Participating in online discussions takes some getting used to. The first few times you participate, you may feel nervous about sharing your ideas publicly. The more you take part, the more comfortable you become using online communication tools and the more you will benefit from your participation.

One way to overcome the fact that you can't see the person you're talking to is to use what are called emoticons. These little images provide a visual meaning to your written words. For example, a smiling face can be represented by the characters colon, bracket. Similarly, the acronym LOL - L-O-L - stands for 'laugh out loud', and this represents laughter. Only use these if they suit the context and you feel comfortable with them, otherwise it's probably a good idea to avoid overusing them.

OK. Let's cover some basic online communication guidelines. Firstly, "What's the point of participating?" I hear you ask. Well, if you make a regular commitment to log on and check the discussion board, you'll get to know your online community and become an active member of the group. Plus when you take part in an online discussion, the MOOC's moderators and other participants get a clearer picture of your understanding and your level of interest. The nature of this MOOC relies on building a community which enables participants to benefit from the development of personal learning networks, also known as PLNs.

Here are any few things you can keep in mind when you're posting messages.

Try and keep your messages reasonably short. This helps others follow the discussion. If you have something longer to say, try and attach it to a short message as a separate document. But take care not to overload the system with excessive amounts of information.

Make sure the subject line of your post is clear. People see it first and often use it to decide whether or not to read your message. Consider it a promotion for your ideas. Be careful to express yourself clearly and keep to the subject of the discussion.
Try to move the discussion forward rather than saying things that could end it. Don't be afraid to speak from your own perspective and give your own ideas.

So what are the best things to check before you post a message? Well, the most obvious one is to have a quick read through all the contributions. That way you can avoid repeating something other people have already written. You can proofread your message for grammar, punctuation, spelling and layout to make the meaning clear. Try and observe and get a feel for the discussion to ensure the correct level of formality is used.

Generally, online discussions are informal but polite. Check who you are replying to. If your reply is not valuable to the whole group, reply to the author only. Reread your message. If you accidentally send the wrong message, you will need to contact the MOOC administrators to have it erased.

OK. It has to be said. What kind of things are bad to do?

A discussion is public, so it's wise not to write anything which discriminates on the basis of race, colour, nationality, age, marital status, sex, political affiliation, religion, disability or sexual preference, or which might be considered obscene, offensive, threatening or intimidating. This includes offensive text or pictures, for example - pornography, racism, sexism, obscenities, insults, sarcasm, defamatory statements, rumours and gossip about individuals or organisations. Such comments have no place in online communication, where the general approach is supportive and collaborative. In extreme cases, people who persist in offensive or disruptive behaviour may lose access to the tool and may be barred from participation.

Never publicly attack another member or post an emotionally charged contribution. This is considered flaming and it's not acceptable. It is inappropriate to correct someone's mistakes in your posting to the group. Only use capitals for specific purposes such as headings or acronyms, otherwise it can seem like SHOUTING. Never post when angry.

Don't dominate the discussion. Keep in mind that no advertising is allowed, and don't forward sensitive content without the writer's permission. This protects the confidentiality of any content that was intended only for the course participants.

So what happens if you feel like you're being harassed? We would like you to report any feelings of harassment to the MOOC's moderators. Do you think you need more help? In addition to this guide, the moderators will inform you about any other rules specifically relating to participating in the discussions in the MOOC.

If you're nervous or unsure of how to participate in online discussion, please contact the MOOC's moderators via the discussion forums or use the contact email address supplied.

We look forward to seeing you in the MOOC's discussion forums online. We hope you gain a lot from this experience.