

# Discussions Tool

What is the Discussions tool?

The Discussions tool provides an area for collaboration allowing learners to post, read, and reply to messages on different topics, share thoughts about course materials, ask questions, share files, or work with your peers on assignments.

## Why use the Discussions Tool?

- Have you ever run out of time just when a class discussion became interesting?
- Have you wondered how to involve the quiet learners who often need time to absorb the material?
- Have you ever been concerned that group work is often logistically difficult for learners?
- Would you like to enhance the critical thinking level of your learners?

Consider some of the advantages of moving some classroom discussions online.

Use the Discussions tool in your course to:

- Encourage users to share thoughts on course material with their peers
- Set up forums for users to ask questions
- Pose a question for the class to debate
- Discuss the answers to an assignment
- Create forums for groups to work on group assignments

## Scenarios

*Scenario:* You instruct learners to engage in a debate which requires them to work in groups. They are required to present a convincing argument and be prepared to counter opposing arguments. Aside for the group logistics issue you want each group to present their arguments first before reflecting and responding on the opposing argument.

*Possible Solution:* Using the discussions tool to allow learners to engage first in a group discussion (which only authorized group members can access) to fully flush out their arguments. Here they can share their resources, ideas and reflections. Then create a discussion forum/topic with specific restrictions requiring learners to post their arguments before they are able to view and comment on other posts.

## Creating a Discussion Forum and Topic

Forums are used to organize your discussion topics into categories. You must have a Forum created before creating Topics. Topics are where learners post and read messages and they cannot exist outside of Forums.

To create a forum (and topic) select:

- **New Forum**
- If you want to automatically create a topic in the Forum with the same name, select the **Create a New Topic in this Forum** with the same title check box.
- Additional options to consider include approving messages before posted, visibility restrictions; user must compose a message before participating in responses checkbox, availability restrictions etc.

## Availability and Restrictions

You can create and attach Release Conditions if you want a Forum or Topic to be available to users only after they fulfill other specified tasks. Examples of release conditions include completing a dropbox submission, scoring a specified grade in a particular quiz, completing a survey and being enrolled in a particular section.

Group Restrictions is available if you select the restrict this Topic to the following groups check box to restrict a Forum or Topic so that it is only accessible to members of a specific group.

**Note:** You must create groups or sections before you can set group or section restrictions.

## Assessments

You can evaluate users' individual messages and have Learning Environment automatically calculate a Topic score for each user, or you can assign a Topic score directly to each user. If you choose to assess individual messages, you can specify how you want the system to calculate each user's overall Topic score.

## Managing Discussions

On your course homepage, the Updates widget lists the total number of unread messages for all discussion Topics in your course. In the Forums & Topics List (found by clicking on the **Discussions** tool on your navbar), the number of unread messages appears beneath each Topic. To see only Topics with new messages, select **Topics with Unread** from the Display drop-down list. If you have the Discussions List pane visible you can see Topics with unread messages in bold.

You can also choose to subscribe to specific discussion forums, threads, or messages and receive an email notification when there is a new post.

## Viewing and Exporting Statistics

Select the context menu for the Forum or Topic you want to access statistics for. Use this information to determine which Topics are stimulating and which are not. Use statistics to follow the participation levels of different users, so you can send email reminders to users who have not been participating.

## Restore Option

When a forum or topic is accidentally deleted, the **Restore** area will allow you to undo this action. The **Restore** area:

- lists who deleted a forum or topic and when it was deleted
- allows any forum restored to include all topics under that forum at the same time
- enables all posts within a topic that is being restored to be kept when restoring a topic

Simply select the **Move Actions** menu and access the restore area to restore any deleted items.

## Rubrics

Rubrics associated with a discussion topic are visible to instructors and students. Students can examine the expectations for the discussion simultaneously as they engage in a discussion for the course. Instructors can make use of the Rubric to evaluate students and these evaluations can be seen by students in the User Progress Tool

## Integration with Content

Discussion topics are seamlessly integrated within the Content Tool, allowing students to participate in discussions without ever having to leave the Content Tool. You are able to edit and modify the majority of a discussion topic's properties (i.e. availability, restrictions, allow anonymous posts etc.) from the content tool. Simply include the discussion topic in the content tool by "adding an activity" and then access that discussion topic from within content to make any adjustments and view users' posts.

## What tools interact with Discussions?

You can link a Topics score to a grade item in your courses grade book so that users' scores are automatically transferred to the Grade Book. This enables you to factor the Topic score into users' final grades for the course. It also enables you to display the result to users. Users cannot view their topic score directly through the Discussions tool, but they can view their grades in the Grade Book.

