



Guide for Lecturers: Mastering Forums - Effective Announcements and Student Engagement

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Target Audience

Lecturers

What is this guide for?

This guide shows lecturers how to use the two main forums in a subject to share important information with students, respond to their questions and keep them engaged throughout the term. It covers posting announcements, replying to students and guiding students on how to use the forums.

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1. Introduction

Forums are one of the quickest ways to reach your students and to hear from them. Every post made in a forum is also **sent to students as an email notification**, so your message **reaches** them even **when they have not logged in to the subject**. This makes forums a reliable way to communicate, and it means **less time spent answering the same question** by individual email.

Forums also **keep communication in one place**. Announcements, questions and answers stay in the subject, where students can find them again, instead of being lost in individual inboxes.

In this guide you will learn how to:

- Understand the two main forums and the other forums in a subject
- See when there are unread posts and keep track of new activity
- Post an announcement and use the advanced options
- Reply to students who respond to your announcements
- Reply to questions and topics in the Subject Inquiries and Discussions forum
- Guide students on how to use the forums

2. An Overview of the Forums in a Subject

Every subject created with the template has two main forums at the top of the page, visible as soon as you log in. Other forums, placed within the relevant sections, cover specific topics or purposes. This guide focuses on the two main forums.

Although the topic-specific forums may not be used much yet, over time they will keep discussions focused, make relevant information easier for students to find, and encourage students to engage with each other on specific topics or issues.

2.1. Main Forums

Let's give a quick, short description of each main forum (Figure 1):

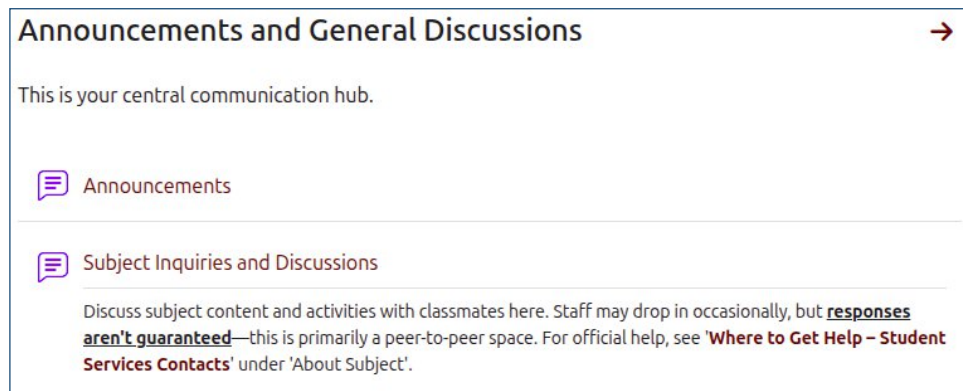


Figure 1: Main forums

- **Announcements:** Used by lecturers to share information with all students in the subject, such as deadlines, schedule changes, reminders and updates. Students cannot start topics here.
- **Subject Inquiries and Discussions:** Used by students to ask questions about the subject and start discussions, and by lecturers to reply. Other students can also join in and help each other.

2.2. Keeping Track of Unread Posts

When you or your students open the subject, each main forum shows the number of unread posts next to its name, for example *3 unread posts*. The number goes down as posts are read, so it is an easy way to see at a glance that something new is waiting.

- **Announcements:** For students, the count shows announcements they have not read yet. For you, it also shows when a student has replied to one of your announcements.
- **Subject Inquiries and Discussions:** For you, the count shows new questions or topics that may need a reply. For students, it shows new posts from you and their classmates.

TIP | Check the unread count every time

Look at the unread count on both forums each time you open your subject. It is the quickest way to make sure no student question is left waiting. Encourage your students to do the same, so they do not miss your announcements.

2.3. Other Forums

Now let's look at the other forums, which are specific to a topic or purpose. Various sections contain forums for specific discussions, such as students introducing themselves to the class, or asking about assignments and online tests. Students can start their own topics in these forums, provided the topics relate to the forum's purpose. Figures 2 to 4 show examples.

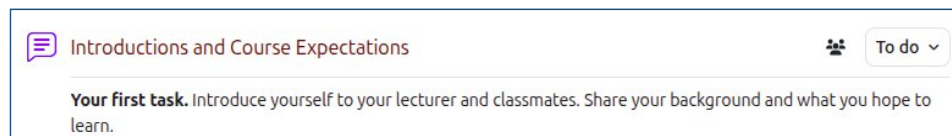


Figure 2: Forum for introductions by students

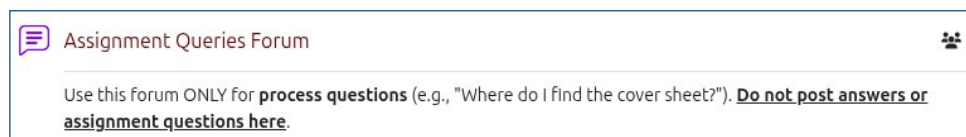


Figure 3: Forum for assignment questions

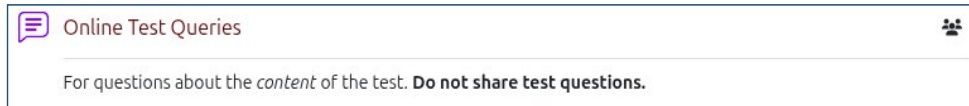


Figure 4: Forum for online test questions

3. The Announcements Forum

The **Announcements** forum is for communicating with all students in the subject at once. Only lecturers can start a topic, so students know this is where to find important information. Each announcement is sent to students by email and is also displayed in the Latest announcements block, so it is difficult for them to miss. Use it for things such as:

