are icons for mathematical symbols (sqrt), code (code icon), and a 'Preview' button.

Next, select the [Forum Settings](#) you want to apply to the forum.

Forum Settings:

- Allow anonymous posts.
- Allow author to modify message after posting.
- Allow author to remove own posted messages.
- Allow file attachments.
- Allow new threads.

You can also change the privileges of individuals to the forum by first selecting the name of an individual from the list provided, and then clicking on the appropriate button.

Forum User Settings:

- a** = Forum moderator privileges
- A** = Permanent forum moderator
- b** = User is blocked from posting

The screenshot shows a list of users with their names and IDs: 'A Baker, Dennis (dbaker2)', 'A Marshall, Shane (smarshal)', 'A Quintero, Stephen (squinter)', and 'Warren, Daniel (rdw4048)'. The last user is selected. To the right of the list are four buttons: 'MODERATE', 'NORMAL', 'BLOCK', and 'UNBLOCK'. A red box highlights these buttons, and a red arrow points from the text above to this box.

Step 6. Click on the Submit button, and then on the OK button to finish the process

