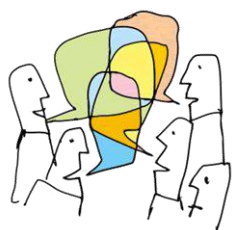


## Discussion Forums in Moodle

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Discussion forums offer great opportunities for building community beyond the classroom. They allow students to reflect publicly about what they are learning and to negotiate shared understanding. Forums are a great leveler, enabling all students to actively participate in a discussion regardless of where they fall on the introvert-extrovert spectrum.

### I. Quick Tips for Successful Discussions

- In general, make a point of clarifying your expectations for student participation in forums—both for the quantity and quality of student responses. Be sure to address participation in your course syllabus and grade requirements.
- As you create a forum, consider how the topic relates to the course objectives—what skills, knowledge or dispositions will the forum support? Communicating the relevance of a forum to your students can help to elevate participation from "busy work" to a solid learning experience.
- Be "present" in your forums—you don't always have to reply to every post (although it is recommended that you greet each student who posts to a "let's get acquainted" forum), but do chime in from time to time with a comment or follow-up question. Consider summarizing a discussion or pointing out the major themes that you've observed at the conclusion of the posting period.
- Ask provocative questions. Provide a variety of discussion prompts throughout the term to stimulate discussion: ask students to take a side or to debate an issue, offer a scenario and have students devise an analysis or solution, present a current event or cultural trend and have students tie it to the topic at hand—the possibilities are endless!

### II. Forum Creation

To create a forum:

1. With editing turned on, click on **Add an activity or resource....** and select **Advanced forum** (Figure 1).
2. Enter a short but intriguing **name** for the forum (Figure 2). Note that the name of the forum will determine the width of the corresponding column in the grade book. Include due dates and other details in the description area, not in the title.

**TIP:** Number assignments and forums for quick reference. For example, the forum shown in Figure 3 below is the second activity in week 7.



Figure 1: Select Advanced Forum

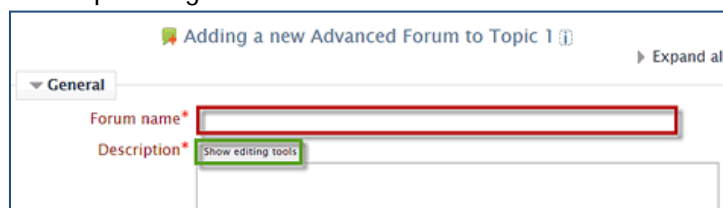


Figure 2: Add Title and Forum Prompt

- Click on **Show editing tools** if you intend to format text or to insert an image or a link to a file or website in the discussion prompt (Figure 2, above).
- Enter a discussion prompt in the **Description** area (Figure 3). Be sure to include **instructions for students** describing how to participate in the forum, such as "Use the **Add a new discussion topic** link to post your reply" or "Click on **Reply** to post your response," depending on the type of forum you create.

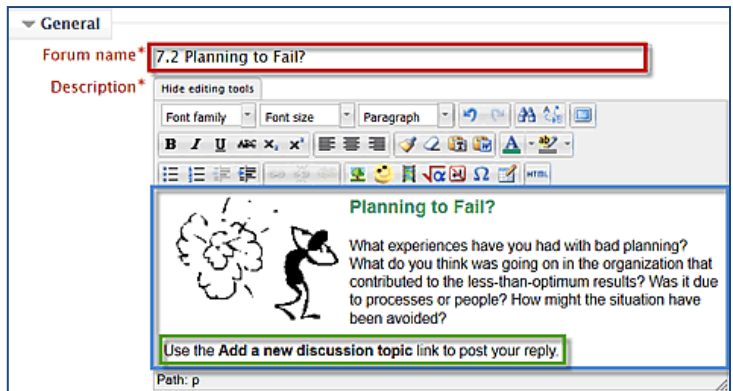


Figure 3: Sample Forum Name & Description

#### Discussion Prompt Tips

- Use an image to add interest.
  - Be clear about what you are asking students to consider and discuss.
  - Ask clarifying questions to shape the discussion and encourage critical thinking.
  - Reiterate expectations for posting (e.g., one original post and replies to two students, requirements for citing sources, etc.) and due dates, if any.
- Check the **Display description on course page** box (Figure 4) if you wish to have the prompt displayed on the course home page. Keep in mind that doing so will contribute to the infamous Moodle "Death Scroll," requiring students to scroll past it to locate other activities and resources in your site.
  - Use the **Forum type** drop-down menu (Figure 4) to select the type of forum that you want to use.

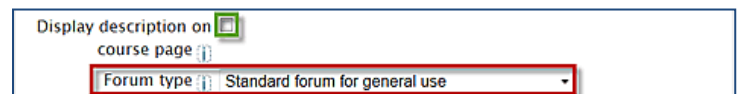


Figure 4: Forum Type

**Note:** Forums do not have date settings for availability as assignments do; they are visible and available or hidden.

### III. Types of Forums

There are five main types of forums in Moodle. Usually, a "Standard" forum will serve your objectives, but you may find that another type meets a special need for structure or content. **CAUTION:** Once students have begun posting to a forum, changing the forum type can cause page problems.

