

Discussions

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What is the Discussions Tool?

The Discussions tool provides an area for collaboration and communication, allowing students to post, read and reply to messages on different topics, share thoughts about course materials, ask questions, share files and work with peers or colleagues.

Why use the Discussions Tool?

- It can help to build collaboration between students separated by location and time.
- It can give students who need time to absorb the material an opportunity to do so before responding to a prompt or question.
- It can mitigate the logistical difficulties related to group work.
- It offers opportunities to enhance critical thinking.

Consider some of the advantages of moving certain classroom discussions online. You can use the Discussions tool to:

- Encourage students to share thoughts on course material.
- Set up forums for students to ask questions.
- Pose a question for the class to debate.
- Discuss the answers to an assignment.
- Create forums for groups to work on group assignments.

Creating a Discussion Forum and Topic

Forums are used to organise your discussion topics into categories. You must have a forum created before creating topics. Topics are where students post and read messages and they cannot exist outside of forums. To create a forum (and topic):

1. Click on the **New** drop-down button and select **New Forum**.
2. If you want to automatically create a topic in the forum with the same name, select the **Create a new topic in this forum with the same title** check box.
3. Additional options to consider include: approving messages before they are posted, visibility restrictions, release conditions, students must start a thread before participating in responses checkbox, anonymity, etc.
4. Directly create a topic for your new forum by clicking on **Save and Add Topic** or add one later by clicking **New > New Topic** or selecting **Add Topic** from the drop down next to the forum name.

Please note that any options that you set at the forum level (e.g. Allow Anonymous posts) will automatically cascade down to any topics held within that forum.

Availability and Restrictions

You can create and attach release conditions if you want a forum or topic to be available to users only of a specific group/ section/ role, or only after they have fulfilled other specified tasks.

Examples of release conditions include: completing an assignment, a quiz score threshold, or viewing a specific content topic.

Group Restrictions are available if you select the **Restrict this topic to the following groups and sections** checkbox, and if you already have groups available. You can also set up group-specific discussions using the **Group and Section Restrictions** tab.

Assessment

You can evaluate students' individual messages and have Amathuba automatically calculate a topic score for each user, or you can assign a topic score directly to each student. If you choose to assess individual messages, you can specify how you want the system to calculate each student's overall topic score.

Managing Discussions

On your course minibar, the **Updates** bell displays the number of unread messages for all discussion topics in your course. In the **Discussions List** tab of the Discussions tool, the number of unread messages appears beneath each topic with the topics with unread messages displaying in bold. You can also choose to subscribe to specific discussion forums, threads, or messages and receive an email notification when there is a new post.



Display

All Subscriptions

Default Notification Method

Show notifications in minibar only

Send me an instant notification

Include in my summary of activity

Viewing and Exporting Statistics

In the **Statistics** tab of the Discussions tool, you can export statistics by clicking on the **Export to CSV File** button. Use this information to determine which topics are stimulating and which are not. Use statistics to follow the participation levels of different users, so you can send email reminders to users who have not been participating.

Restore Option

When a forum or topic is accidentally deleted, the restore area will allow you to undo this action. The restore area:

- Lists who deleted a forum or topic and when it was deleted.
- Allows any forum restored to include all topics under that forum at the same time.
- Enables all posts within a topic that is being restored to be kept when restoring a topic.

Simply select the **More Actions** menu and click **Restore** to access the restore area and retrieve any deleted items.

Rubrics

Rubrics associated with a discussion topic are visible to lecturers and students. Students can examine the expectations for the discussion simultaneously as they engage in a discussion for the course. Lecturers can make use of the rubric to evaluate students and these evaluations can be seen by students in the Class Progress tool.

Interactions with Content

Discussion topics can be seamlessly integrated within the Content tool, allowing students to participate in discussions within Content. See the [Content tool](#) guide for more information on adding activities.

What Tools Interact with Discussions?

Discussions interact with a variety of tools.

These tools include:

- Content
- Grades and Class Progress
- Competencies and Rubrics
- Groups and Release Conditions