

A Guide to Online Discussion

Overview

Last year through the Civic Discourse initiative, WEB Projects participants moved from using an online conferencing system as a casual “virtual faculty room” to hosting student discussions about current event topics. At the same time, new Cooperating School members took graduate courses online. From these two experiences we have built some agreements for online communication and raised some concerns about student performance, especially in terms of in-depth discussion and student ability to use the WWW for research. Several online discussions hosted by the Vermont Center for the Book as well as the Dorothy Canfield Fisher (DCF) online discussions reveal similar concerns.

This year, we are taking the lessons learned from past experiences and applying them to the current initiatives of “History Day,” “Taking a Stand” and “Civic Discourse.”

Identified Lessons

1. Back and forth communication is at the heart of online discussion. Participants do not naturally engage in a dialog; user tendency is to post rather than post and respond.
2. Discussion needs to be an integral part of what is happening in the classroom. Online discourse goes deeper when it is keyed to classroom goals.
3. A common educational focus beyond identifying a discussion topic provides a context for discussing the quality of student performance.

Communication

Above all else, human beings are communicators. We make tools; we build shelters and weave clothing; we rearrange nature. But without the artifice we call language, we would be little more than exceptionally clever beavers, inventive ants. Ian Tattersall is succinct: "Among our most remarkable attributes," he writes in his 1998 *Becoming Human: Evolution and Human Uniqueness*, "the most striking is our possession of language."

Unfortunately, our ability to communicate effectively has strict limits. Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his 1921 work, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, writes, "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence." And from this Austrian philosopher's iconoclastic (and often very obtuse) point of view, there was much that should be silently passed over.

While Wittgenstein was writing about the impossibility of discussing the existence of god or, more prosaically, the nature of a color, a frank appraisal of our day-to-day existence reminds us of how hard it is to communicate even simple things even to people we know well.

My wife calls out "I'll be home late" as she walks out the door. Does that mean before or after dinner? What should I tell people who telephone for her? When should I start to worry if the weather turns bad?

My daughter says, "Good music really makes me feel good." I say "Good music makes me feel good." She means Smashing Pumpkins. I mean Bach. She means standing in a mosh pit feeling the sounds of a bass guitar pulsate through very fiber of her body. I mean sitting very still, straining to hear the edge of a note I've never heard before. Different music, different way of feeling good. Same words.

Moreover, there is much more to communication than mere words. There's tone of voice, the speed with which we speak, and body language, not to mention the associations listeners (or readers) may bring to even the simplest of facts, or most straight-forward of ideas.

You smile when you tell me you were puzzled by what I had to say about Bill Clinton. Your smile reminds me of the smile my mother affected when she was about to criticize me. I respond one way to your words, another to your smile, and-perhaps most strongly-yet another to my memory of my mother.

Communicating, whether in speech or in writing, is an extremely complex process. In addition to predictable issues about basic human communication, threaded discussions bring an extra challenge. They elicit a specialized version of text as a medium that lies somewhere between spoken conversation and conventional writing. Spoken conversation has a free-flow nature where topics meander as one idea leads to another. Formal writing is highly organized and redrafted to follow conventions. As we read online discussions, we expect to see the conventions of formal writing because we are communicating with text. However, even if individual postings are carefully crafted, the total effect of online group communication appears disorganized because of the conversational aspects of the group's interaction.

The following guidelines offer a starting point for successful communication:

1. Follow the conferencing structure.

The conferencing system is built so that there is a distinction between "posting new message in this thread" and "Reply" to a message that is already posted. Following this structure will tune the users into whether they are continuing with an idea previously posted or starting a new message about the thread topic.

2. Stick to the discussion topic.

When posting messages, make sure that your ideas either relate to the discussion topic or are in direct response to something that someone has already posted. If you have something to say, a new discovery perhaps or a sudden inspirational thought, that does not fit the above criteria, this is a sign that you need to start a new thread.

3. Respond to each other's postings.

Users are not sure which messages to respond to and which to leave as completed thoughts. This produces confusion. Some tips for responding include:

- acknowledge the last entry when appropriate
- cut and paste ideas from previous messages to carry on the conversation
- pose questions for others to respond to
- use (...) as a symbol to continue a line of thought

4. Ask for what you need.

If you would like to have a response to a particular thought or question, ask. That will tune other users' attention to your comments.