**A. Standard forum for general use.** A standard forum is the default discussion type and it's great for establishing clear conversational threads. Students use an "Add a new discussion topic" link (Figure 5) to post an initial thread. They may reply to anyone's post and may use the new discussion topic link as many times as they wish.

**IMPORTANT:** Select only this type of forum for **group** work; other forum types do **not** allow students to reply.

**TIP:** To have your students reply to specific threads and eliminate the possibility of creating new topics, see **Prevention of New Threads** on page 8.

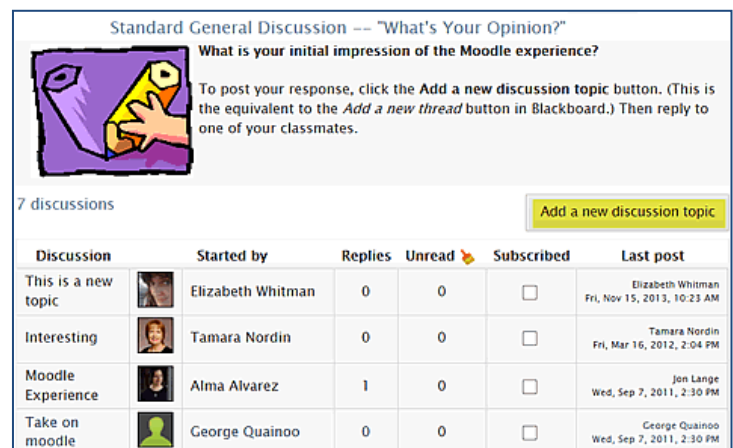


Figure 5: Standard General Format

**B. Each person posts one discussion.** Forums that limit participants to posting one discussion are similar to the standard general forum but with a twist—each person may use the "Add a new discussion topic" link just once (Figure 6). After posting an initial thread, students may reply to as many other postings as they wish, but they cannot initiate any more new threads. This kind of forum can be useful for students posting work for all other students to critique.

**C. Q and A forum.** A Q and A forum (Figure 7) is one way to ensure that students make original posts without cadging ideas off their classmates. Before students can read replies made by others, they must first post a reply of their own (Figure 8). After waiting out the 15-minute grace period set aside for editing a post and refreshing the screen, they will be able to read and reply to all of the other current and future posts made in the forum.

**IMPORTANT:** You must post a thread to initiate the discussion. Students do not have an "Add a new discussion topic" link in this forum format. If you do not make an initial post, they will not be able to post. Be sure to provide clear instructions to your students about replying to your initial thread to make their post.

**D. Single simple discussion.** In single simple forums, students see your prompt and use a **Reply** link to post their thoughts (Figure 9). They can also **Reply** to other students. All responses are immediately open and visible to other students. This type of forum is great for free ranging discussions as students can easily read posts made by their classmates and build off their ideas.

**E. Standard forum displayed in a blog-like format.** The blog-like format offers a different view of standard posts. Rather than just seeing the title of the post, course participants see the first 75-100 words displayed along with the subject line (Figure 10). Students click on an **Add a new topic** link to create a post, then click on **Discuss this topic** to read an entire post and reply. Unlike the standard forum, a forum displayed in blog-like format will not support group work.

