

Guidelines for WebCT discussion postings

To enhance in-class discussion, and to provide an alternative for those who are shy, we will have online discussions in WebCT in the class. Each Friday I will start a new discussion topic for the following week. The topic will remain open for discussion for about a week.

Each week you should make a minimum of two contributions to the discussion. I am asking for two contributions to ensure that it is a true discussion—that is, that you return to the discussion after having made your own initial contribution. If you are shy in class, you can compensate by making additional contributions online. Please make at least one contribution before Tuesday's class. If everyone squeezes in their contributions at the very last minute, we won't have a real discussion; it will just be busywork. I don't want it to be busywork, and neither do you, so be punctual.

I realize that this will demand time and effort on your part. In the past, I have required four or five short papers in writing seminars. This year I am requiring only three, to allow time for WebCT discussions. Your contributions will be factored into the 25% of the grade that is based on participation.

Ground rules for discussion: be polite, and please respond to the ideas of the person whose post you are replying to. Posts should not simply say "yes" or "me too," and they should be written in complete sentences. Unless you have a very good reason not to do so, please respond to the most recent message in the discussion topic.

I will not necessarily intervene in the discussion. If I notice a factual mistake, though, I will correct it. I might also make comments or pose questions if I think they would help the discussion along.

If you have suggestions for topics, please let me know!

There are a few other topics available:

- General discussion – for issues that seem broader than the weekly topic
- Notes – if you missed something or want to raise a specific point about class
- WebCT help – post here if you want assistance with WebCT
- Concerns – an anonymous forum; you can post here if you have concerns about the class, the readings, behavior of fellow students, etc. that you don't want your name attached to (please be polite or I will close down this discussion)

Turn the page over for a brief justification of this kind of discussion.

The humanities: an unending conversation

In a memorable analogy, the literary critic and philosopher Kenneth Burke described the humanities as the “unending conversation” of history:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.¹

This conversation resembles a late-night “bull session,” but there are important differences. In scholarly disciplines, there are rules about what counts as a sound argument and what constitutes valid evidence for that argument. Some of those rules are straightforward, but others can be learned only through experience. As you participate in the different aspects of this course, try to pay attention not only to the content but also to the form of what is being said. The online discussions will allow you to converse with your fellow students in a forum that allows for more reflection than in-class discussion.

¹ Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 2d ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 110-11.