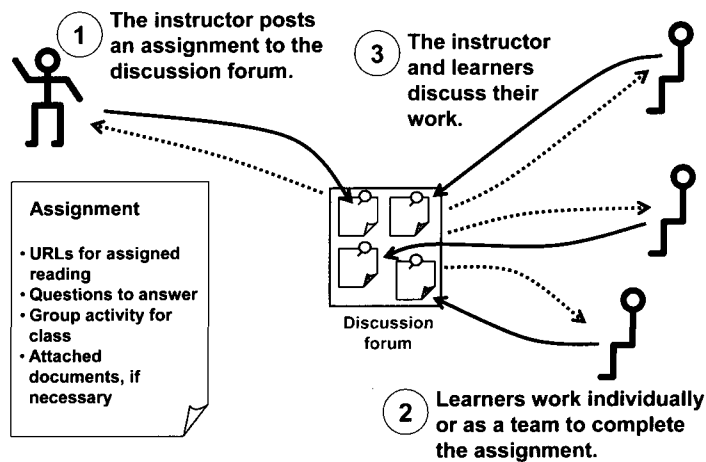


## GUIDE DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES

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Discussion forums evolved from the social and professional exchanges that took place in Internet list-servers and newsgroups. These intellectual watering holes attracted individuals with like interests but distant locations to a free exchange of ideas. And learning took place.

The use of discussion forums in e-learning builds on this informal exchange, but adds an efficient structure. Here's how a discussion activity might be used in formal education:



Learning starts as the instructor posts an assignment to the group. The assignment may include URLs or hyperlinks to assigned readings, questions to answer individually, and group activities. Assignments may also include attached reading and other necessary materials.

Learners read the assignment. They may work on it individually or in teams before posting their completed solutions back to the discussion forum where the instructor and other learners can see it, discuss it, and evaluate it. A typical course might consist of 6 to 12 such assignments.

## Design meaningful discussion activities

Online discussions are an essential part of many different kinds of learning activities. The activity may take the form of a debate or brainstorming. It may involve few or many participants. It may cover factual or emotional subjects. The success of these activities depends on well-designed online discussions. But good discussions do not just happen. They are designed and crafted to provoke deep thought and continual improvement of ideas and opinions.

### Start the discussion

Most important is the way the designer launches the conversation. Each discussion must start with a simple invitation to participate. The best invitation is a specific assignment. What makes a good assignment? Here are some techniques to use to create an assignment that entices learners to participate:

The image shows a screenshot of a discussion assignment with several annotations pointing to specific parts of the text:

- Intriguing title:** Points to the bolded text "It's there someplace!"
- Scenario introduces the issue, makes it interesting, sets the context, and constrains discussion:** Points to the sub-header "Finding the histogram display in digital cameras" and the introductory paragraph.
- Complete, simple instructions:** Points to the numbered list of four steps.
- Invitation (repeated) to participate fully:** Points to the final sentence: "Take this opportunity to help fellow learners. Have a lively discussion!"

The assignment text itself is as follows:

**It's there someplace!**

Finding the histogram display in digital cameras

"How can I display the histogram on my camera? Mine doesn't look like the instructors!! ... Oh, wait. I just found it." Share your questions and discoveries about how to find the histogram display in your digital camera. If you know how to find the histogram, share with others. If you still cannot find the histogram, ask your fellow learners.

1. Click **Discussions** in the **Communications** menu to the left of this window.
2. Click the topic **Histograms**.
3. If there is a **thread** about your camera, read it.
4. If your camera is not listed, start a **new thread** for your camera type.

Take this opportunity to help fellow learners. Have a lively discussion!

### Prepare learners to discuss

Discussion activities can be complex and time-consuming for learners. To ensure you do not confuse learners or waste their time, provide complete instructions for each discussion activity. This example prepares learners to participate in a discussion in which they will critique the work of their classmates. Notice the different parts of this activity.

How the activity fits in the course.

“Why am I doing this?”

Created in PowerPoint and converted for Web delivery using Adobe Breeze Presenter. View example at [horton.com/eld/](http://horton.com/eld/).

