Discussion forums offer the opportunity to build community and engage learners 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 learners to actively participate in a discussion regardless of where they fall on the introvert-extrovert spectrum.

## Quick Guide to Forum Types

| Use a …. | For …. |
|---|---|
| Standard general forum | A straightforward, structured discussion with all users able to create as many threads as they wish |
| Single simple discussion | An informal, free flowing discussion where all users reply to the instructor's initial post (**note**: not usable for groups) |
| Each person posts one discussion | A way for students to post work to be shared with or critiqued by their peers |
| Q and A format | A discussion where students are required to draft their posts without being influenced by what others have already written |
| Standard forum displayed in a blog-like format | A showcase of long-form exposition |

See this guide to forum types for information on setting up and managing each of these formats.

## Pedagogical Tips

- 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.

- And speaking of being clear, in the forum description itself provide context for your discussion prompt. Rather than simply saying, "Discuss chapter two," consider what in chapter two merits your students' reflection. Ask them to describe how it fits with their prior knowledge or what surprised them about what they read. Play devil's advocate and disagree with the text's authors, then have your students justify the authors' position.

- 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 worthwhile learning experience.

- 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!

- And while we're talking about variety, consider changing up the types of forums that you use from time to time to spice things up. For an online course, have small groups work on a problem and then share their solution in an all-class forum, or engage them in a jigsaw or role play activity in groups.

# Forum Tips

- Be "present" in your forums—you don't need 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. Ask clarifying questions to shape the discussion and encourage critical thinking. Consider summarizing a discussion or pointing out the major themes that you've observed at the conclusion of the posting period.

- It is strongly recommended to include a Q & A forum to accommodate general questions about the course. Subscribe to the forum (Figure 1) and you'll receive an email each time a student posts a question—just remember to reply in the forum so that everyone may benefit from your reply.



**Figure 1: Subscribe to Q & A Forum**

## Operational Tips

- To have your students reply to specific threads and eliminate the possibility of creating new topics, see [Prevention of New Threads](#).

- 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. Reiterate expectations for posting (e.g., one original post and replies to two students, requirements for citing sources, etc.) and due dates, if any.

- [Insert an image](#) in the **Description** textbox to add interest.

- Check the **Display description on course page** box (Figure 2) if you wish to have the prompt displayed on the course main page. Keep in mind that doing so will contribute to the infamous Moodle "Death Scroll," making students scroll past it to access other course materials. If you do display the prompt, consider unchecking the box after the discussion is concluded to clean up your course page.



**Figure 2: Display Description on Course Page**

- Number forums and other items to indicate where they occur in the course. In Figure 3, for instance, these activities and resources are all located in section two of the course.

- Keep the title of the discussion forum short if you intend to grade it—the length of the forum name will determine the width of its column in the gradebook.

- Include special [instructions for students](#) if you ask them to insert files or respond with more than text.
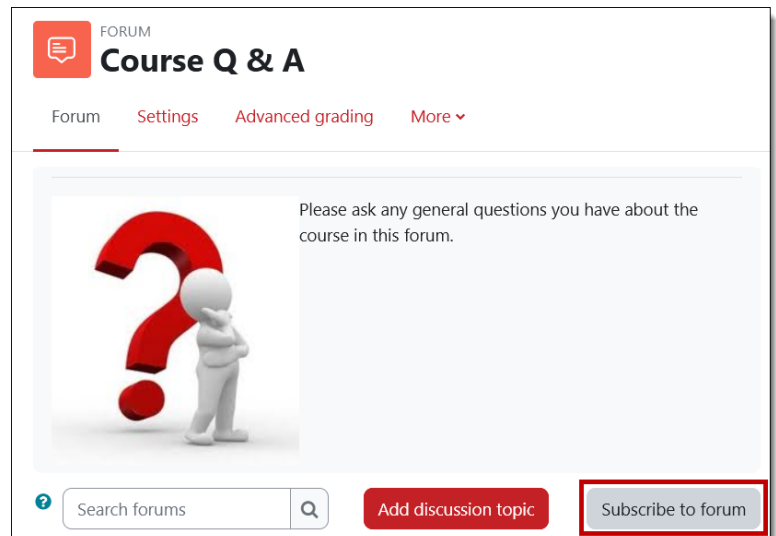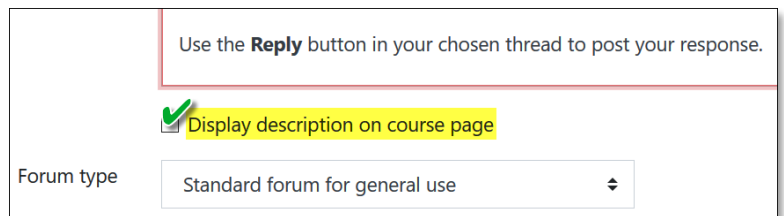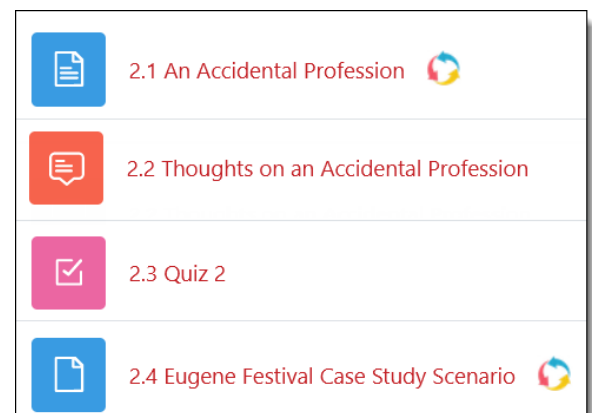


**Figure 3: Number Activities and Resources**

See these additional guides to working with forums:

- [Create a Forum](#)
- [Forum Types](#)
- [Ratings Forum Grading](#)
- [Manage Forums for Groups](#)
- [Whole Forum Grading](#)