

Using the On-Line Forum in Your 101 Classroom

Many people hear of the on-line forum and are a little frightened by it because they do not think of themselves as technologically savvy, they fear that it will create lots of extra work for them, or they simply feel more comfortable in the classroom proper. If you have ever thought these things, PLEASE read this memo. I thought all of these things once, but after a year of using the on-line forum in my 101 classroom I have come to see it as one of the most valuable tools available to us at the Writing Program.

What is it?:

The “on-line forum” is a space on the Writing Program web site where all students and teachers of 101 can go and write their ideas.

How do I get there?:

1. Go to wp.rutgers.edu.
2. Click “Writing Program Forums.”
3. Click “Cross-Section Forum.”

It’s that easy! When you get there you will see titles of different “threads.” If you are interested in reading the discussion about this topic, simply click on it.

Why would I want to do this?:

1. There are more people to talk to. When students go onto the forums they are communicating not only with their classmates but with students all over the University. Therefore, important issues that other classes may be mulling over, everybody gets to benefit from.
2. More connections get made. When students head into that 2nd and 3rd paper it is important for them to see that a variety of connections between texts can be made. Even if students from different classes are reading the same texts, they probably are being asked to connect them in different ways. When students read about the way other students are connecting, say de Waal and Gladwell, it broadens their own thinking about the connections they are making.
3. Everyone gets to “speak.” On the forum there are no bullies and there are no shy students. Everybody gets the space to say what they wish, and nobody can be interrupted. Of course, sometimes heated debates get started, but every writer gets a chance to respond from equal footing.
4. Student writing develops faster. Students often write a lot of junk into their rough drafts, not because they are not having interesting thoughts, but just because they want to get all their thoughts in there. When students go on the forums before writing their rough drafts and between writing rough and final drafts, a lot of that writing goes there. They have already typed out the

ideas once, they have gotten some responses to their writing, and now they can go write more focused papers (It's almost like they are writing three drafts without knowing it!).

Will this create more work for me?:

Absolutely not! This entails as much or as little work as you want to put into it. Some teachers are very present on the forum, starting threads, responding to their students' conversations, etc. Other teachers (like myself) have a very small presence on the forum. Every two weeks or so I will spend 10-15 minutes (usually while my class is in the computer room anyway) cruising around the forum to see who is writing and if any interesting conversations are taking place. (You can search by username to see how many posts each student has made. Click on "members" when you are on the site.) If conversations seem to be at a stand-still or I simply can't contain myself with an idea I'm having, I'll start or respond to a thread. (If my class has a particularly hard time with the first read-through of a text, I'll start a thread on the text they are readings over the weekend, telling them ahead of time to keep an eye out for it. This way they come into class with a bit of a conversations already started.) Again, all teachers are different and you will have to decide how active you want to be on the forum.

How do I introduce this and work it into my class?:

1. First, you should set up a time to go to the computer room with your class. Go to "Create/Edit Classpage," login, click "Edit 101: (your section)," then go to "Add/View A Computer Room Meeting Time." The instructions are very simple. Since I am teaching a Mon. / Thurs. section this term, I will schedule the computer day for a Monday.
2. On the Thurs. prior I will give them instructions on how to set up a username and password (see Appendix 1). I will tell them to come to class in the computer room on Monday with their username and password in hand. (Note: I usually do this around the time that we begin the second paper, but it can be done whenever.)
3. When they get to class on Monday, I pass around a sheet of paper for them to put their names and usernames.
4. Then I tell them to go onto the forums (follow my directions under "How do I get there?") and play around -- looking at what people have written, figuring out how it works, etc. It is very easy and they will learn best through simply doing it. (If they click "f.a.q." many of their questions about how the web site works will be answered.)
5. At this point I pass around a handout of guidelines for their time on the forum (see Appendix 2). Please note: This is only one approach to how to instruct your students how to use the forum. Some teachers will want to be more or less structured depending on their class and their teaching style. I am constantly revising this handout semester to semester.

I hope this has been helpful. If you have any questions about the forum or any suggestions about these guidelines, please feel free to email me. Also, if anyone has interesting experiences with the forums this semester, I'd love to hear about them. Thanks.

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Appendix 1: How To Set Up Your Username & Password

1. Go to wp.rutgers.edu.
2. Click “Writing Program Forums.”
3. Click “Register.”
4. Read this page and click “Agree.”
5. Insert the information they ask for. (Make sure to write down the username and password that you choose.)
6. Click “Submit.”
7. A message will be sent to your email address shortly. You must click on the link in that email to begin using the forum. (This is only true the first time; after this you will just login at the bottom of the “Writing Program Forums” homepage.)

Appendix 2: Guidelines for Using the On-Line Forums

Now that you know how to use the on-line forum, I want to tell you how we are going to work it into our 101 class.

- You are required to make 10 posts on the on-line forum before the end of the semester.
- I will not monitor or grade what or how you write on the on-line forum.
- I will periodically check to see if you are doing your posts and you will sometimes see my presence on the forum.
- I do expect you to adhere to certain general guidelines:
 1. Be respectful of other people when you respond to their ideas.
 2. Try to work on both sides of the forum -- starting threads and responding to already existing threads.
 3. As you write, try to engage your peers in a helpful way. In other words, keep in mind that everyone is there to learn. You should try to offer up interesting comments that you think everybody could benefit from reading.
 4. Make sure that your posts open up ideas, instead of closing down conversations.
 5. Allow your posts to be multiple sentences long. One word posts don't open out the conversation.