

# Collaborating online

## Getting the most out of discussions and webinars

### Why collaborate online?

Online discussions and webinars are designed to complement subject materials, such as videos and readings. They give you an opportunity to critically engage with concepts and ideas by discussing or questioning them, applying them to your own context, and engaging with others' perspectives.

*Online collaborations provide an interactive learning environment where you can clarify and extend what you learn from subject material.*

In addition to creating connections with your peers, collaborating online helps you to study effectively and efficiently and prepare for assignments. It gives you an opportunity to:

- practice / demonstrate your critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
- develop your interpersonal communication skills (both written and verbal).
- learn by considering others' perspectives.
- test your ideas and understanding on other students.

### Discussion boards

A discussion board allows people to participate in forums (discussion topics) and post in threads (conversations). Posts generally pose and answer questions relating to subject content – they may be student or tutor generated, assessed or non-assessed, formal or informal.

Discussions are **not usually real-time**; conversations develop gradually as people create or add to posts in their own time. A major benefit of this type of discussion is that you have time to consider, plan and research your responses. It also means you have a record of conversations that you can refer to later.

### Webinars

Webinars are **real-time** video chat sessions led by an academic, tutor or sometimes a guest speaker: these are often recorded so you can refer to them later. They usually focus on a particular topic or aspect of the course, such as an assignment or a key concept. They provide you with an opportunity to get to know your peers, discuss concepts from the subject, practice applying what you've learned, voice opinions and ask questions.

### Strategies for collaborating online

Online discussions can be stimulating and a lot of fun, however, their success depends on the participation of all students. As with face-to-face communication, it's important to find a way to express your views and question those of others in a respectful and sensitive way, as this helps to develop your understanding and critical thinking. Here are a few tips and strategies to help you collaborate effectively online.

#### Tip 1: Understand expectations

Find out if your participation in online forums is compulsory, and if so, whether it will be assessed. For discussion forums, find out the required frequency, due date, length, focus and tone of posts.

#### Tip 2: Prepare

The more preparation you do, the more actively you'll be able to participate. There will usually be **prescribed** and/or **recommended readings** to be completed *before* you engage in online discussion. It may not always be possible to read everything on the reading list in time, so a good method is to read all the prescribed reading and one or two recommended texts thoroughly and briefly review several (or all) of the others. When reading:

- consider how the reading relates to the topic and the main points presented in the subject materials.
- think about similarities or differences between the texts and try to form your own opinions.
- note down any questions and comments you have.

#### Tip 3: Participate actively

The easiest way to participate is often to add to the existing discussion. You can do this in a range of ways. For example, you can:

- agree with what someone has stated.
- ask the contributor to clarify what they mean.
- ask a specific question related to what was stated.
- ask for or provide an example for the point under discussion.
- disagree (politely) with what someone has stated and give reasons for your opinion.
- respond to a question that is asked of the group.
- share relevant resources or links.

Consider the following examples of contributing to a webinar:

<b>Jac:</b>	People in Victoria act as if Aussie Rules football is a religion for them.	<b>Introducing a new topic</b>
<b>Sue:</b>	Yep, good point, they do!	<b>Agreement</b>
<b>Ben:</b>	What do you mean when you say “religion”?	<b>Asking for clarification</b>
<b>Jac:</b>	Well, it’s like they worship it. The whole city stops every weekend to watch the games. It’s like church.	<b>Clarifying</b>
<b>Lin:</b>	Yes, and it’s always in the newspapers or on TV. It’s a constant topic of conversation.	<b>Agreement (with example)</b>
<b>Raj:</b>	Although, over summer, when they’re not playing games, you don’t hear all that much about it, do you?	<b>Mild disagreement (in form of a question)</b>
<b>Ben:</b>	No, I don’t think that’s the case. The papers usually spend the summer discussing who will play for which team or who the new coaches will be. There’s always something new.	<b>Stronger disagreement (with example)</b>
<b>Raj:</b>	Yes, there is always something in the news, but there is much less of it over summer than during the football season itself.	<b>Agreement (qualified)</b>
<b>Lin:</b>	But if football is something that is just frequently discussed, does that mean that it is like a “religion”?	<b>Relating to what has been said earlier</b>

#### Tip 4: Consider your audience

Online communication can be challenging, as you don’t have the same range of verbal and visual cues (voice, body language etc.) to contextualise your words and check your message was received as intended. We may not be able to see looks of confusion, agreement or even frustration. Below are some strategies to help you communicate effectively and avoid misunderstandings.

#### Be objective:

Draw on evidence, examples or reasoning to explain your point/question and limit emotive or subjective language. **Question the idea, not the person.**

- ✗ *You seem confused about the relationship between obesity and socio-economic status.*
- ✓ *I’m not quite sure I understand – could you please explain how you see the relationship between obesity and socio-economic status?*

**Use simple language:** words that most people would know and easily understand.

- ✓ **tried**      ✗ **endeavoured**
- ✓ **use**        ✗ **utilise**
- ✓ **explain**    ✗ **elucidate**

**Be specific:** relate your comments directly to particular ideas or posts, and avoid words that are vague or have multiple meanings.

For example:

- ✗ “Great point: it really highlights the issues we’ve discussed”.
- ✓ “Great example for this week’s topic on reducing social isolation in elderly populations, Lee. Using avatars to help them connect with each other is a really interesting idea.”

**Be concise:** wordy sentences and posts can be difficult to read.

#### Replace longer phrases with single words

- ✗ Information provided by responses indicates... [5 words]
- ✓ Responses indicate... [2 words]

#### Use strong verbs, rather than nouns

- ✗ This paper **provides an evaluation** of Gaspar’s framework. [8 words]
- ✓ This paper **evaluates** Gaspar’s framework [4 words]

#### Use active, rather than passive voice

- ✗ **An analysis** of user behaviour was conducted. [7 words]
- ✓ We **analysed** user behaviour. [4 words]

**Be coherent and cohesive:** structure your response logically and consider the flow between ideas and posts carefully.

**Allow opportunity for interaction:** although your response should be well developed, it should also encourage others to respond. If it is uninteresting, or allows little room for questioning or comment, then you’re unlikely to spark an interesting debate.

## Nervous about contributing?

It’s normal to feel a little nervous about publishing your thoughts and ideas for all to see, especially if you’re still grappling with new ideas and concepts. Just remember that while it might sound cliché, there are no silly questions.

Try to post something early on, even if it’s simply to introduce yourself or agree with something someone else has posted. The longer you wait to post, the harder it will get! As discussions build, you might find that the ideas become more nuanced and complex, making it harder to contribute something new or interesting.

A strategy is to log in early each week with **one or two comments or questions already prepared** to contribute to the topic. As you become more confident you can be more spontaneous with your comments.

## Netiquette

There are some clear differences between online and face-to-face communication, but our behaviours should show a similar level of respect. Behave the same way online as you would face-to-face.

- Be careful with humour and sarcasm.
- Respect others’ points of view, even if you don’t agree.
- Be aware of cultural differences, without making over-generalisations.
- Be polite; acknowledge responses to your posts and respond to others’ posts.
- Never post in anger – if you’re upset with something someone has written, take some time to think about how you can respond objectively, without emotion.

## Academic Skills