5. Know in advance that the discussion may nonetheless appear disjointed.

Online conferencing is also identified as "asynchronous communication."

Integration into the Classroom Curriculum

This section will be prepared by participants in each strand.

Common Educational Focus

Both teachers and mentors have expressed a common concern -- to deepen the level of student discussion by encouraging specific references to what is being read, researched, and discussed. There are standards from the Vermont Framework that explicate these concerns:

Taking a Stand

1.3 Reading Comprehension -- students read for meaning, demonstrating both an initial understanding and personal response to what is read.

3.7 Informed Decisions -- students make informed decisions

5.13 Responding to text -- students respond to literary texts and public documents using interpretive, critical, and evaluative processes

Civic Discourse

3.7 Informed Decisions -- students make informed decisions

6.2 Uses of Evidence and Data -- students understand the varied uses of evidence and data, and use both to make interpretations concerning public issues

Beyond teaching to the common standards listed above, individual classes will probably add goals that address specific local curriculum.

History Day

See supporting materials.

Assessing Student Performance

The above standards are proposed as common to everyone participating in each respective initiative. They all contain sources of evidence that point to assessment frameworks. A simple 3 point scale for each standard is being offered as a rough guide. As we implement online discussions, the rubrics are likely to evolve. By the end of the process we will be in a better position to elaborate the assessment tools and supply specific student examples.

Taking a Stand

1.3 Reading Comprehension -- students read for meaning, demonstrating both an initial understanding and personal response to what is read.

This is evident when students:

- b. analyze and interpret features of a text;
- c. make connections between parts of a text, other texts, and experiences in and out of school;
- e. identify the textual structure and/or technical, artistic, and literary conventions; and
- g. analyze, interpret and evaluate texts for their cultural, political, and aesthetic contexts

Level 3: Analyzes, interprets and evaluates texts for their cultural, political, and aesthetic contexts

Level 2: Makes connections between parts of a text, other texts, and experiences in and out of school; identifies the textual structure and/or technical, artistic, and literary conventions; and analyzes and interprets features of a text

Level 1: Discusses the reading at a literal level or makes connections without reference to the text.

3.7 Informed Decisions -- students make informed decisions.

This is evident when students:

- a. seek information and base decisions on evidence from reliable sources;**
- b. evaluate the consequences of decisions;**
- c. describe and explain their decisions based on evidence;**
- d. recognize others' points of view and assess their decisions from others' perspectives;**
- e. analyze and consider alternative decisions; and**
- f. differentiate between decisions based on fact and those based on opinions**

Level 3: Seeks information and bases decisions on evidence from reliable sources; describes and explains decisions based on evidence; differentiates between decisions based on fact and those based on opinions; recognizes others' points of view and assess decisions from others' perspectives; and analyzes and considers alternative decisions;

Level 2: Seeks information and bases decisions on evidence from reliable sources; describes and explains decisions based on evidence;

Level 1: States opinions and thoughts. Little reference to specific facts.

5.13 Responding to text -- students respond to literary texts and public documents using interpretive, critical, and evaluative processes

This is evident when students:

- a. make inferences about content, events, story, characters, and setting, and the relationships among them;**
- c. analyze the impact of authors' decisions regarding word choice and content;**
- d. make inferences about themes and styles;**
- e. describe how linguistic structures and the diverse features of language can influence the interpretations of texts;**
- g. explain the effects of point of view;**
- k. interpret the ambiguities, subtleties, contradictions, ironies, and nuances**

Level 4: Makes inferences about content, events, story, characters, and setting, and the relationships among them; analyzes the impact of authors' decisions regarding word choice and content; makes inferences about themes and styles; describes how linguistic structures and the diverse features of language can influence the interpretations of texts; explains the effects of point of view; and interprets the ambiguities, subtleties, contradictions, ironies, and nuances

Level 3: Makes inferences about content, events, story, characters, and setting, and the relationships among them; analyzes the impact of authors' decisions regarding word choice and content; makes inferences about themes and styles; describes how linguistic structures and the diverse features of language can influence the interpretations of texts; explains the effects of point of view

