

Guide for discussion moderators

Managing sensitive conversations in online discussion forums to encourage inclusive engagement with course content and classmate perspectives

Your role as a Moderator is to be a neutral participant in discussions, overseeing comments on the topics posted by other participants.

Etiquette guide

Please take a moment to become familiar with these basic rules of engagement for discussion participants as these make up the framework you will use as a moderator to help maintain effective discussions. Please also consider sharing this guide with students prior to the course launch, and/or add it to a course guide.

We encourage you to engage in polite, professional discussions of the course material, and to share relevant experiences, questions, or concerns you may have about course content. Please follow the guidelines below:

1. **Help your fellow students:** *You have experience and knowledge that no one else has, and we can all benefit when you share your perspective as it relates to the topic.*
2. **Stay on topic:** *Post information that is relevant to the course topics and discussion questions. Focus on sharing ideas and avoid personal attacks. If posting a link, you must provide context: What are you linking to and why is it important?*
3. **Respect other students' opinions,** *even if you do not necessarily agree with them. If you feel the need to disagree, acknowledge the valid points in your classmate's argument and provide evidence for why you may not agree with their opinion. We want to encourage critical thinking and thoughtful critique, while remaining polite.*
4. **Be mindful of content:** *If you see content that you believe is inappropriate, please "Report to Admin" so a moderator can review the post.*
5. *We will not remove anyone from the group for presenting dissenting ideas. However, we will not tolerate inappropriate, or abusive language, personal attacks, disrespectful conduct, or spam.*
6. *Participation at your institution may be subject to institution-specific policies. For example, at Cornell, among other Cornell and community behavioral expectations, participation is subject to the Student Code of Conduct and Policy 6.4 governing Harassment and Bias Activity. This course community has been designed to discuss controversial ideas. However, we do not welcome posts seeking to simply inflame or instigate. We seek to create an environment and community that is safe for expressing a variety of views and perspectives. The moderators do not want to heavily police the murky line between what constitutes "trolling" posts versus honest conversation. However, these rules are subject to change if any activity compromises the productivity of the community. Ultimately, judgment calls will be made by course faculty.*

Finally, posted comments and images do not necessarily represent the views of the course instructors, or Cornell University more broadly. Our goal is to provide a space for engagement from a variety of perspectives, and we expect that that you will participate in a respectful manner that encourages discussion.

Best practices for using copyrighted content on a discussion platform

To properly post and use copyrighted content in a forum, follow these best practices:

- Link to the media content with a URL rather than copying and embedding a digital copy of the content in the forum or platform. Using a URL to link to legitimately acquired content is not a violation of copyright but simply an instruction to locate the subject content. Conversely, the acts of copying and streaming the content within a forum or platform may arguably be characterized as independent violations of Copyright by rights holders.
- If you intend to copy a segment or clip of content to embed on the forum discussion, do not use any more of the content than is necessary to make or illustrate your point, or support your comment, critique, or narrative (all valid forms of fair use of content).
- Avoid copying any content from materials created and marketed primarily for use in instructional support (e.g., from textbooks, workbooks, or other instructional materials designed for the course).
- Embedding and using more than a short excerpt of digital content is unlikely to ever be transformative and, therefore, may not constitute as either a fair use or qualify as a §110(2) exempted use.
- Ensure that the content serves a legitimate instructional or pedagogical purpose; do not use copyrighted content as entertainment.
- Place a video in context, explaining why it was chosen and what it is intended to illustrate. Recontextualize the video when appropriate by adding background readings, study questions, commentary, criticism, annotation, and student reactions.
- Limit access to the content to only those participating in the forum.
- For any embedded, streamed content, use available platform technologies that limit others' ability to download, copy, or further distribute the content.
- Notify all participants that all content is only made available for teaching, learning, study, and research purposes.
- Provide proper attribution to known rights holders of content you use, share, or cite.

Discussion forum moderation guide

Moderators can use this guide for assistance in overseeing discussion forums. You can adapt this [Moderation Tracker](#) template to keep track of information about discussion posts that have been removed, or altered in some way due to inappropriate comments, etc.