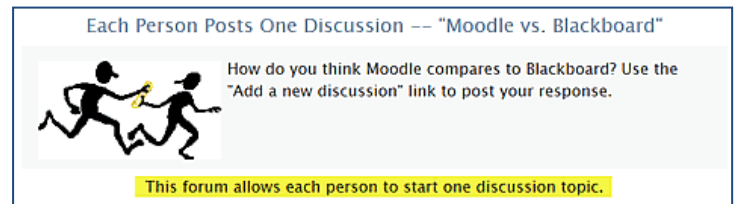


Figure 6: Each Person Posts One Discussion Format

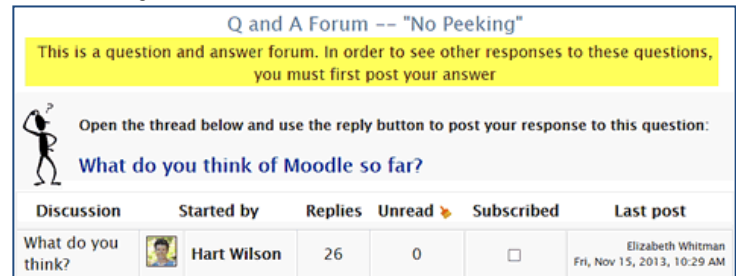


Figure 7: Q & A Forum Format

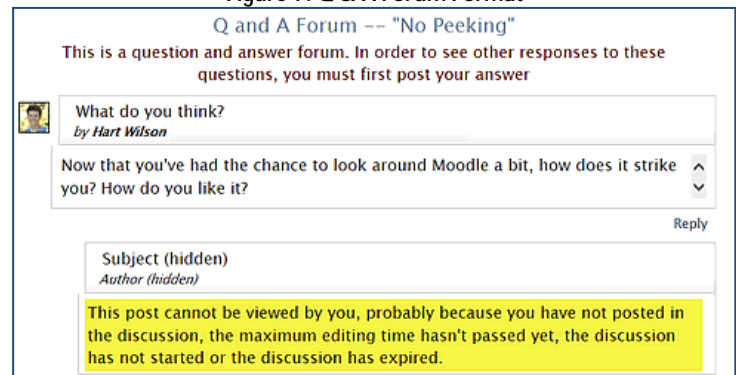


Figure 8: Q & A Hidden Post

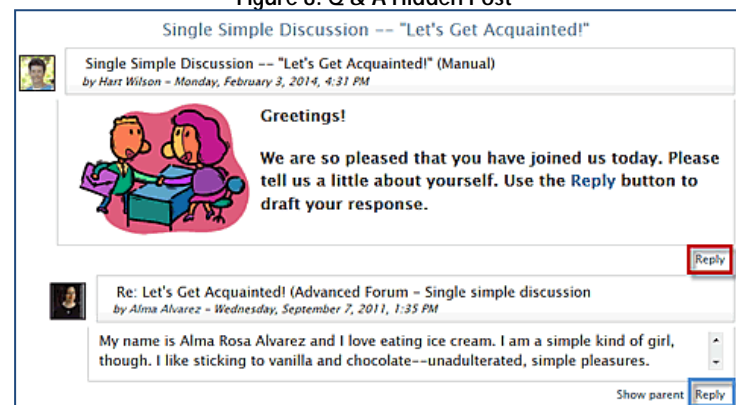


Figure 9: Single Simple Discussion Format

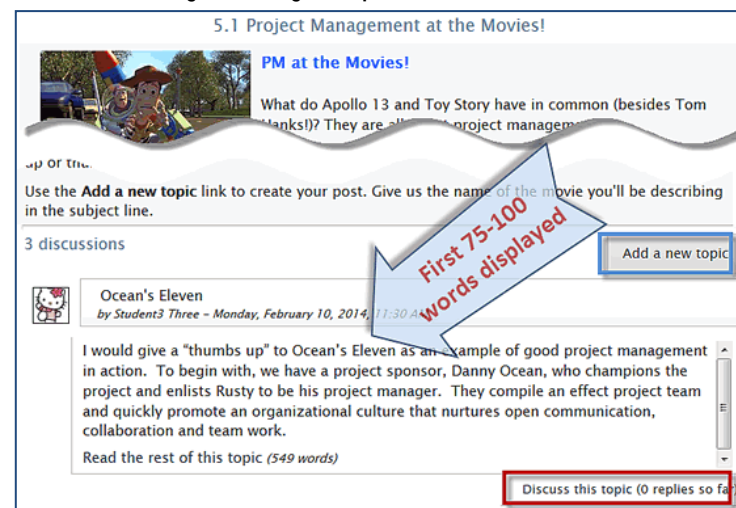
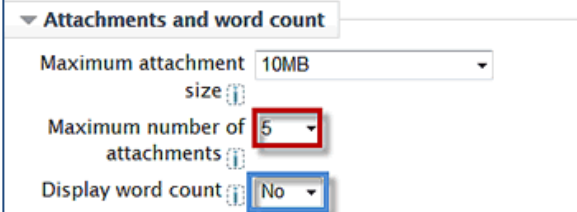


Figure 10: Standard Forum in Blog-like Format

## IV. Forum Options

**Enable anonymous posting.** This setting might be useful in certain cases, but should be used with careful instructions regarding appropriate kinds of participation.

**Attachments and word count.** If you want students to be able to **attach files** to their posts, indicate the number of files they may upload with each post (Figure 11). Use the drop-down menu provided to have the **word count** displayed with each post. All course participants will be able to see the word count if you activate it.



▼ Attachments and word count

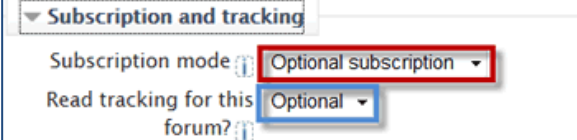
Maximum attachment size 10MB

Maximum number of attachments 5

Display word count No

Figure 11: Attachments & Word Count

**Subscription and tracking.** When you are subscribed to a forum, you will receive an email copy of posts made by all other posters. There are four **subscription modes** available (Figure 12):



▼ Subscription and tracking

Subscription mode Optional subscription

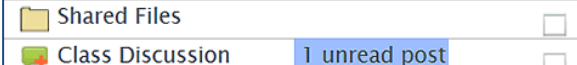
Read tracking for this forum? Optional

Figure 12: Subscription & Tracking

- Optional subscription – Participants can choose whether to be subscribed.
- Forced subscription – Everyone is subscribed and cannot unsubscribe.
- Auto subscription – Everyone is subscribed initially, but can choose to unsubscribe at any time.
- Subscription disabled – Subscriptions are not allowed.