Level 2: Makes inferences about content, events, story, characters, and setting, and the relationships among them; and describes how linguistic structures and the diverse features of language can influence the interpretations of texts

Level 1: Makes inferences about content, events, story, characters, and setting, and the relationships among them

Civic Discourse

3.7 Informed Decisions -- students make informed decisions.

This is evident when students:

- a. seek information and base decisions on evidence from reliable sources**
- b. evaluate the consequences of decisions;**
- c. describe and explain their decisions based on evidence and logical argument;**
- d. recognize others' points of view and assess their decisions from others' perspectives;**
- e. analyze and consider alternative decisions;**
- f. differentiate between decisions based on fact and those based on opinions**

Level 3: Seeks information and bases decisions on evidence from reliable sources; describes and explains decisions based on evidence and logical argument; differentiates between decisions based on fact and those based on opinions; recognizes others' points of view and assess decisions from others' perspectives; and analyzes and considers alternative decisions;

Level 2: Seeks information and bases decisions on evidence from reliable sources; describes and explains decisions based on evidence;

Level 1: States opinions and thoughts. Little reference to specific facts.

6.2 Uses of Evidence and Data -- students understand the varied uses of evidence and data, and use both to make interpretations concerning public issues.

This is evident when students:

- a. analyze and evaluate the uses of evidence and data in conflicting interpretations;**
- c. use statistical methodology to describe and interpret a broad range of societal issues; and**
- d. evaluate a public issue by tracing its origins, gathering and presenting data and other relevant evidence, and justifying the best resolution.**

Level 3: Evaluates a public issue by tracing its origins, gathering and presenting data and other relevant evidence, and justifying the best resolution; uses statistics to prove or disprove a point (if applicable); and analyzes and evaluates the uses of evidence and data in conflicting interpretations

Level 2: Evaluates a public issue by tracing its origins, gathering and presenting data and other relevant evidence, and justifying the best resolution

Level 1: Makes only general, unsubstantiated and/or irrelevant references to evidence and data in making interpretations

Using the WEB Exchange -- Shared Discussions

The WEB Exchange is located at <http://www.webproject.org/exchange>. Once you have navigated there, select the word "Discussion." You will automatically be placed in the Public General Discussion area, unless you login. Any comment that is added to this area is potentially viewable to the whole world. By clicking on the Logout/in button, you can access higher levels of security.



Welcome to the WEB Exchange Shared Discussions

After you click the Logout/in button, you will be presented with a password prompt.

User Login

If you are a registered user please login below

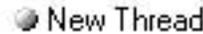
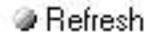
Otherwise use the [Registration Form](#)

Username:

Password:

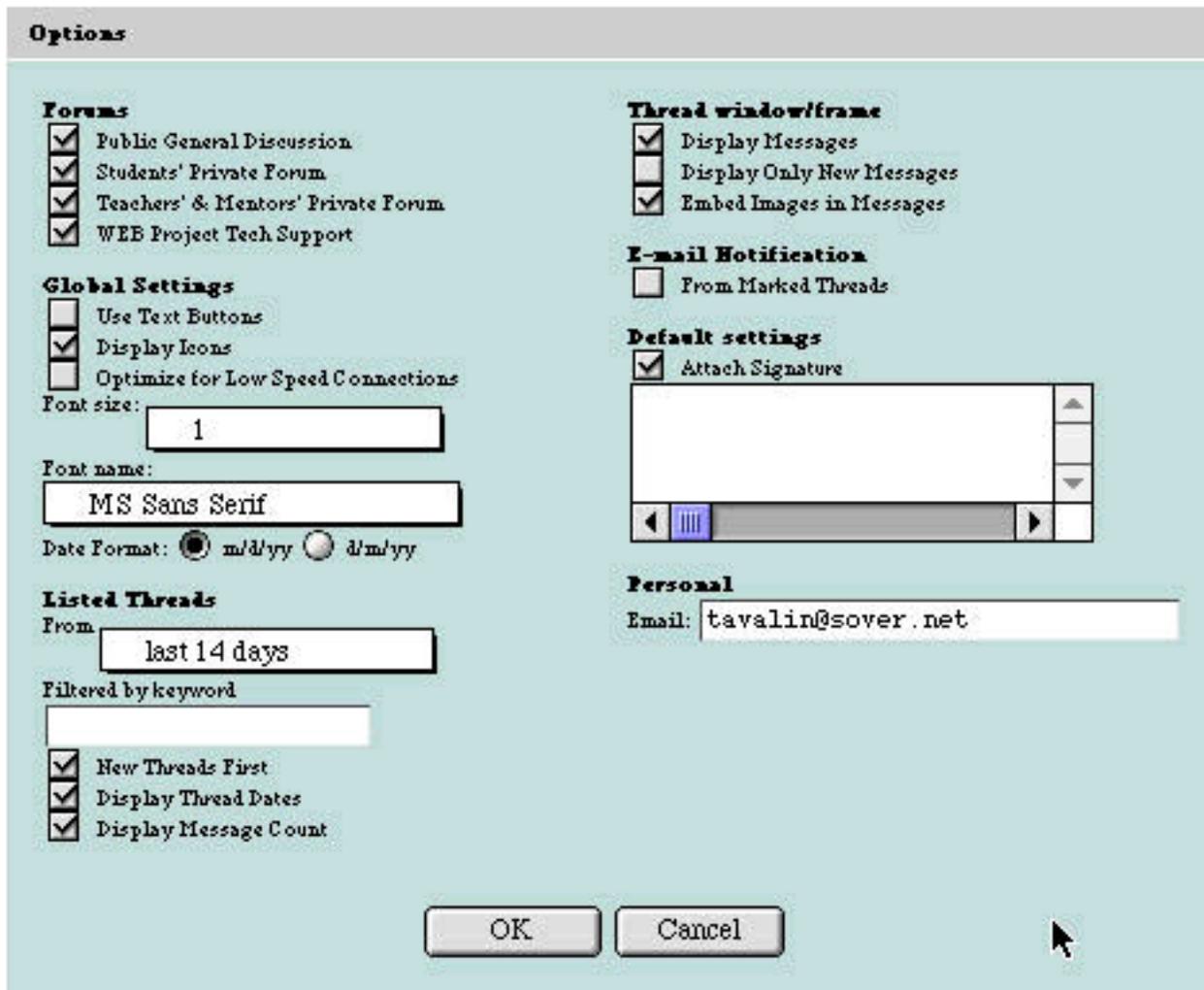
Depending upon the passwords you use, you will either see the Students' Private Forum or the Teachers and Mentors' Private Forum plus the Technical Support Forum.

Active threads from last 14 days :

Public General Discussion		
	Civic Discourse	10/31/97 (14)
Students' Private Forum		
	Introductions	10/31/97 (1)
	Welcome	10/30/97 (1)
Teachers' & Mentors' Private Forum		
	Civic Discourse – Next Steps	10/31/97 (1)
	Art Imitating Virtual Art	10/26/97 (7)
	icon design	10/22/97 (1)
	Mini MIDI course welcome	10/22/97 (7)
WEB Project Tech Support		
	viewing uploaded images	10/29/97 (2)
	shortcuts	10/27/97 (1)