**Exhibit your work to the critics**


About activity Assignment details Rules to follow Resources Grading criteria

**About this activity**

Now that you have learned to take digital photographs and load them into your computer, it is time to share your artistry with your fellow learners.

In this activity, you will take a series of photographs and submit your best one for review by the class. Your classmates will critique your submission (as you will critique the submission of others). Then, using the feedback you receive, you will attempt to take a better photograph.

The purpose of this activity is not only to help you take better photos, but also to let you practice giving constructive feedback.




**Exhibit your work to the critics**

About activity Assignment details Rules to follow Resources Grading criteria

**Details about this assignment**

- 1. Pick one of your best digital photographs.** Your photograph must be in JPEG (.jpg) format and no larger than one megabyte. It should show a scene or objects other learners will recognize.
- 2. Submit the photograph.** To submit the photograph, go to the course discussion forum, log in, then go to the *Photos to critique* topic. Follow the instructions for posting.
- 3. Critique the photographs of others.** In the topic *Photos to critique*, comment on three submission by your teammates. In writing your comments, play the role of an upbeat art critic who emphasizes the positive aspects of the work.
- 4. Take a better photograph.** Read the critiques of your photograph. Then, go out and take a better photograph and submit it. Only your last-submitted photograph will be graded.



The procedure learners should follow, stressing the approach to take when critiquing the work of their classmates.


Rules and other constraints.

**Exhibit your work to the critics**

About activity Assignment details Rules to follow Resources Grading criteria

**Rules to follow**

- You are responsible for taking, loading, and submitting the photograph on time and for accessing the discussion group.
- Your photograph must be an original photograph that you took with your digital camera.
- At any time during the process, you can submit a better photograph. Only your last submission will be graded.
- Follow the *Rules of Engagement* posted to the *Class references* topic.



How the activity will be graded.

“What if something goes wrong?”

**Exhibit your work to the critics**


About activity Assignment details Rules to follow Resources Grading criteria

**Grading criteria**

- This activity is required and graded.
- This activity will count for 5% of your final grade.
- Your grade on this activity will depend equally on:
  - the quality of your photograph (only the last one you submitted)
  - on your comments about the photographs of others.

The judgment of the instructor is final.

If you have difficulties of any kind, e-mail the instructor.



### Allow enough time

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Online discussions are not as fast as face-to-face conversations. As a general rule a 10-minute face-to-face conversation in the classroom would require:

- ▶ 20 minutes with audio-conferencing.
- ▶ 30 minutes with chat.
- ▶ 1 to 2 days in a discussion forum.

The same conversation in a 1-hour class meeting may require a week or 10 days in a discussion forum.

### Set up needed threads

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When learners first arrive at a discussion forum, they should not find an empty warehouse. Put in some walls and a few rooms. Start a few conventional top-level threads, such as:

- ▶ **Introduction.** Tell learners what the whole discussion forum is about in more detail than on the welcome topic. Put any needed instructions here.
- ▶ **Administrative support.** Provide a place where learners can request help with any aspect of the course other than content or technology.
- ▶ **Technical support.** Include a thread for questions about tools and technologies used in the course. Start by posting the technical requirements, instructions for obtaining necessary tools, and a general troubleshooting guide.
- ▶ **General comments.** Plant a general comment thread to collect comments that do not fit any existing thread. The moderator can move these comments to the correct thread or use them to start a new thread.
- ▶ **Student lounge.** Set aside a discussion area where students can talk to one another on any subject—whether related to the course or not.

### Ensure learners have necessary skills

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Help learners new to your discussion forum learn to interact and to overcome their fear of doing something that makes them look stupid. Teach learners the essential skills for online discussion. Here is a survival kit of discussion skills:

- ▶ **Replying to messages.** Remind learners that they must click the **Reply** button for the specific message they want to reply to.
- ▶ **Posting new messages and starting new threads.** Learners must understand the difference between **New Message** and **Reply**. **New message** adds a message at the

same level as the current message. **Reply** creates a new message beneath the current message. Not heeding this distinction results in tangled threads of messages with no clear context in which to interpret messages.