Being inundated with email can be annoying, so **Forced subscription** should only be activated with due consideration.

**Read tracking** settings affect users' ability to track unread posts so that new posts will be highlighted on the course home page (Figure 13). Changing the status of this item may override the user's settings for this forum. **Note:** If new posts are not highlighted on your course page, update your profile settings to enable this feature.

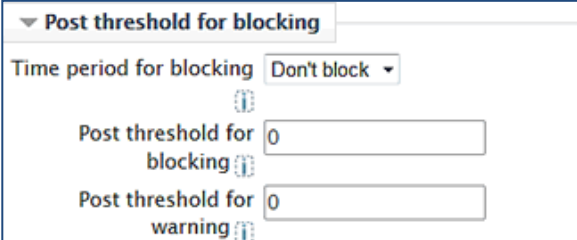


Shared Files

Class Discussion  1 unread post

Figure 13: Tracking Unread Posts

**Post threshold for blocking.** To restrict students who might abuse the forum environment by dominating a discussion, you can set a threshold for the number of posts that a student may make in a given time period (Figure 14).



▼ Post threshold for blocking

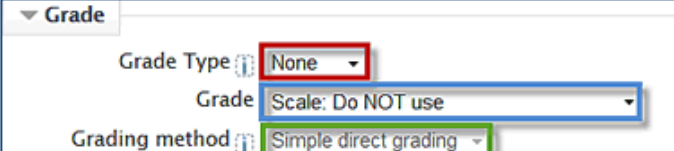
Time period for blocking Don't block

Post threshold for blocking 0

Post threshold for warning 0

Figure 14: Threshold for Blocking

**Grade.** To give one overall grade for a student's participation in a forum, choose "Manual" as the **Grade Type** (Figure 15). To attach points directly to each post in the discussion itself, choose "Rating." (See **Grading Advanced Forums**, page 5.)



▼ Grade

Grade Type None

Grade Scale: Do NOT use

Grading method Simple direct grading

Figure 15: Grade Options

Choose a maximum **grade** for the discussion. Please ignore the scale options! They do not work as expected. You may choose "No grade" to enable individual feedback without requiring a score. **Note:** Assigning a grade will automatically create an item in the grade book for this forum.

In the **Grading method** field (Figure 15), leave the forum set for simple direct grading to enter scores directly or select an advanced grading type (rubric, marking guide or checklist).



**Ratings. Important:** For "Rating" enabled forums, you must open this option area and indicate how you want Moodle to calculate scores in the **Aggregate type** field. Scores can be aggregated in a variety of ways (Figure 17); most instructors use **Sum of ratings** to calculate forum scores. **Note:** The total sum will not exceed the total points possible.

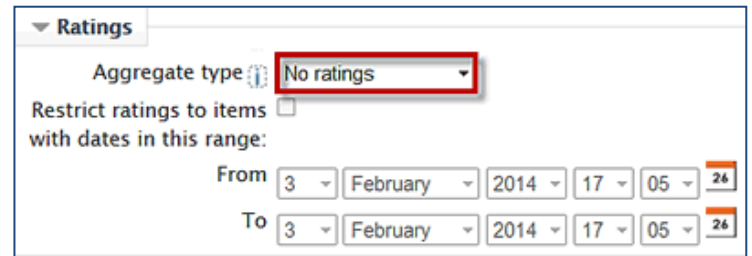


Figure 16: Rating Options

For forums set up for "Manual" scoring, make sure this option is set to "No rating."

Set dates in the **Restrict ratings to items with dates in this range** field if you want to limit the posts that you evaluate in a forum set for "Rating." Students will still be able to post after the closing date, but late posts will not be accompanied by a scoring menu. (**Note:** Date restrictions are not an option for Manual scoring.)

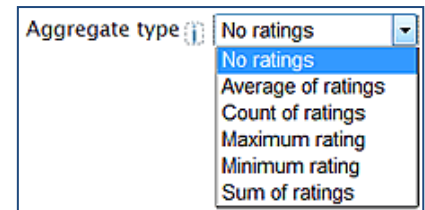


Figure 17: Aggregate Types

**Common module settings.** These settings control availability (visibility) of the forum and group access (Figure 18). In the **Group mode** field, select Separate or Visible groups to limit access to the discussion to groups of students rather than having it open to the entire class.

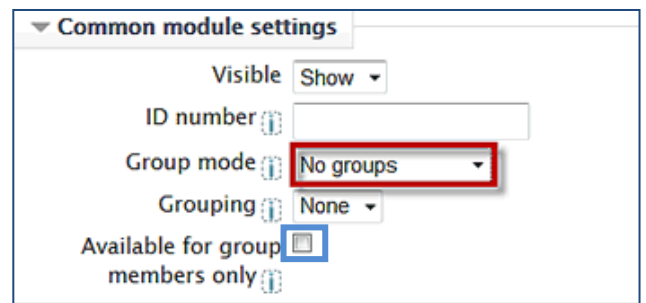


Figure 18: Common Module Settings

- **Separate groups** – Posts will only be visible to the members of each group (and to the instructor). Students will not be able to see the work being done in other groups.