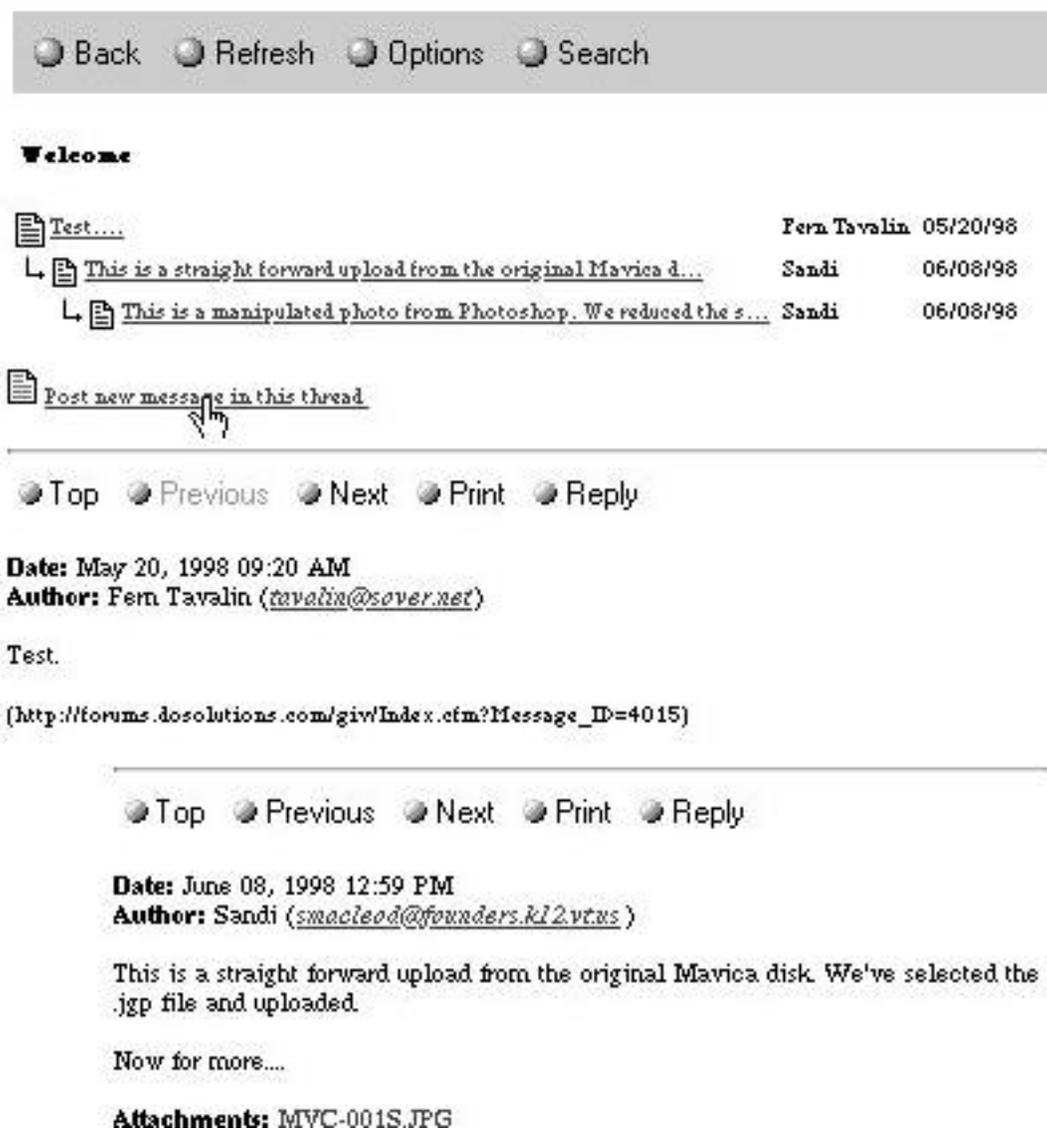
Each of these forums contains separate threads of conversations (threaded discussions). Click on the topics (threads) to see more information. Play around with the different buttons on the screen so that you can learn what the full capacity of the discussion site is. Don't be afraid to make a mistake. You can always click on the edit button.



The Teachers and Mentors' Private Forum contains more features than the Student Private Forum. By clicking on the Options button that appears on the grey bar at the top of your screen, you will be able to see the different functions under your management. You can subscribe to a thread so that you receive e-mail notification whenever anyone posts a message; you can decide which forums are visible to you; you can choose your own font; you can select the order and appearance of threads.

Holding Online Discussions

The online discussions are organized by thread topics, messages, and replies. Once you enter a discussion topic, you will see an outline of the messages, with new messages appearing at the far left and replies appearing as indentations.



The screenshot shows a web browser interface for a forum. At the top is a navigation bar with buttons for Back, Refresh, Options, and Search. Below this is a "Welcome" section. A list of messages is displayed, including a main message by Fern Tavalin and two replies by Sandi. A link to "Post new message in this thread" is visible. Below the list are navigation buttons for Top, Previous, Next, Print, and Reply. The main message content includes a date, author, and body text, followed by an attachment list.