The following are some general guidelines for moderation and managing contentious threads:

- Touch base with the other moderators, and avoid too many people responding to a thread. Keep an eye on any threads that look contentious. The teaching team is here to guide the discussion and educate first and provide our own input second.
- In many cases, less moderation is better. The community will self-police, and we should give the participants in the course an opportunity to engage with the material and the perspectives presented by their peers.
- Try wording your forum responses as "I" instead of "You" messages. That way you are sharing your perspective: the way you see/interpret comments made by others without actually "attacking" them.

Common discussion moderation actions

Issue	Action	Who
Link only	Encourage students to provide context along with each link. Post a response reminding students to, "Please accompany links with explanation on how this link relates to the course content."	Faculty team
Off topic	Remind users to stay on topic. Close thread and say, "This is off topic" if too distracting. If there is a more appropriate forum, say, "Move to a more appropriate thread" and provide a link. Alternatively, consider opening a new thread in the discussion boards if there is interest.	Faculty team
Language	Take a screen shot and remove the post if offensive. Make a judgment call: if not too inflammatory or personal, consider pointing the student who made the post to the etiquette guide and requesting edits. This also applies for profanity and posts typed in all capital letters.	Faculty team
Needless ad hominem attack	Remind users to stay on topic. If appropriate, use the incident as a teaching moment.	Faculty team
Political rant	Remind users to stay on topic. Close the thread and say, "This is off topic" if too distracting.	Faculty team
Warning signs or threats	Request assistance from your university's central communication office (for example, at Cornell, moderators would contact Strategic Communications and the Center for Teaching Innovation)	Executive director, in consultation with the faculty team

Sample text for moderators

These sample statements can assist moderators in responding to incidents in discussion forums.

1. Add a link to the discussion guidelines after each moderation comment.

For more information see the forum discussion guidelines here: _____

2. Consider copying & pasting directly from the etiquette guide:

a. Debates about expertise; encourage everyone to participate

- i. We are all here to learn, and everyone has something to contribute. You have experience and knowledge that no one else has, and we can all benefit when you share your perspective on this topic.

b. Staying on topic

- i. Please remember to stay on topic. Post information that is relevant to the course topics and discussion question. If posting a link, please provide context to tell your peers what you are linking to and why it is important.
- ii. This thread is off-topic and has been closed.
- iii. Perhaps this forum may be a more appropriate place for this discussion: _____.
- iv. Great question! Let's make a new thread in the discussion board to talk about this in a more appropriate place: _____.

c. Disagreement

- i. It is possible to respect other students' opinions even if you do not necessarily agree with them. If you feel you need to disagree, please politely acknowledge the valid points in your classmate's argument and provide evidence for why you do not agree with their opinion. We want to encourage critical thinking and thoughtful critique, and politeness is the first step.
- ii. Please be mindful of the rules of forum engagement and limit your criticism to the comment, not the commentator.

d. Vulgar language, spam, or personal attacks

- i. No one will be removed from the discussions for presenting dissenting ideas. However, we will not tolerate inappropriate or abusive language, personal attacks, disrespectful conduct, or spam. Consider this a warning, and we would appreciate if you would edit your comment to acknowledge that you understand these rules. As set out in the guidelines, the instructors reserve the right to delete or close this thread.

e. When personal attacks escalate to trolling

- i. This course community has been designed to discuss controversial ideas. However, we do not welcome posts seeking to simply inflame or instigate. We seek to create an environment and community that is safe for expressing a variety of views and perspectives. The moderators do not want to heavily police the murky line between what constitutes “trolling” posts versus honest conversation; we would encourage you to edit your comment to acknowledge that you understand these rules; otherwise, we will close this conversation.

3. Posts that should end because of too much activity (or not enough)

- a. Course staff are intentionally moderating “lightly,” as we want to foster interaction among students. However, this post has moved substantially away from its original topic, and the conversation has become acrimonious. We are closing this thread. Please continue to comment on other topics on other threads but walk away from the discussion here.

4. Distaste for forum guidelines

- a. Please let us remind you that by participating in these discussion boards, you have accepted the terms of our rules of engagement. These guidelines were designed to foster the most productive and constructive discussion possible.
- b. We suggest you refer to _____ module, with particular attention to _____. Here is a direct link: _____.