- **Visible groups** – All posts will be visible to all students, but only members of a group will be able to reply to the posts of their fellow group members. **Caution:** The visible group setting can be confusing to students who expect to be able to reply in all forums.

The **Grouping** field is used to distinguish between different kinds of groups: if you have a course with combined CRN's and you also set up small project groups, for example, you might have "groupings" set up to identify each kind of group. A "CRN" grouping would include the CRN groups, while a "Project" grouping would contain the small working groups. With **Separate groups** set up, choosing "CRN" in this field would limit the discussion forum to all of the students in each section, while choosing "Project" would limit the forum to small groups.

Check the **Available for group members only** box (Figure 18) to make the forum visible only to group members. Others will not see the forum at all. If you leave this unchecked, students who do not belong to the selected group or grouping will see the forum name and description, but will not be able to view responses or post messages.

### Group Forum Tips

- You only need to create one forum for groups to work in—you don't need to create a separate forum for each group.
- Students not enrolled in a group won't be able to make any posts in a forum set for Separate or Visible groups. If you restrict the forum to **Available for group members only**, the forum won't be displayed for any student who is not enrolled in the specified group or grouping.
- In a forum set for groups, students will only be able to reply to your posts if you select a team from the group name drop-down menu just above the discussion topics area and then draft your post. If you submit a post while "All participants" is selected, students will be able to see your post but won't be able to reply to it.

- To learn more about Groups and Groupings, see the related article in the [Moodle Knowledgebase](#).

**Restrict access.** These settings function for forums the same as they do for all other activities and resources. We recommend ignoring them unless you have a compelling need to control access to a forum. **Note:** Setting access dates will prevent students from viewing the entire forum before and after the selected dates.

**Completion settings.** Completion settings (Figure 19) allow students to check off the forum if they have participated in it. You can also use the **drop-down menu** to require students to meet the condition(s) you indicate before the forum can be checked off. There is no need to enable the **Expect completed by** field unless you intend to monitor completion for your students.

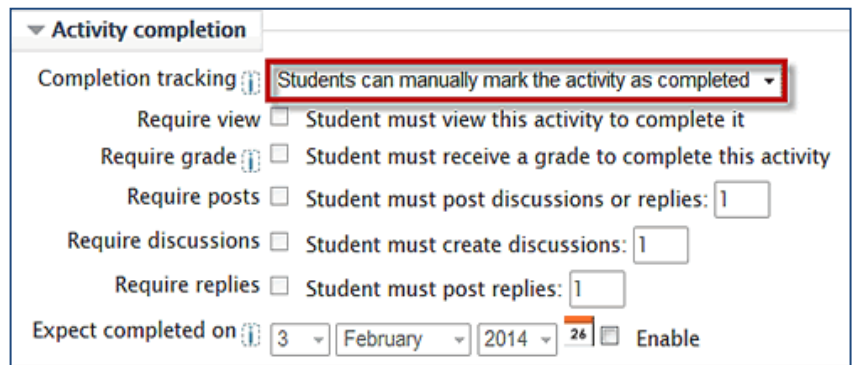


Figure 19: Completion Settings

## V. Grading in Advanced Forums

**Forums Set for Rating.** In "Rating" forums, each post will feature a drop-down menu in the lower left hand corner (Figure 20). Select the score you wish to assign from the points possible.

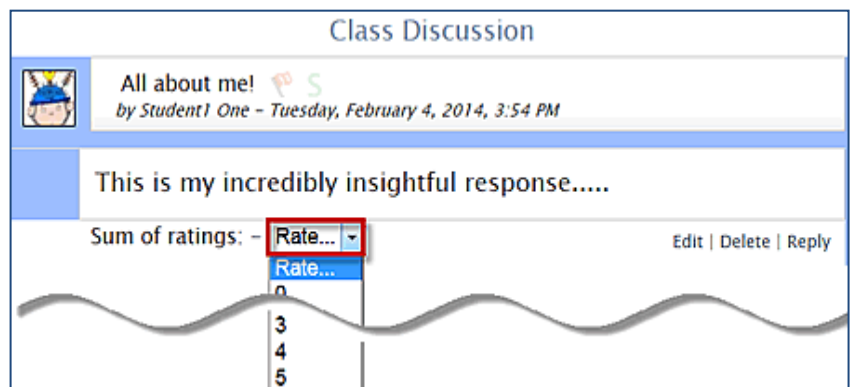


Figure 20: Grading Post with Ratings

### Special Considerations When Using Ratings

- You **must** choose an aggregation method in the **Ratings** options area (Figure 16, p. 5) in order for the scores you assign to student posts to be recorded in the grade book.
- With ratings, you can only offer feedback to students about their posts by replying in the forum or by entering comments in the "Grader Report" view in the grade book (a somewhat laborious process).
- It's not possible to assign points in a forum to a student who does not post. To assign zero points to students who don't participate, go to **Grades** in the **Course administration** block, locate the grade item representing the forum, and enter a zero in the grade book for each non-participant.
- Moodle's advanced grading tools (rubrics, marking guides, and checklists) cannot be used with ratings.