● Back ● Refresh ● Options ● Search

Welcome

Test.... Fern Tavalin 05/20/98

↳ This is a straight forward upload from the original Mavica d... Sandi 06/08/98

↳ This is a manipulated photo from Photoshop. We reduced the s... Sandi 06/08/98

Post new message in this thread

● Top ● Previous ● Next ● Print ● Reply

Date: May 20, 1998 09:20 AM
Author: Fern Tavalin (tavalin@sover.net)

Test.

(http://forums.dosolutions.com/giv/Index.cfm?Message_ID=4015)

● Top ● Previous ● Next ● Print ● Reply

Date: June 08, 1998 12:59 PM
Author: Sandi (smacleod@founders.k12.vt.us)

This is a straight forward upload from the original Mavica disk. We've selected the .jpg file and uploaded.

Now for more....

Attachments: MVC-001S.JPG

Use the “post new message in this thread” link if you want to post a comment about the discussion topic. This link is at the bottom of the list of messages and is difficult for some users to find. Remember to scroll up to find the “post new message in this thread” if you posting relates to the general discussion.

[Top](#) [Previous](#) [Next](#) [Print](#) [Reply](#)

Date: June 08, 1998 12:59 PM

Author: Sandi (smacleod@founders.kl2.vt.us)

This is a straight forward upload from the original Mavica disk. We've selected the .jpg file and uploaded.

Now for more....

Attachments: [MVC-001S.JPG](#)

(http://forums.dosolutions.com/giv/Index.cfm?Message_ID=4324)

If you wish to comment specifically to one person's message, choose the "reply" button. Comments that are replies show as indented entries. This gives a visual cue that a specific response to someone is being made. New users often confuse "new message" and "reply" postings.

In addition to posting messages and replying to threads that have already been established, users can create new topics of conversation called "threads."

The screenshot shows a forum interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with buttons for Exit, New Messages, Search, Options, and Logout/in. Below this, it says "Active threads from last 30 days :". To the right of this text are buttons for "New Thread" and "Refresh". The main content area displays a list of threads, each with a folder icon, a title, a date, and a count in parentheses. The threads are categorized under "Arts", "Asian Cultures", and "Public Issues and Youth Empowerment".

Category	Thread Title	Date	Count
Arts	Test	05/27/98	(3)
Asian Cultures	Welcome	06/08/98	(3)
Public Issues and Youth Empowerment	Activate Thread	05/20/98	(1)

The "New Thread" button is located on the home page of the conferencing system.

Attaching Files

The conferencing system supports file attachments. That means that you can upload text, image, sound, or motion files to go along with the messages you are posting. These files need to be saved in “universal file formats” to be viewable by other users. Such formats include: (.jpf), (.gif), (.txt), (.mid), (.aiff), and (.mov).

Edit Message

Author: Fern Tavalin

E-mail: tavalin@sover.net

Subject: (optional)

Message:

Let's use this discussion to talk about your monograph and to practice the remaining technology skills that you all need to demonstrate in order to complete the course requirements.

Would each of you please observe in your classes for visual evidence of problem solving as you've defined it, take turns with the Mavica to capture this visual evidence, and then upload the visual images (as a jpg) to this site along with a description of what it represents? That will give you a