- Assignment and test deadlines or reminders
- Changes to class times, venues or the online session link
- New learning material or resources that have been added
- Words of encouragement or general updates

IMPORTANT | Students need a current email address on Moodle

Forum notifications are sent to the email address in each student's Moodle profile. If that address is missing, outdated or incorrect, students will not receive your announcements by email, and the Announcements forum loses much of its value as a communication tool.

Request that students check and update their email address, and **remind** them from time to time. Students can find the how-to article on changing or updating their email address on Moodle on the **Online Support (Ticketing) System**.

3.1. Posting an Announcement

Before you post, keep these guidelines in mind:

- Keep the subject short and specific so students know what it is about before they open it.
- Keep the message brief and clear. Include the important dates, times and what students must do.
- **Post one topic per announcement**, and avoid posting too often so that students keep paying attention.
- Use a professional and friendly tone.
- Check your spelling and details before posting, because the announcement is sent to students by email.

GOOD TO KNOW | A short delay before the email is sent

The email is not sent the moment you click *Post to forum*. There is a short delay (usually about 30 minutes), during which you can still edit the announcement, for example to correct a date or a typo. For urgent announcements you can skip the delay (see Advanced Features).

The screenshot and steps below show you how to post a new announcement (Figure 5).

The screenshot shows a web interface for adding a new discussion topic. At the top, there is a search bar labeled 'Search forums' and a red button labeled 'Add discussion topic' with a red arrow and the number '1' pointing to it. Below this, there is a 'Subject' label and a text input field with a red arrow and the number '2' pointing to it. To the left of the 'Message' label, there is a large text area for the message content with a red arrow and the number '3' pointing to it. At the bottom, there is a red button labeled 'Post to forum' with a red arrow and the number '4' pointing to it. The 'Post to forum' button is next to a 'Cancel' button and an 'Advanced' link. The message text area has a rich text editor toolbar with options like Edit, View, Insert, Format, Tools, Table, and Help, and icons for undo, redo, bold, italic, link, unlink, image, video, audio, and text color.

Figure 5: Posting a new announcement

Here are the steps as shown in the screenshot above:

1. **Add a new topic:** Click the *Add discussion topic* button at the top of the Announcements forum.
2. **Enter the subject:** Type a short, clear title, for example “Assignment 1 due date extended”. The subject also becomes the email subject line that students see.
3. **Enter the content:** Type your message. Include what students need to know, any dates or times, and what action they must take.
4. **Post the announcement:** Click *Post to forum*. Students are notified by email.

The announcement also appears in the Latest announcements block (Figure 6), so students see it as soon as they open the subject.

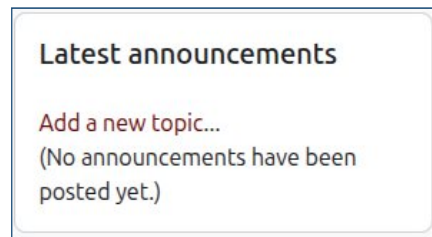


Figure 6: Latest announcements block

These are the simplest steps. Under *Advanced*, you will find more options, such as attaching a file to your post, pinning it so that it always stays on top, and limiting the period during which it is visible.

3.2. Advanced Features

The screenshot below shows the setting options under *Advanced* (Figure 7).

A screenshot of a web interface for creating a forum post. At the top, it says "Attachment" on the left and "Maximum file size: Unlimited, maximum number of files: 1" on the right. Below this is a file upload area with a dashed border and a large downward arrow icon. Text inside says "You can drag and drop files here to add them." Below the upload area are two checkboxes: "Pinned" and "Send forum post notifications with no editing-time delay". Below these is a section titled "Display period" with a dropdown arrow. Under "Display period" are two rows: "Display start" and "Display end". Each row has an "Enable" checkbox followed by date and time selectors (day, month, year, hour, minute). At the bottom is a "Tags" section with a right-pointing arrow. At the very bottom are two buttons: "Post to forum" and "Cancel".

Figure 7: Forum post advanced features

Here are some examples of when you may want to use these features:

- **Attachment:** Lets you attach a file to your post, such as a schedule, a handout or an assignment brief. One file can be attached to each post.
- **Pinned:** Keeps the post at the top of the forum, above newer posts. Use it for information students must be able to find easily throughout the term, such as the assessment schedule, how to contact you or the exam arrangements.

