

## Discussion Posts

During the pandemic, SJSU permanently expanded its catalog of online courses. Now more than ever, discussion posts are vital to online and in-person courses. This type of assignment usually consists of the professor giving the class a prompt to which students must respond and possibly reply to other responses. For asynchronous courses, these assignments act as the active dialogue between you and your peers. For synchronous courses, they typically act as homework assignments to ensure that you think critically about and keep up with the course content. Discussion posts vary in length, writing style, and overall structure from class to class, but this handout aims to provide a list of best practices to keep in mind.

### Review the Materials

A discussion post will often ask you to respond to a prompt based on a previous reading, course material, or piece of media you are analyzing. It is also helpful to review all the course materials from the class that week, your notes, the professor's lecture, and online modules to catch up with the class and allow you to have more information to pull from for your analysis. If you are able to see the discussion post's questions before you read, you can then look for the answers in the text as you complete your assigned reading.

### Read and Address the Prompt

Of course, addressing the prompt the same you would with a paper keeps your writing focused on the topic of the discussion. Consider using some of the prompt's language in your response, which makes it easier for your peers and professors to find where you directly answer the discussion questions. Here's a sample discussion post prompt.

**Professor Lee** - Monday, 9:17 AM

Hello everyone!

For this discussion, we'll explore chapters 5, 6, and 7 in our textbook "Social Media: The New Generation."

To complete this assignment, please do the following:

1. Read the chapters and write a response on the positive and negative effects of social media on society today.
2. Choose one question at the end of one of the assigned chapters to respond to in your post.
3. Respond to at least three of your classmates in a meaningful and respectful manner.

Posts must be above 300 words and devoid of grammatical and spelling errors. Demonstrate your knowledge of the readings, but you may relate its topics to your personal experience. Be sure to define and explain the terminology you use in your post.

Submit your post by Thursday night; you will have until Sunday to respond to your peers.

Generally, keeping your main point or argument at the beginning of your discussion post is advisable. This allows your reader to follow along with your writing rather than be confused and attempt to figure out on their own how all your points come together. This is a shorter writing assignment, and this idea is contrary to a traditional paper's funnel introduction. Where typical introductions have a narrow, debatable claim (your thesis) at the end to ease readers into your topic, in a discussion post, on the other hand, everyone is a part of the same discussion. There's no need to ease them into it, so show them what you want to say about the discourse first!

### Remain Clear, Focused, and Professional

#### *Clear*

Write a concise response and cite information from credible sources. Avoid writing excessively long responses or citing findings from unreliable sources. Appeal to a general audience when creating discussion posts.

**Zaria** - Today, 2:22 PM

Hello everyone! I believe that social media has a negative effect on our society. I have read a lot of articles about this stuff, and lots of people say that young people are especially affected by social media because they use it every day. It can be very addicting, and research from famous studies shows that kids spend nine hours on social media every day. That is so much time! I know how addicting social media can be because I spend hours each day checking my Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter accounts. I really enjoy posting pictures and updates of my life online and seeing what my friends are up to. It makes me feel connected to the world.

I also read another article from this website called BuzzFeed about how social media is bad because excessive usage leads to poor academic performance. This makes sense because if you are spending a lot of time using social media, then you are spending less time studying for tests.

There was also another article from this website called socialmediaforkidz.com. I read about how social media can lower your self-esteem. It was saying things about how people who use social media tend to compare their lives to others' lives. They might get jealous if they see that one of their friends got a new car and then start thinking about how they are not as rich as other people.

Zaria stays on topic, but her writing is unclear and could use some polishing. Some professors may allow you to use more conversational writing conventions in your posts (e.g., contractions, first-person pronouns), but consult your professor's grading sheet first and check out the language used in other responses (or model responses provided by the professor). Make sure to define any key terms you use and avoid using unclear words such as "things," "stuff," or "it."

Zaria also uses sources with questionable legitimacy (e.g., unscholarly sources), and she does not cite any of the information she is pulling from.

### **Focused**

While other topics and knowledge can be useful for some discussion posts, especially those with open-ended questions, sometimes you need to address the reading itself to demonstrate your understanding. Ensure that everything relates to your main point; otherwise, your readers (e.g., your peers, your professor) may be confused.

**Mateo** - Today, 3:13 PM

Social media has a negative effect on our society. Do you know what else does? Violent video games. Youth are more impacted by playing violent video games than by using social media. For example, the shooter who was responsible for the mass murder at Sandy Hook Elementary played *Call of Duty*.

**Kiara** - Today, 9:54 PM

Mateo, although you brought up a good point that violent video games negatively impact our society, the topic is about social media usage. Your thoughts led me to think about how violence can be related to social media; while watching the evening news on NBC, I have heard stories about teenagers who get bullied on social media sites, such as Facebook. For example, some classmates continued to post mean, hurtful comments on her Facebook page. Sadly, some of these teenagers have committed suicide because they could not handle the harassment. Therefore, I believe that social media can have a negative effect on our society.