**Forums Set for Manual Grading.** The easiest way to assign grades in an advanced forum with manual grading is by using joule Grader.

1. Click on **joule Grader** in the **Course administration** block (Figure 21).

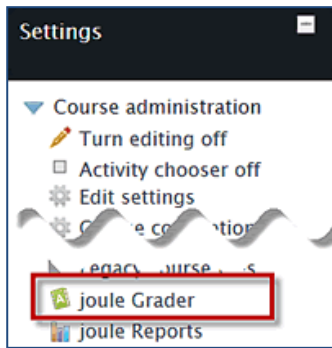


Figure 21: joule Grader

In the **Gradable activities** field (Figure 22, below), use the drop-down menu or the forward and back arrows to select the forum that you wish to grade. The **Users** field contains the names of course participants and allows you to navigate from one student to another.

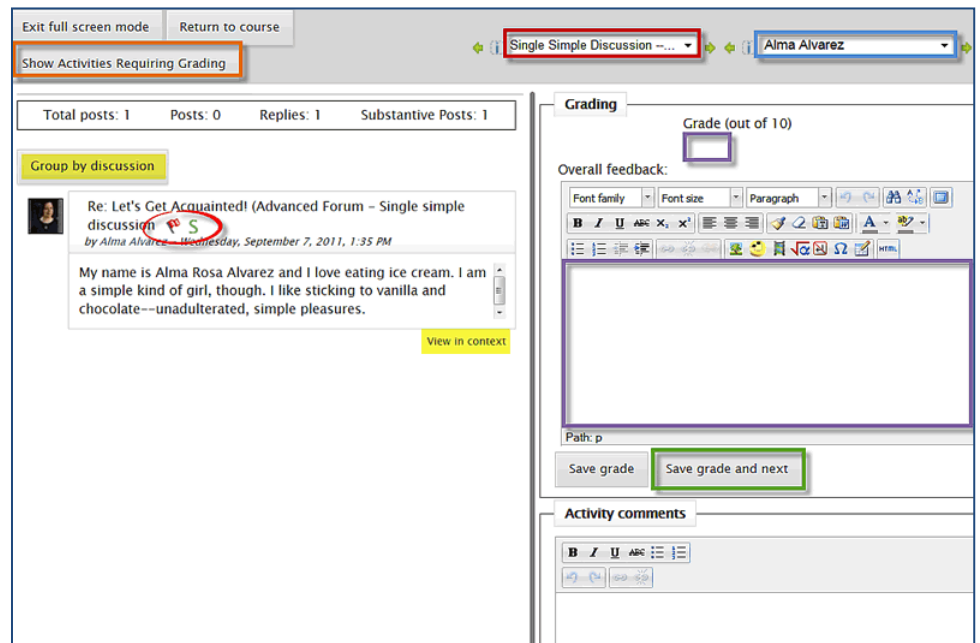


Figure 22: Manual Grading with Joule Grader

All of the student's posts for that forum are displayed on the page. Click on the **View in context** link to open a pop-up window displaying all the messages in that thread. Click on the **Group by discussion** button to see the parent message (the first thread in the discussion) to which the student is replying. (Note that the parent message may not be the message to which the student has replied. Click on **View in context** to clarify the progression of the discussion.) If you previously clicked on **Group by discussion**, this button changes to **Show only user's posts**, which you can use to toggle the display.

2. Enter a **grade** and **feedback** for the student in the fields provided.
3. Click on **Save grade and next** to bring up the next student's work.

### Special Considerations When Using Manual Grading

- For manual grading, leave the aggregation method in the **Ratings** options area (Figure 16, p. 5) set to the default of "No ratings."
- Postings that you read for the first time while you are assigning grades in joule Grader continue to be displayed as unread when you return to the forum. To indicate that you have in fact read all of those posts, click on the **paintbrush** to "Mark all posts in this forum read" (Figure 23).

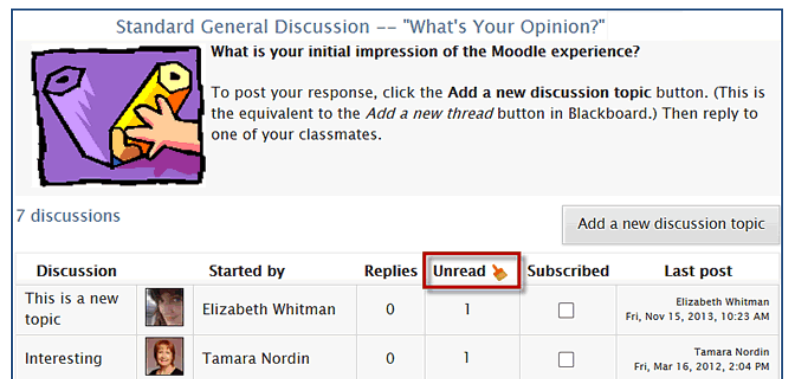


Figure 23: Mark Posts as Read

## VI. Additional Forum Options

### "Substantive Posts" in Advanced forums.

In the example shown in Figure 24 at right, you'll see a red flag and a green S adjacent to the title of Alma's post.

