This page provides guidance for students on how to make the most of online study.

Online study at UNSW is often one component of campus-based learning and teaching. When used this way, the online activities and resources are there to support and complement other course components such as lectures and practicals. For example, you might be required to take part in online tutorial discussions or collaborate with fellow students in an online small-group project.

Some courses are entirely online. They have no campus-based components, and the online learning activities and resources are the main focus of study.

Regardless of your mode of study, or whether you are on or off campus, it's important to make the most of the online components of your course.

**Online participation guidelines**

General politeness, characteristics of online discussions and hints for new users.

For many of you this will be your first experience of participating in tutorials and discussion groups using the Internet. To help you successfully use this new approach, here are some general guidelines—also known as “netiquette”—for participating in an online discussion group. Your tutor will also tell you about any other rules specifically relating to the way your sessions are conducted.

**General politeness**

A computer-based discussion is similar to a normal face-to-face discussion session—it's a personal exchange of information. So it's important to observe the everyday courtesies you would employ in normal conversation. You should:

- be polite and avoid the use of bad language
- respect other’s point of view
- be aware of cultural differences, and
- be careful with humour and sarcasm.

**Characteristics of online discussions**

In an online rather than a face-to-face discussion, you will notice some differences in interactions with your fellow
students, and in the way you contribute to the discussion. If you are not taking part in a virtual classroom session, the discussion is usually conducted "asynchronously", that is, over an extended time—one or two days, a week or a semester. This allows participants either to respond immediately to discussion points or to take some extra time to give a more considered response.

Ideas and impressions are transmitted by text, so you will not have the advantage of body language to help you interpret meaning. Be careful to clearly convey your message and be aware that your classmates’ views may change in the course of the discussion. Try not to be judgmental, and give people the benefit of the doubt.

Hints for new users

- Make a regular commitment to log on and check your messages and any discussions you’re involved in, so that you can remain in touch with the group.
- Only use capital letters for specific purposes such as headings. Capitalised text can seem like SHOUTING.
- Read all the contributions before you reply. It can be annoying if the same ideas are repeated once the discussion has moved on to other topics.
- Re-read your message before you send it. If you inadvertently send the wrong message, you will need to contact the system administrator to have it erased.
- As a general rule, try to keep your messages reasonably short.
- When contributing to the discussion, try to move the conversation forward rather than making statements that could kill the conversation.
- The rules of copyright and plagiarism apply to electronic discussion groups just as they do elsewhere. If you use someone else’s ideas, cite them appropriately.

Online discussions

Studying online - what makes a good online discussion?

Online study is different from learning by attending lectures and tutorials. Sometimes there are no lectures at all, and the course readings stand in for them. Course readings may be in print, in a textbook or printed-out collection, or they may be presented online in Moodle, or on the Web. By keeping up with the weekly reading you keep up with the course content.

An alternative to tutorials or seminars is online discussion. Use online discussions to keep in contact with what the tutor and the other students are thinking and doing, and to contribute your own ideas to the discussion.

Log in and contribute to the discussion at least twice a week (preferably more often) to gain the maximum benefit from this form of study. You don’t have to post a long, carefully-written piece, but you should put up a thoughtful and thought-provoking post on the topic that will keep the discussion lively and stimulating.

What makes a good online discussion?

Online discussions will help you to develop your understanding by thinking about the topic, by expressing your ideas about it and by taking account of other students’ ideas. Sharing knowledge and ideas through discussion is a natural way for people to learn—an online discussion works the same way. The difference is that it is in writing, which gives people time to reflect before they respond.

Sending a message to an online discussion is called "posting". Generally, there are four kinds of posts you will contribute at different times. These are:

1. introductory
2. information sharing
3. question or comment (questions and responses to other people’s posts) and
4. topic analysis.

Desirable characteristics of different post types

Introductory—You may be asked to introduce yourself as you would in a tutorial. The online introduction is even more
important because an online discussion is a particular kind of social situation. When you’re new to online discussion, the written introduction gives you practice in using the online medium.

**Information sharing**—You will often be asked to share information online. This may be something the tutor has asked for, or you may have something of your own to share on the topic, from your reading or other research you have done, or from your existing knowledge or experience. Information sharing helps you to get started, and it also helps the tutor and the other participants.

**Question or comment**—These posts form a discussion by posing questions or commenting constructively on other people’s posts. These kinds of posts actually make it a discussion rather than a collection of monologues. It’s just as important for you to ask questions, or to express your confusion about an aspect of the topic, as it is for you to post a substantial topic analysis.

**Topic analysis**—This is probably the most important type of post, as it is often the part of a discussion that is assessed. The best post is substantial, demonstrates that you’ve done the reading, and reveals your command of the topic by relating it to your own ideas, knowledge and experience.

When making a topic analysis post, follow these rules:

- Respond to other people in the discussion as well as the tutor.
- Aim for a post of at least 200 words. However, sometimes a short question or observation can help develop the discussion in a new way.
- Make a statement that develops the discussion with your own ideas. If other students have outlined the main issues on the topic, acknowledge this and try to develop these ideas further.
- Don’t be afraid to express your own ideas and opinions (as long as they are relevant to the discussion topic).
- Return to the discussion regularly to stay in touch with how it is evolving.
- Post regularly to maintain your own involvement.

**Acknowledgement**

This page is adapted from a document of the same name (version: BA300112), developed by staff at the Learning and Teaching Unit UNSW, and includes material adapted from handouts developed by faculty teaching staff at UNSW.

**References**