While Kiara does bring the discussion back on track, Mateo derails it to talk about something different. By doing this, he does not display his knowledge of the reading or other sources. Focused writing is all about staying on topic and removing any unnecessary information. Allow your readers to follow you through your post. Allow them to participate in your response to the discussion by being able to follow it. Consider using signal phrases—such as those provided below—and other techniques to lead your reader from one part to another.

### **Useful Signal Phrases for Discussion Posts**

**ADDITION:** and, as well as, additionally, further, along with, also, plus

**COMPARISON:** similarly, likewise, in the same way, as well, too, in common

**CONTRAST:** but, although, however, instead, except, on the contrary

**TIME:** currently, while, as, now, at first, in the past, later, next

**EXAMPLE:** for example, for instance, such as, specifically, primarily, due to

**SUMMARY:** in brief, in short, to sum up, in the end, eventually, ultimately

## Professional

Be respectful when responding to the prompt and to others. Acknowledge and respect that people have different opinions. Do not use a discussion post to take jabs or complain about the course.

**Hasan** - Today, 8:59 PM

Social media is so lame. It only has a negative effect on you if you're someone like Lauren who is obsessed with herself and with other people's lives...Only vain, superficial people have social media accounts. I only use the internet for an hour each day.

**Izumi** - Today, 10:10 PM

OMG Hasan!!! That is SO rude. Don't be so judgmental. :( :( :( :( :( :( :(

Additionally, be sure to review your post for grammatical or structural errors. This goes without saying for all forms of academic writing; you want to look your best in your written communication. It is important that you do a once-over of your discussion post before submitting your work. Root out any inconsistencies with capitalization, the use of text-messaging language, the use of multiple exclamation marks, and the use of emoticons or emoji. Consider reading the post aloud to reveal clunky sentence structure or spelling errors. In an in-class discussion, conversations can flow more naturally as people directly develop ideas with their groups and respond to one another in dialogue; however, with a discussion post, you are still creating and submitting a finished, cohesive product.

## Be Unique

Looking at other responses, avoiding redundancy, and pulling from prior knowledge are some best practices to take note of to make your response unique.

**Other Responses:** If you can view your peers' responses, take a look at them! This helps you take part in the discussion by building upon other people's ideas before starting your response.

**Redundancy:** Avoid repeating the same claim or idea that others have already written about. It would be awkward to say the exact same thing a peer said in an in-class discussion, so try not to restate their content.

**Prior Knowledge:** Respond with a comment that stays on topic, but if you are looking for more inspiration or something to build on, think about how your prior knowledge, experience, or interests could relate to the prompt or assigned reading.

## Adhere to Specifications

Your professor may require other elements beyond the content of your discussion post. Often, a greeting might be necessary. It is nice to address the class in a casual way as if you were participating in an in-person class discussion. A simple "hello everyone" simulates this, adding a personal touch to a discussion post you do not normally see in other writing assignments.

To measure your effort and engagement, your professor may require a word count for your original post. A total of 300 words is common. For reference, a single page of a double-spaced paper usually has 250 words, so this number may feel daunting, especially if you have multiple

posts to do. If you are pressed to add more to your post, instead of filling that word count with fluff, review your post and see the opportunities to expand or explain to get your point across. Do you use any terms that may need to be defined? Is there a section that may need a quotation from the text? How about a transition sentence to link one idea to the next? Adding these details makes your post more cohesive, and those sentences add up!

### Reply to Your Peers

Sometimes, your professors will require you to respond to other discussion posts for full credit; even if it is not required, this is generally a good practice anyway to engage in discussion. Take a look at how these sample students reply to the same post about the positives and negative effects of social media on society.

**Luis** - Today, 5:34 PM

I can see how social media is both positive and negative. However, I think that social media is more positive than negative. Social media allows people to network with others. LinkedIn is an example of social media. A lot of people see it as a professional version of Facebook. Personally, I have connected with professors and companies on LinkedIn that I am interested in doing an internship with. They are able to view my work experience and can gain an understanding of what kind of a student and person I am. Perhaps the effect of social media on each person depends on the way the individual is using it.

**Cassandra** - Today, 7:27 PM

I agree with everything you just said, Luis!

**Aaliyah** - Today, 8:02 PM

Hi, Luis! You bring up a great example of the positive impact that social media can bring. I wrote about how Facebook lets me stay connected to my family members across the country, but I also have LinkedIn, where employers and people I network with can view my resume and cover letter, too! Overall, social media is all about connecting people with others across the world, and the fact that it can do that with careers benefits society as you said.

A good reply goes beyond saying, “I agree”; of course, you can always agree with your peer, but your reply should also attempt to build upon your peer’s answer in one of three ways.

