

Dear Students,

After 5 years of instruction in the Homeland Security Program at Concordia, I have read hundreds responses to discussion board and weekly assignment questions. Yet, I am often surprised and delighted by students who introduce new and exciting ideas or angles on these interesting topics - causing us to reflect on the wicked problems of the complex and challenging homeland security and emergency management disciplines.

At times, however, whether because of the demands of life or work or the challenges of scholarship, students miss the opportunity to truly reflect on the issues that we discuss in class, and simply write a comment or two in passing, missing the opportunity to learn and discuss critical issues with their colleagues. This hurts not only that student's experience, but that of their peers, who are deprived of their unique insight and experience. We have so many professionals and veterans in this program who, in one way or another, have been involved with homeland security and emergency management for many years, and have much to share. We need those insights as a community of learning!

To aid and encourage my students, I have developed a guide for getting the most from your online experience in the homeland security and emergency management program. I believe that by following these six (6) simple aids, you can enhance your learning opportunities, expand your enjoyment of the course, and improve your point totals as well!

Six Recommendations for Responding to Essay and Topical Discussion Assignments Online

1. REFLECT

We are community of learners. The reason why education works in a community of online learners is because we bring our individual experiences to the community and share them with others, forming a reflective "circle of trust" that enables each of us to gain something that would not be gained without the community. Lectures don't do that, learning in community does. This is not new. John Locke, as quoted by Alexander Ireland in *The Book-Lover's Enchiridion* said:

"Education begins the gentleman, but reading, good company, and reflection must finish him."

So often, we jump into Blackboard, jump into the week, read the questions and start typing a response. When we do this we sometimes miss the contextual importance of the question, which is often the whole point of the discussion!

As an alternative, try reading the question the night before you respond, or in the morning before the drive to work, and REFLECT on the question and what you know about the topic. By doing so, you can allow your mind to begin forming a response without the need to write. Allow your mind to wander into related issues and begin forming connections that you can bring to your response when you sit down to write.

2. RESEARCH

Before you respond to an assignment or discussion, and armed with the reflective connections that you made as you thought about the topic, look for existing literature on the subject. Often, our reflective ideas are supported or challenged by the work of colleagues, journalists, and scholars who are also thinking about these issues. Maybe your ideas and connections will be altered – that is ok! You have not written yet, and it is fine if you are influenced by the ideas of others. In the end, your response should be a summation of your unique experience and knowledge combined with the ideas and insights of others.

Remember that the ideas of others are an important result of their own hard work and dedication to the discipline of homeland security. As such, and out of respect that we ourselves deserve in kind, we give them credit for their hard work by noting in the text where we allude to their work, and we tell our colleagues where to find their work by



including a reference. Citations and references are how we share and support the efforts of the learning community and further the discipline and its effectiveness.

3. RESPOND

When it is time to write a response, be sure to gather your thoughts, ideas and research into a coherent and concise response to the question or topic at hand. Often, students fail to directly address the question in their response. For instance, if you are asked to RESPOND to the question of whether drone strikes on US citizens abroad is legal, than you should take a position that it IS legal, or IS NOT legal. Your essay or response should be clear and supported by sources of information that bolster your contention. If, alternatively, the question is whether drone strikes on US citizens abroad are morally defensible, that is a different question, and that is the question that must be addressed, regardless of legality.

I am often asked how to format such a response, and in reply I typically recommend that, in the absence of a structure that you prefer or have found better supports your unique response, the following structure seems to work in many cases:

- **Introduction** – a concise opening paragraph where you articulate your response to the question and the basis for your unique approach to responding to the issue or question raised. First sentence is important to capture the reader’s attention and set up the response;
- **Support Paragraph #1** Herein you support your response with three unique, referenced and
- **Support Paragraph #2** cited points of research or personal experience that bolster your claim to
- **Support Paragraph #3** have the best response to the question;
- **Conclusion** – A concise paragraph in which you summarize the three aforementioned paragraphs, bring the reader to a focused conclusion and articulate how your solution or response to the question is the best and most magnificent idea that anyone has ever had in the history of human scholarship.

In general, this structure provides a good outline for responding to essay-type assignments. Assuming that each of these bullets is a moderately-sized paragraph, you will end up with a response of about two (2) double-spaced pages, or around 500 words. A condensed version of this is appropriate for discussion board responses.