I want to use fixed-width font to display this message

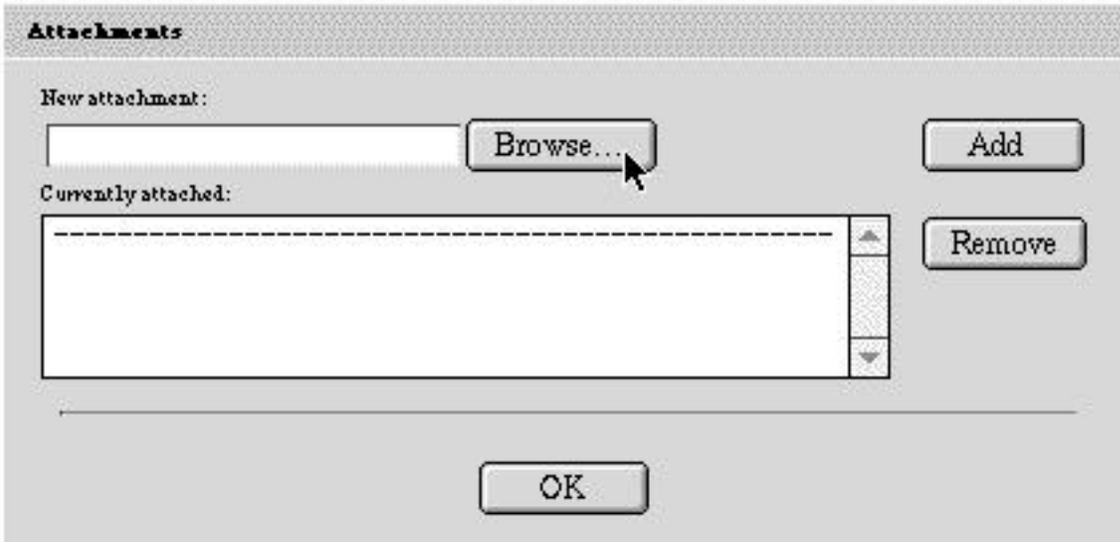
Notify me by e-mail about all messages posted in this thread