- **Send forum post notifications with no editing-time delay:** Sends the email straight away instead of after the short editing time. Use it for urgent information, such as a venue change for today's class. Check your post carefully first, because the email goes out exactly as you wrote it.
- **Display period:** Tick *Enable* and set the *Display start* and *Display end* dates between which the post is visible. Use it for time-bound information, such as a reminder about a test on Friday, so the post does not remain on display once it is no longer relevant.

TIP | Pin sparingly

Pin only one or two posts at a time. If too many posts are pinned, students stop noticing them.

3.3. Replying to Student Replies or Further Inquiries

Students cannot start new topics in the Announcements forum, but they can reply to an announcement, for example to ask for clarity. The unread count next to the Announcements forum (see Section 2.2) shows when a student has replied. When this happens, respond promptly: open the student's reply, click *Reply*, type your response and click *Post to forum*. Your reply is also sent to the student by email. A few tips:

- Reply within a set time, for example one working day, so students do not feel ignored or act on incorrect information.
- Keep replies short, clear and respectful.
- If several students ask the same thing, consider posting a new announcement or updating the original post so everyone sees the answer.
- If a student raises a question that is not about the announcement, kindly direct them to the Subject Inquiries and Discussions forum.

4. Subject Inquiries and Discussions

This is the forum where students ask questions about the subject and start discussions with you and with each other. Like announcements, posts here are sent as email notifications. Posting works the same way as in the Announcements forum, with three differences:

- Students can start new topics, whereas they cannot in the Announcements forum.
- Posts in this forum are not displayed in the Latest announcements block.
- Under *Advanced*, students can only attach a file to their post. They do not have the other options available to lecturers.

4.1. Replying to Student Discussion Topics

Check the Subject Inquiries and Discussions forum regularly so that students get timely answers. The unread count next to the forum (see Section 2.2) shows when there is a new question or topic waiting. To reply, open the topic, click *Reply*, type your response and click

Post to forum. The student is notified by email, and the answer stays in the forum for other students to read.

Tips for effective replies:

- Reply in the topic, not by private email, so that all students can benefit.
- Answer the question directly and, where helpful, point to the relevant resource or section of the subject.
- Encourage students to help each other. Where a student has answered correctly, acknowledge it, and step in to correct or add to it where needed.
- If a question comes up often, post a short announcement for the whole class.

NOTE | Keep personal matters private

Posts in this forum can be seen by all students in the subject. For sensitive or personal matters, such as marks or personal circumstances, invite the student to contact you privately instead.

5. Guiding Students on How to Use the Forums

Students will use the forums well when they understand how they work and why they matter. Take a few minutes early in the term to:

- **Show them where the forums are** and explain the difference between the two main forums.
- **Explain that announcements are sent by email.** Ask them to check their email and the Latest announcements block regularly, and to look at the unread post count when they open the subject.
- **Ask them to update their email address on Moodle** if it is missing or has changed, and remind them from time to time. See the important note in Section 3, which also says where to find the how-to article.
- **Encourage them to ask subject questions in the forum** instead of by private email, so that everyone benefits from the answer. Personal matters should still be raised with you privately.
- **Share simple forum etiquette:** search existing topics before posting, use a clear subject, ask one question per topic, and be respectful of others.
- **Point them to the topic-specific forums** for introductions, assignment questions and online test questions.
- **Set expectations** on how often you check the forums and how soon they can expect a reply.

A good place to start is a welcome announcement in the first week, together with a short demonstration of the forums.

6. In Conclusion

Forums are more than a place to post notices. Used well, the two main forums keep communication clear and in one place, reduce repeated individual emails and help students feel supported and connected to the subject.

6.1. Summary of the Two Main Forums

The table below sums up how the two main forums compare.

Feature	Announcements	Subject Inquiries and Discussions
Purpose	One-way communication from lecturers to all students	Questions and discussions between students and lecturers
Who can start a topic	Lecturers only. Students can reply to a post, for example to ask for clarity	Lecturers and students
Latest announcements block	Posts are displayed	Posts are not displayed
Advanced options	Lecturers can attach a file, pin a post, set a display period and skip the editing-time delay	Lecturers: all options. Students: attach a file only
Email and unread posts	In both forums, posts are sent as email notifications, and the number of unread posts is shown next to the forum when the subject is opened	

6.2. Key Points to Remember

- Use the **Announcements** forum for one-way information to all students, and the **Subject Inquiries and Discussions** forum for questions and discussion.
- Every post is sent as an email notification, so keep your posts clear, brief and checked before you post.
- **Students must have a current email address on Moodle to receive the notifications.** Request that they update it, remind them from time to time, and point them to the how-to article on the Online Support (Ticketing) System.
- Use *Pinned* and *Display period* to keep important posts visible and to remove those that are no longer relevant.
- Check the unread post count each time you open your subject, and reply to students promptly in the forum.
- Guide students early in the term on how to use the forums.

With regular use, the two main forums help you keep students informed, answer their questions once for everyone and build an engaged learning community.

————— **End of Guide** —————