4. REFRAIN

In my experience there are a few common issues that occur in online writing that form a small list of things to avoid. They tend to make the responses less interesting, and have the hallmarks of a rushed, thin, and insubstantial response. Here are a few things to REFRAIN from doing in your online submissions.

REFRAIN from . . .

- **. . . Stating Personal Opinions** – If you write the words “I think. . .”, “In my opinion. . .”, or “I believe. . .” you should look carefully at what you said and ensure that you are not just stating an unsupported or unrelated personal opinion. Your response should focus on what you know, not what you think you might know about a topic. Knowledge comes from experience, research and reflection, as stated above. Leave your unsolicited opinions outside the course room.
- **. . . Making Broad Generalizations** – If you are tempted to write the words “all. . .” or “always. . .” or “every. . .” you might be about to make a broad generalization, and the first question your reader will ask is “is that always true?” Please avoid broad generalizations relating to the issues and topics we discuss. It is very likely for every instance that you stated “all” or “always” there are instances where that just does not apply. It is an indication that you did not research or reflect on the topic and on your response, and you might just be stating your opinion without any contextual applicability to the discussion.



- **... Giving Unfounded Praise** – So often, especially in peer responses, students are tempted to give praise to their colleagues without any reflection on whether it is appropriate. I get it! We are all in this together and we love to be positive and friendly. That is awesome! But think about it. If we are telling our peers that what they said was the best thing since *The Great Gatsby* and they didn't even answer the question, we are not doing anyone any favors. Instead of giving unfounded praise, RESPECTFULLY CHALLENGE your peers. Start by asking whether or not their response RESONATES with you and your experience. If it does, why? Let them know! If it does not, why not? Tell them why you think that maybe the answer lies in another dimension of the topic.
- **... Submitting Something You Are Not Proud of** – Do not hit the submit button on work that you are not proud to sign. Your responses are becoming a part of the archives of the University, and your papers could be an early manuscript of your work that people will dig up after you have won the Pulitzer Prize. Be thoughtful about what you submit. PROOFREAD your work, REVISE it before submittal, and make sure you are proud of the product. Ultimately, your work is a reflection of who you are as an individual. Make sure that your reader is left with a good impression of your scholarship, and is not distracted by sloppy, careless, and unedited writing.

5. RELIVE...

...as in your experiences. I am always amazed and humbled by the diversity of experience and backgrounds that makeup the students of this program. PLEASE bring YOUR experiences to bear on the questions and topics discussed in the courses. PLEASE talk about YOUR experiences and insights. PLEASE share stories about how YOUR perspective is formed by your unique life experience. I am NOT asking for your opinions, experiences doesn't mean opinions (see above), there is a difference. Learning is about seeing the world from another's perspective, through the lens of another's unique and beautiful journey through life. To the extent that you are comfortable, please share yours whenever it relates to what we are discussing, and help us learn about the world.

6. RETURN

Sometimes a response just won't be apparent. Even after the research phase, you might not be sure what to write, or how to respond to a question. Fear not! It happens to everyone. One technique for dealing with that is to RETURN to the foundations of the homeland security enterprise. For me, foundational aspects of homeland security include things like:

- **Critical Thinking** – What is really going on here? What is the bigger picture? What is right and wrong and how does it apply here? Who are the players and what are their motivations? Who wrote this and why? Why does it matter? When did all this happen? Why did this happen? Why is it like this? WHO CARES??
- **Ethical Decision Making** – Is this the right choice? How are people affected? Who is making the decisions and why? What is their motivation? Does this benefit the greatest number of people? Why do this? Is this the right use of resources? Is there a good return on investment? What would I do and why?
- **Leadership** – Who is in charge here? What are the pressures involved in making these decisions? Who gets to decide? What is their perspective? What keeps the leaders up at night? What intelligence did they have when they made that decision? Who is right?

By returning to these and other foundational aspects of our discipline, you may find the springboard into your response. Sprinkle that with some research and experience, and you'll have a post to be proud of. Hope that helps!

This guide represents a bit of my experience which I think is valuable to share. I hope that it helps my students and others to develop good learning habits and get the most from their online education. If you have questions or comments (or corrections) related to this guide, please feel free to email me directly at: jnairn@cu-portland.edu. Thank you.