

# Using the Discussions Tool - Student View

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For more information about the Discussions tool go to:

[http://webct.rpi.edu/web-ct/help/en/student/student\\_index.html - discuss](http://webct.rpi.edu/web-ct/help/en/student/student_index.html - discuss)

# Introduction

**Discussions** is a place where students can view/post messages and participate in online discussions (conferencing). The Discussions tool is often considered the number one tool for online communication in the WebCT learning environment. An online interactive discussion can quickly produce a very rich learning environment. The Discussions Tool in WebCT is used for asynchronous (not at the same time) discussions. Thus, it is not the same as Chat or Instant Messenger which are used for real-time, synchronous discussions. Discussions are organized by subjects/threads rather than chronological order. It is also very different from a listserv which lists messages chronologically and not according to the actual place in the discussion.

## Benefits

- discussion members can participate anytime, anywhere
- saves time answering student questions – a question only needs to be answered once in Discussions
- participants can present/access content through URL references and file attachments to messages
- provides a central place for students and instructors to discuss general course issues, case studies or learning material
- groups can discuss group projects in private
- provides a place to present a project or assignment
- provides a place to make general course announcements
- maintains a sequential, written record of all discussions
- discussion messages can be searched
- discussions can be downloaded and saved for future reference
- provides tools to help evaluate discussion participation; the discussion leader/instructor can easily search a user's contributions to the discussion and track the number of postings

## Discussion Structure

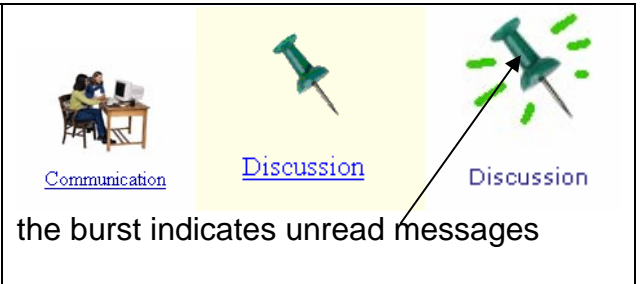
**Topic** - a topic is usually a fairly broad area within a course, e.g. chapter or content module title. Everyone can access public topics, while private topics are available only to a select set of chosen beforehand. By default, *Discussions* contains two public topics - Main and Notes. These topics cannot be deleted or renamed. **All** contains all messages from all public topics. **Main** is: the main discussion area. **Notes** only contains messages related to a page of content in a *Content Module*. Only instructors can create new topics.

**Subject/Thread** - Within a topic, a subject/thread is a group of messages that relate to a single subject, question or statement. Students can create new subjects/threads.

**Message** - within a subject/thread are messages - a single posting - an original message or a reply to another message

# Entering the Discussion Tool

If available, click on the Communication icon, then click on the Discussions icon



## Topics Screen

After clicking on the Discussion icon, you will see the topics screen which presents a list of topics. By default, *Discussions* contains two public topics – Main and Notes. ‘All’ is not a topic but a listing of all subjects in all topics.

Click on a topic name to see its messages.

Topic	Unread	Total	Status
Main	1	3	public, unlocked
Notes	0	0	public, unlocked
<b>All</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	---

### Button Choices on the Topics Screen:

- compose a new message
- search existing messages
- topic settings - change the number of threads/subjects per page to display on your screen or how much of the message to display

#### Discussions



Click on a topic name to see its messages.

Topic	Unread	Total	Status
Main	1	1	public, unlocked
Notes	0	0	public, unlocked
<b>All</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	---

The topic table lists current topics for discussion with the number of

- **unread** messages
- **total** messages
- **status** of topics - public or private, unlocked or locked. Private topics are restricted to a group of members. A locked topic is no longer accessible.

Before reading messages you must decide which topic area you want to read messages in.

Click on a topic (e.g. Main) to reveal the messages within the topic. If you click on ‘All’ you will see all unread messages for all topics.

# View Discussion Subjects/Threads

After clicking on a topic (e.g. Main), you will see a list of subjects/threads contained within that topic.

## Discussion Messages: [Main](#)

**Compose message** | Update listing | Search | Mark all as read | Designer message options ▾

Display:  All  Unread |  Threaded  Unthreaded | Select topic:

Status	<input type="checkbox"/> Subject	Author
▶ 2/3	<input type="checkbox"/> What You Can Do in Discus...	
▶ 1/1	<input type="checkbox"/> Other Tools	
▶ 1/1	<input type="checkbox"/> What's Next?	