These clickable icons are only visible to instructors. While you can use the red flag to mean anything you like, the green S stands for substantive post.

Note that Moodle keeps track of the number of substantive posts made by each student. (There are no set standards defining "substantive;" this is a subjective call that is entirely up to each instructor.)

**View posters.** You can see who has posted to a forum by clicking on **View posters** in the **Forum administration** block. This report shows how many total posts, original posts and replies students have made. As shown in Figure 25, students only see their own posts. Note that they do see a count for substantive posts, although an S is not visible to students in the forum itself.

**Print forums.** If you'd like, you can download and/or print posts made in advanced forums. To do so:

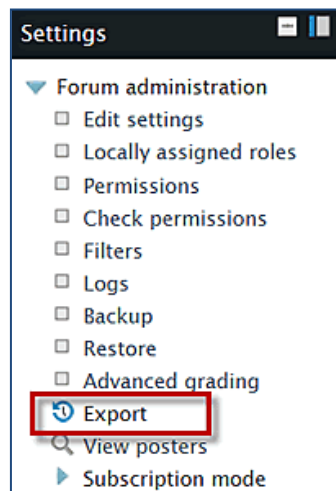


Figure 26: Export Posts

1. Open the forum and click on **Export** in the **Forum administration** block on the left (Figure 26).
2. In the **General** area (Figure 27), use the **Export format** drop-down menu to select **Print** (or export as a spreadsheet or plain text).
3. Select the desired discussion forum(s) and participant(s) from the **Posts for** drop-down menus.
4. Click on **Export**.

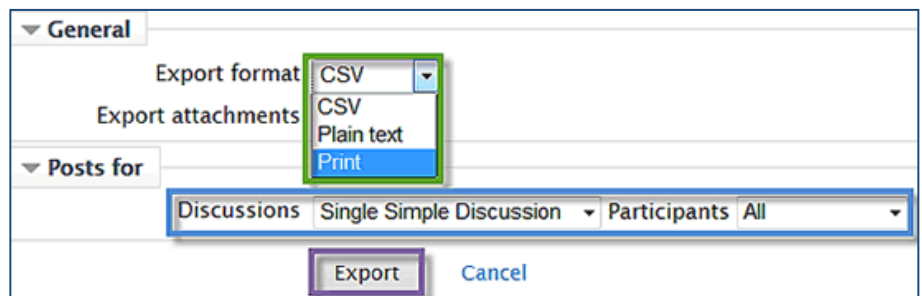


Figure 27: Export Post Options

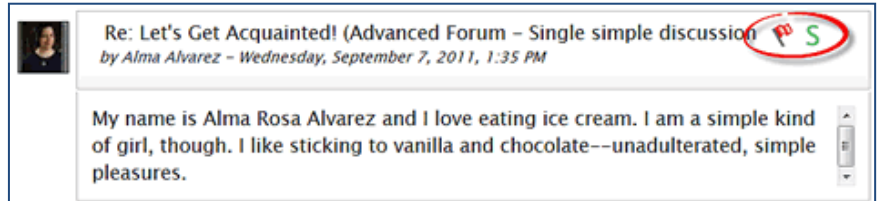
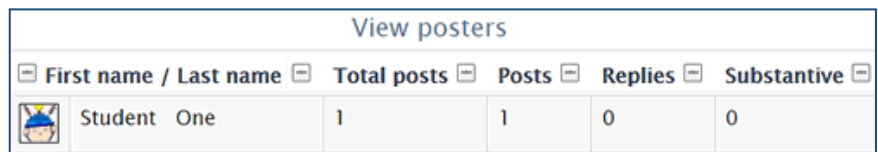


Figure 24: Flagged Substantive Post




	First name / Last name	Total posts	Posts	Replies	Substantive
	Student One	1	1	0	0

Figure 25: Student View of View Posters

## VII. Prevention of New Threads

For some standard discussions, you may want to limit students to replying to specific threads rather than have them post new threads. For instance, you might want them to choose one of two or three topics to reflect upon. If you don't control their ability to add new threads, the forum can be somewhat chaotic, with students adding topics that interest them willy-nilly. Instead, you can add a post for each topic and then eliminate the "Add a new discussion topic" link for students, allowing them only to respond to your initial threads.



To remove the "Add a new discussion topic" link on the students' pages, you'll assign a No New Threads role to your students.