I want to send this message to every participant in this thread

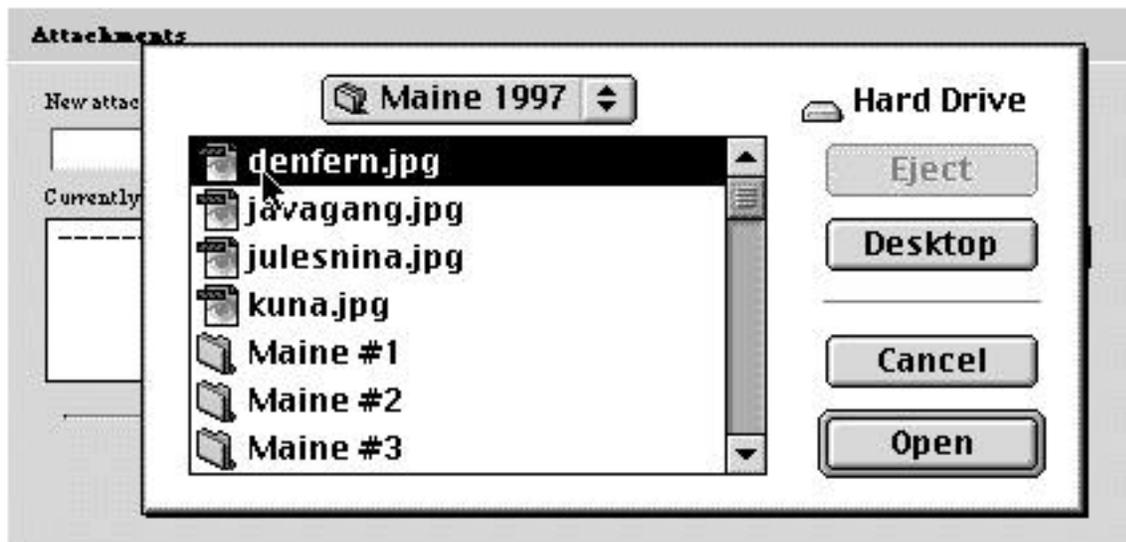
Quote Preview Post Cancel

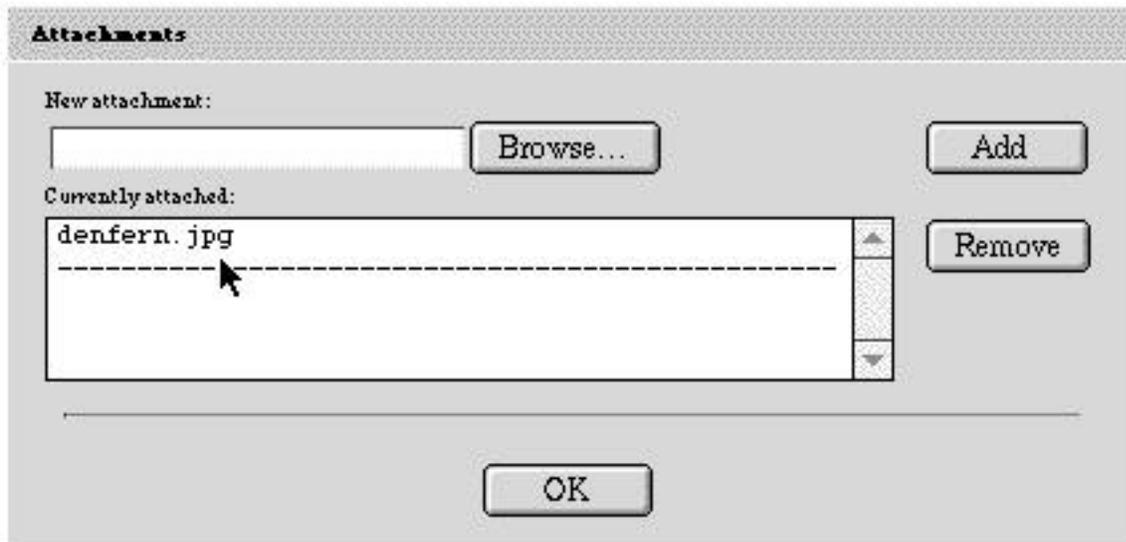
Attachments: None

To attach a file to a message you are composing, click the "Attachments" button .

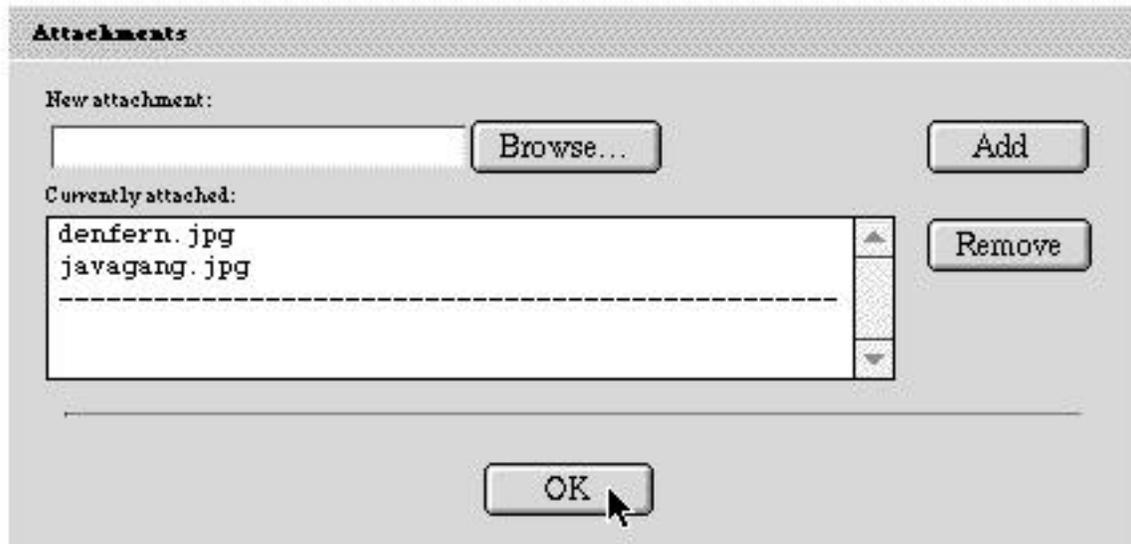


Then, click the "Browse" button to find your already properly prepared image file. This allows you to search your computer's hard drive to find the file that you wish to upload. **Mac users** should copy files onto their hard drives rather than trying to upload from the disk drive. **PC users** should be able to load directly from the disk drive without problems.





Next, click the "Add" button. You will see the name of your file transfer to the Attachments list. You can then add other files, as you will. Notice that the software allows you to remove files as well as to add them.



When finished adding attachments, click on "Okay." This will bring you back to the original message page. From there, click "Post" to put your message and the attached files online.



Make sure that you **DO NOT** place a check mark in the box to the left of the file attachment. The check mark means that the attachment should be made visible within the thread. If this happens then it will take **FOREVER** to download the discussion!

