

# Example Code of Conduct for Online Discussion Forums

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## Introduction

As one of the core values outlined in Strategy 2031, through inclusivity we champion a culture in which all are valued and supported to thrive – shaped by diversity, powered by difference. This is underpinned by the [Student Conduct Policy](#) that outlines how University of Liverpool students are required at all times to behave as responsible members of the University community.

Unregulated or poorly guided online discussion forums have the potential to become a negative experience for both students and academic staff alike. As more discourse now takes place in the online space (i.e. Canvas), it becomes critical that guidelines or codes-of-conduct are in place to ensure that discussions are focused, respectful, easy to follow, and remain on-track.

When inviting students to engage in Discussion Forums through Canvas the overall premise should be for students to act as they would during in-person interactions – in an engaged and respectful manner. However, interaction and timely intervention from academic staff can play a key part of a productive forum, and it should be clear from the offset for students that they know how, and when, you as an academic will engage in the discussion. Similarly, it should also be highlighted from the offset how any potential inappropriate behaviour, discrimination or intimidation will be handled.

**Please note:** your School and/or Faculty may have an existing code of conduct, or similar, which may meet your needs.

## Example Code of Conduct

The code of conduct below is intended as an example only and may be used as a template for your own programme and/or module specific version.

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### Module X Discussion Forum Code of Conduct

You are reminded of your responsibilities as a member of the University community to always treat your peers with respect and inclusivity, and to maintain an inclusive environment where all members feel valued – you must avoid the use of offensive, discriminatory and inappropriate language, and be mindful of cultural differences, in accordance with the [Student Conduct Policy](#).

Specifically, in online discussion forums you are expected to:

1. **Commit to constructive engagement:** engage in discussions thoughtfully and constructively. Provide feedback in a constructive manner and avoid personalised attacks. Do not focus on the individual – focus on the idea(s) and ensure that you disagree respectfully.
2. **Maintain academic integrity:** abide by academic standards and ensure your contributions are of your own work. Where required, reference materials accordingly, only share authorised resources and avoid plagiarising others' work.
3. **Remain on topic:** keep your contributions relevant to the discussion topic. Maintain clarity and flow of the forum by avoiding cross-posting and making off-topic posts.
4. **Professionalism and Clarity:** foster a professional environment by aiming to use proper punctuation and grammar, maintaining an academic approach. Avoid the use of text-speak, slang, and strive to write clearly and inclusively.
5. **Confidentiality and privacy:** do not share personal information about yourself or others within a discussion forum – respect the right to privacy and do not disclose information that is intended to remain within a forum.

If you encounter or observe inappropriate behaviour or comments, please report this to the Module leader on [username@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:username@liverpool.ac.uk) in the first instance, or if you prefer to report this anonymously you can report concerns about another students conduct via the [report and support online platform](#).

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## Alternative Approach

Although commonly used for peer-based group work, Negotiated Ground Rules, or a ground rules agreement, could also be an effective approach for the use of online discussion forums. When meeting your students for the first time there are typically several administrative and mandatory course related areas that need to be addressed, and this is the optimum time to introduce the concept of negotiated ground rules – when students are becoming orientated to new methods of learning.

Negotiated ground rules can be thought of as collaboratively established guidelines that are used to set expectations for conduct, participation, and communication within groups. Students co-create these guidelines – in collaboration with the academic – at the beginning of a programme/module, or before embarking on a particular group-based activity. In addition to providing a platform for all students to have their opinion and voices heard, this approach also contributes to a heightened sense of responsibility and ownership for students, which can in-turn lead to increased engagement, commitment, and standards of contribution.

In the context of online discussion forums, allowing students to self-regulate for respectful, constructive, and meaningful interaction can contribute towards a positive online environment and student experience, richer discussions, and a more productive dynamic.

Suggested examples of negotiated ground rules/ground rules agreements include [Writing a Ground Rules Agreement for Group Work](#) by Tom Reid, University of Bath, [Setting Ground Rules](#) by Queen Mary University of London, and [Group Work Contract](#) by Centre for Innovation in Education (CIE).

## An Academics Role in Discussion Forums

### Before a discussion forum opens

- Provide clear guidance and instructions on the required task/discussion prompt.
- Outline expectations of student conduct and behaviour – consider negotiated ground rules or code of conduct.
- Be clear on how you will interact with students within the forum.
- Confirm the open/close date and time(s) of the forum, where appropriate.

### During an active discussion forum

- Maintain an engaged and pro-active online presence.
- Engage frequently and consistently.
- Provide constructive and timely feedback.
- Monitor the discussion is remaining on-task and relevant to the forum.
- Intervene where appropriate and display encouragement.

## After a discussion has ended:

- Thank students for their participation and engagement.
- Summarise the key points made and rich outputs from the discussion forum – or consider delegating this as a student activity.
- Do not delete the forum – you may choose to re-open it at a later date and students may want to revisit a post.

## References

[Conduct Online](#) by The Open University

[Group Work Contract](#) by Centre for Innovation in Education (CIE)

[Graduate School's Code of Conduct for Engaging with Online Discussion Forum](#) by Imperial College

[Netiquette: Ground Rules for Online Discussions](#) by Colorado State University

[Setting Ground Rules](#) by Queen Mary University of London

[Setting Ground Rules](#) by City Lit

[Standard Discourse Guidelines](#) by Open edX

[Writing a Ground Rules Agreement for Group Work](#) by Tom Reid, University of Bath



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