- **Writing a clear subject** for the message. For replies, the default is just to add “Re:” in front of the original subject line. Require learners to replace this with a meaningful subject. Otherwise you have messages that begin “Re: Re: Re: ....”
- **Editing posts.** Teach learners to correct small errors in their messages. They may not know they can click an **Edit** button to revise the message. Warn learners that it is not polite to make changes after a reply in a way that makes the reply look false or silly. The polite way is to add a message pointing out that the original submission has been revised and perhaps thanking those who suggested improvements.

## Moderate discussion activities

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In a *moderated* discussion forum the instructor—or someone else—watches over the exchange of messages. The primary duty of the moderator is to ensure that learners have productive discussions with other learners. Moderators perform two main tasks. First, they must set up the discussion forums and threads. Second, they must oversee the conversations that take place there.

### Pick the right moderator

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Normally, the instructor for the course is also the moderator of the course’s discussion forums. However, the requirements for a moderator are different from those for an instructor. And the instructor may be too busy to take on both jobs.

A good moderator is knowledgeable, supportive, and articulate.

- **The moderator should be well-informed and on the ball.** The moderator must understand the subject matter, the computer system, and any software used by the discussion forum or other parts of the class. Or have ready access to those who do.
- **The moderator must have a caring nature.** The moderator must tactfully endure insults and rude behavior, patiently instruct fumble-fingered technophobes, continually inject enthusiasm into disheartened souls, and repeatedly calm abused and abusive respondents.
- **The moderator must be a superb communicator.** The moderator must be able to listen deeply and accurately gauge the knowledge and emotions of others. Not everyone can do this. The moderator must be someone whom others describe as tactful or diplomatic. And the moderator must be able to express complex ideas and subtle emotions in simple, unadorned prose.

So who are the job candidates?

Moderators can come from several different backgrounds. To pick a moderator, consider the following candidates:

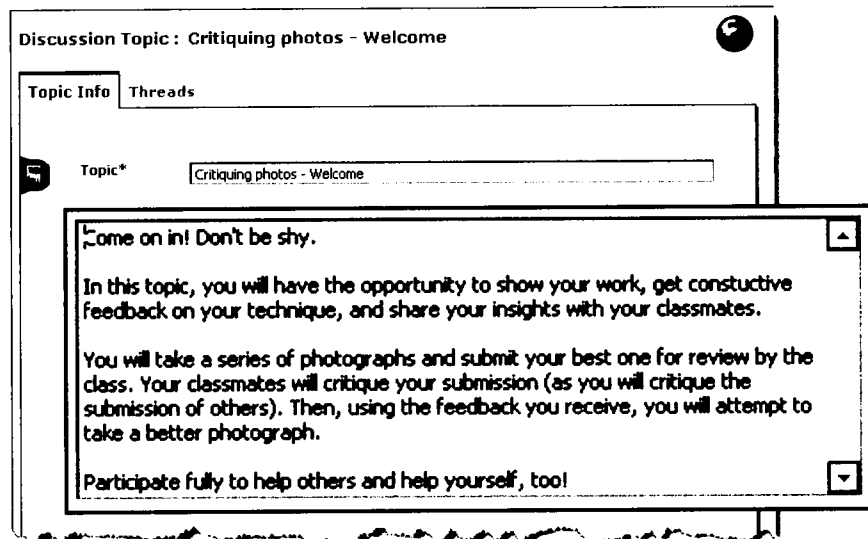
- ▶ **Instructor.** About 90% of the time the instructor is the moderator. Make this your default choice.
- ▶ **Teaching assistant.** Often the instructor will delegate moderator duties to an assistant or instructor-in-training. Moderating a discussion forum is a great way for a junior staff member to learn about learners.
- ▶ **Recent graduate.** Learners who have completed the course may be good candidates, especially if they are continuing in the field of the course and want to stay in touch.
- ▶ **Outside expert.** A practitioner may not have time to teach a course, but may be willing to contribute by moderating a discussion forum.

If you cannot find an ideal candidate, perhaps you should split up the moderator duties. A technically adept assistant manages the technology, while the instructor spot-checks messages, and a learner helps out for extra credit.