**Note:** This role will apply solely to this forum; students will continue to be able to add threads in other forums.

Here's how to achieve this effect:

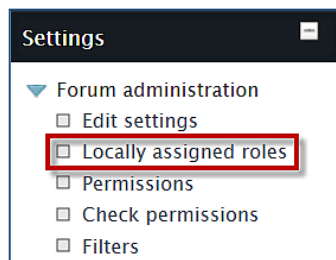


Figure 28: Locally Assigned Roles

1. Create a standard forum. Click on **Save and display** after drafting your prompt and selecting the desired forum options.
2. In the **Forum administration** block on the left, click on **Locally assigned roles** (Figure 28).
3. Scroll down and click on **No New Threads** to select this role (Figure 29, next page).
4. Select all of the students listed, with the exception

of any who might be serving as discussion leaders for this forum (Figure 30). Be careful—don't select yourself!

5. Click on **Add**.
6. Click on **Back to the list of all roles** in the lower right corner to confirm the role assignment (Figure 31).
7. Click on **Back to Advanced Forum: [Forum Name]** to post the threads that you would like students to follow for the forum.

You can check your success by returning to your course home page and switching your role to Student. When you open the advanced forum, you should not see the "Add a new discussion topic" link.

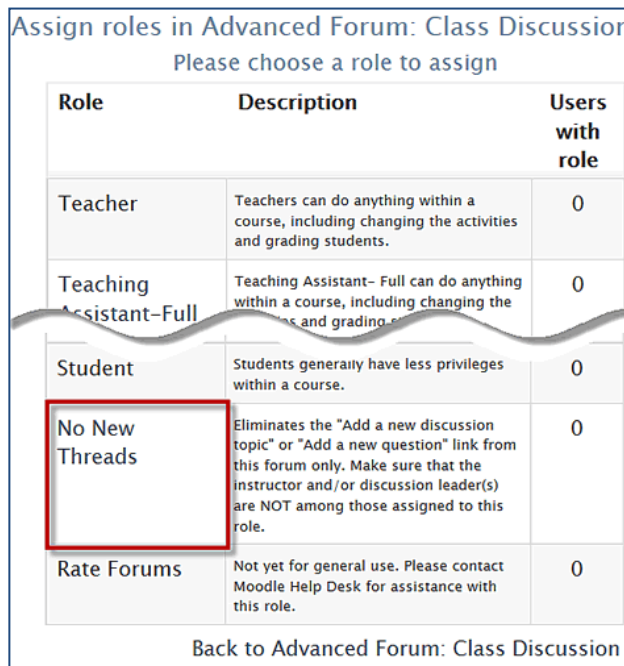


Figure 29: Assign Roles Options

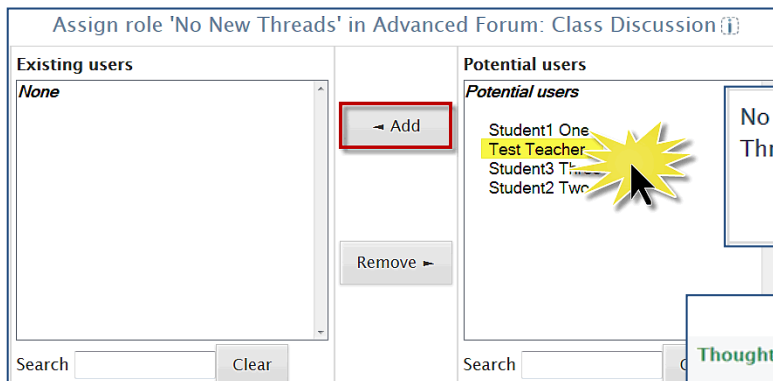


Figure 30: Select Users for No New Threads Role

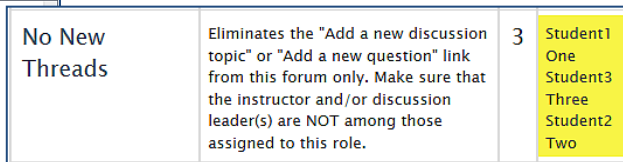


Figure 31: Confirm Role Assignment

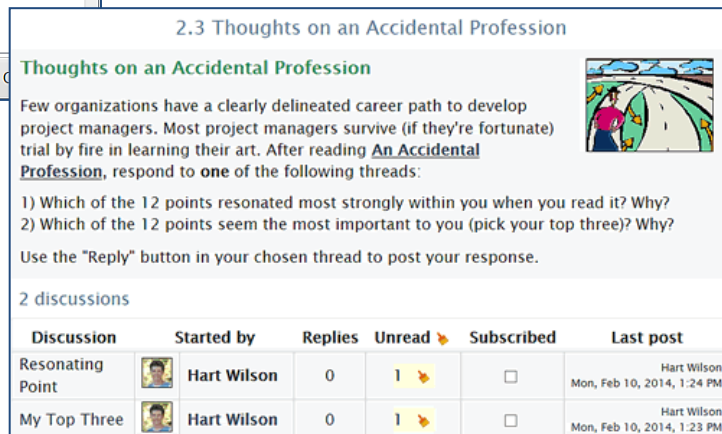


Figure 32: Discussion Limited to Two Threads