1. **Compare:** You can always compare and contrast your responses. This tactic works especially well when the two of you answer the prompt with a similar idea.
2. **Question:** Ask where your peer could expand on their idea or where you found their writing or reasoning unclear. You can request clarification from your peer or motivate them to further develop their response.
3. **Counter-Argument:** Where you can agree with your peer, you can also disagree with them. Respectfully provide a counter-argument to your peer’s finding or claim. This could also make use of the second technique (“Question”) where you could ask your peer to address this flaw or counter-point you have found.

## Activity 1: Dive into the Discussion!

Use your knowledge of discussion posts to reply to your peer's response to the following prompt.

Read the following short story. Choose one of the elements of creative writing outside of plot (point of view, character, setting, structure, theme, or language) to comment on whether or not Maugham uses it effectively. Use evidence from the text to support your claims. The elements you can choose are listed below.

Point of view: who is telling the story and how does that affect the story

Character: who are the people in the story and what do we know about them

Setting: where the story takes place and any context for the story

Structure: the order of events in a story organized into a beginning, middle, and end

Theme: what is the moral of the story

Language: word choice and emphasis as well as how words are put together

There was a merchant in Baghdad who sent his servant to the market to buy groceries and in a little while, the servant came back, white and trembling.

He said to the merchant, "Just now when I was in the marketplace, I was jostled by a woman in the crowd. When I turned, I saw that she was Death. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture, and now, please, lend me your horse and I will ride away from this city to avoid my fate. I will go to Samarra, and there Death will not find me."

The merchant agreed and lent him his horse and the servant mounted it. He dug his spurs into the horse's sides and as fast as the horse could gallop he went. He went all the way to Samarra, seventy miles away. Then, the merchant went down to the marketplace and he saw Death standing in the crowd. He walked up to her and asked, "Why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning?"

"That was not a threatening gesture," Death said, "it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Baghdad, for I knew that I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra." ("The Appointment in Samarra" retold by W. Somerset Maugham 1933 from his play *Sheppey*)

**Darius** - Today, 11:59 PM

Hello everybody, I decided to write about **character** in this story. We don't get to see much of the characters since it is a short story, but Death's character was interesting. The fact that she only knows where people will be when they die but not throughout the rest of the day to be surprised by someone somewhere else shows that she is not all-knowing. I think there's a level of fatalism here, that no one can escape what is destined to happen, and not even Death knows.

**You** - Today, now

## Activity 2: Identify the Example!

Here are some responses to a simpler prompt. Can you identify the most professional response out of the four options below?

Topic: What is your favorite sandwich?

**Kai** - Today, 12:33 PM

Sandwiches are the best! Togo's has the most amazing sandwiches ever. Their ingredients are always fresh, and the employees are polite and friendly. I would recommend Togo's over Subway any day!

**Alex** - Today, 2:57 PM

LOL. This topic is awesome. But I have to disagree with all of u guys. Peanut butter and jelly is the bomb! U all r trippin if you dont think PB&J is the best.

**Maya** - Today, 6:11 PM

I would have to say that my favorite sandwich is turkey with cranberry sauce on sourdough bread. The sweetness of the cranberry sauce balances out the saltiness of the turkey. Furthermore, the sourdough bread is perfect for soaking up all the delicious juice from the sauce.

**Camila** - Today, 8:02 PM

I agree with Maya. She said everything that I was going to say.

### Answer Key for Activities

1. Activity 1: Darius deviates from his original topic of character for his response. You could ask him to expand on the subject or if he intended to discuss theme in his response. He also does not make use of any textual evidence and uses terms that he does not define so that his peers can follow. You can ask him questions in your reply so he can expand upon and improve his post.
2. Activity 2: Maya addressed the topic and contributed original thoughts to the discussion. In addition, she used proper grammar and provided supporting details to bolster her argument. Kai did not specifically address the given topic. Alex used informal, non-professional language, and Camila simply stated her agreement with Maya, which did not add to the discussion.

### References

- Maugham, W. Somerset. *Sheppey. The Collected Plays of W. Somerset Maugham*, Heinemann, 1961.
- Nappa, Kellie. "How to Write a Strong Discussion Post." *Johnson & Wales University*, 4 Jan. 2023, [online.jwu.edu/blog/how-write-strong-discussion-post-infographic#:~:text=What%20is%20a%20Discussion%20Post,evidence%20to%20back%20it%20up](https://online.jwu.edu/blog/how-write-strong-discussion-post-infographic#:~:text=What%20is%20a%20Discussion%20Post,evidence%20to%20back%20it%20up).
- "Writing a successful discussion board post." *University of Nevada, Reno*, 13 May 2021, [www.unr.edu/writing-speaking-center/student-resources/writing-speaking-resources/writing-a-successful-discussion-board-post](http://www.unr.edu/writing-speaking-center/student-resources/writing-speaking-resources/writing-a-successful-discussion-board-post).