## Welcome learners

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For each major area of the discussion forum, welcome learners to the discussion area and explain what and whom it is for. Make the welcome the first message in that area. Here is the opening message for a discussion topic on critiquing photographs:



Make learners feel welcome. Invite them to participate. Help learners decide whether they are in the right discussion forum and the right thread, especially if a course has more than one forum or thread. Link to other discussion forums on the subject of a class.

### **Moderate actively but do not dominate**

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Actively moderate the discussion in order to activate learning. An active moderator should not lead to passive learners. The more actively the forum moderator critiques postings, adds comments, encourages participation, re-words messages, sparks creativity, resolves impasses, soothes tempers, challenges assumptions, and plays devil's advocate—the more active learners become.

Intervene when necessary, but only as much as necessary. Do not nit-pick. Let pass minor, first-time lapses. Many times social pressure will take care of the problem. If minor problems crop up repeatedly, post a gentle general reminder. And give it time to sink in. Deliver polite requests asking offenders to modify their behavior. Assume they are just careless or too busy to read the rules. Save high-power interventions for multiple-repeaters and for serious problems. Then pounce.

### **Keep the conversation lively**

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The role of the moderator may not be highly visible, but it is never passive. The moderator is like the mechanic for a complex piece of machinery, greasing a squeaky part here, clearing a jam there, flipping a blown circuit breaker when all motion stops. The moderator does whatever it takes to keep the discussion forum running at peak efficiency.

We have all known people who are always at the center of interesting conversations. Often they are not the ones who do the most talking, yet they do something to keep others talking effectively. The discussion-forum moderator can keep conversations lively by using a few proven techniques:

- ▶ Start new threads by posting interesting, deep questions.
- ▶ Recruit “guests” to add a fresh perspective or ask original questions.
- ▶ Respond to all inquiries that go unanswered for a few days.
- ▶ Correct all misconceptions before they propagate.
- ▶ Remind people of the rules as necessary.
- ▶ Create new threads for interesting ideas that spring up deep within existing threads.
- ▶ Wrap up tired discussions by summarizing them (or assigning those duties to learners).

### **Challenge shallow thought**

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Do not accept mere opinions. Prompt learners to provide the evidence and logical thought behind their opinions. Challenge opinions by responding like this:

I was intrigued by your answer [Quote it.] Can you explain why you feel so?  
Did particular experiences, research, or other evidence lead you to this opinion?

If everyone else agrees with an opinion, take the opposite opinion. Play devil's advocate. Here are some responses you can use to stir up thought:

- ▶ OK, then answer me this ...
- ▶ I claim the opposite. Can you prove me wrong?
- ▶ Throw in a challenging hypothesis.
- ▶ But what if ...?
- ▶ Suppose just the opposite were true. What then?

### **Perform message maintenance**

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Messages dashed off in haste can sometimes go astray. A slight miswording can reverse the intended meaning. To maintain message quality, the moderator should:

- ▶ Reroute misdirected messages to the correct thread. And inform the poster of the change and the reason for it.
- ▶ Reword unclear or inaccurate subject headers.
- ▶ Fix (or have the sender fix) tragic typos or accidental misstatements.

### **Reject inappropriate postings**

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The moderator should reject postings that clearly violate course policies. Pacify or expel angry flammers. Remove messages that other learners complain about if you agree they are not appropriate. If you must reject a posting:

- ▶ Explain exactly why you rejected the posting. Remind the submitter of your standards for postings.
- ▶ Offer the submitter a chance to re-submit after specific changes are made.
- ▶ Require an apology if the posting unduly insulted or offended others.
- ▶ Point out any violations of a broader policy and the consequences of violating it.



### **If messages are posted immediately ...**

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In some discussion forums, messages are posted immediately without the moderator seeing them. In this case:

- ▶ Alert participants to this situation and warn them that some inappropriate messages may slip by.
- ▶ Read all new messages frequently, and immediately deal with inappropriate ones.
- ▶ If an offensive message slips by, remove it and post an apology to the group. Also require that the author of the message post an apology.
- ▶ Make learners responsible for policing discussion. Let them know that you will assist them, but remind them that it is they who decide what is and is not appropriate.