Actions :  Apply these actions to the message(s) selected above.

|

By default, messages are presented by subjects/threads as opposed to a simple listing of messages in the chronological order they were posted. Threaded messages are a series of replies to the same subject. The header row of each message thread displays the following information:

**Status:** displays the number of unread messages in the thread over the total number of messages in the thread.

**Subject:** displays the subject of the first message in the thread and the magnifying glass icon.

## Discussion Messages: [Main](#)

**Compose message** | Update listing | Search | Mark all as read | Message options ▾

Display:  All  Unread |  Threaded  Unthreaded | Select topic:

Status	<input type="checkbox"/> Subject	Author	Date
▶ 1/1	<input type="checkbox"/> What You Can Do in Discus...		

Actions :  Apply these actions to the message(s) selected above.

# View Discussion Subjects/Threads

## Tips:

- To view both read and unread messages, click **All**.
- To view messages in chronological order as opposed to threaded, click **Unthreaded**.
- To display any messages that were just sent, click **Update Listing**.
- To view a different topic, from the 'select topic' drop-down list,
  - select a topic and click Go.
- To **preview all messages** in a subject/thread click on the magnifying glass icon.

Discussion Messages: **Main**

Compose message | Update listing | Search | Mark all as read | Message options

Display: All | Unread | Threaded | Unthreaded | Select topic: Main | Go

Status	Subject	Author	Date
▶ 1/1	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> What You Can Do in Discus...		

Actions: Apply these actions to the message(s) selected above.

Compile | Mark as read | Mark as unread

In the header row, click on the 'twisty' arrow to expand or collapse the list of subject/thread messages. When arrow points down, all messages in the thread will now appear.

Discussion Messages: **Main**

Compose message | Update listing | Search | Mark all as read | Message options

Display: All | Unread | Threaded | Unthreaded | Select topic: Main | Go

Status	Subject	Author	Date
▼ 1/1	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> What You Can Do in Discus...		

Actions: Apply these actions to the message(s) selected above.

Compile | Mark as read | Mark as unread

The arrow now points down to reveal the list of messages under the subject.

Discussion Messages: **Main**

Compose message | Update listing | Search | Mark all as read | Designer message options

Display: All | Unread | Threaded | Unthreaded | Select topic: Main | Go

Status	Subject	Author	Date
▼ 2/3	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> What You Can Do in Discus...		
	<input type="checkbox"/> What You Can Do in Discus...	Webct Admin (rpi)	July 24, 2003 5:17pm
	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Re: What You Can Do in Di...	Don Bell (belld2)	September 15, 2004 3:55pm
	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Re: What You Can Do in Di...	Don Bell (belld2)	September 15, 2004 4:02pm
▶ 1/1	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Other Tools		
▶ 1/1	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> What's Next?		

Actions: Apply these actions to the message(s) selected above.

Compile | Mark as read | Mark as unread | Delete | Move to: -Select Topic- | Go

# Reading Messages

To read all messages in a subject/thread at once, click on the magnifier lens icon.

Homepage > Discussion > All

Discussion Messages: All

Compose message Update listing Search Mark all as read Message options

Display: All Unread Threaded Unthreaded Select topic: All Go

Status	Subject	Topic	Author	Date
0/3	What You Can Do in Discus...	Main		
	What You Can Do in Discus...	Main	Webct Admin (rpi)	July 24, 2003 5:17pm
	Re: What You Can Do in Di...	Main	Don Bell (belld2)	September 15, 2004 3:55pm
	Re: What You Can Do in Di...	Main	Don Bell (belld2)	September 15, 2004 4:02pm

Annotations: A box labeled "Messages with author & date" points to the Author and Date columns. A box labeled "Subject/Thread" points to the Subject column. A magnifying glass icon is highlighted in the "Display" section.

To read a single message, click on an individual message

After displaying/reading a message you have the following options:

**Reply** - reply to the message

**Reply privately** - when you reply privately, your reply is sent as a mail message to the person who posted the message, rather than being sent as part of the discussion forum. The recipient of your reply should check their mail messages for your response.

**Quote** - include the original message in your reply

**Download** - download the message to your PC as a text file.

**Close** - close the message window

**Previous/Next** - read the previous (⏪) or next (⏩) message in the thread.

Discussions - Microsoft Inter...

File Edit View Favorites Tools Help

Subject: Re: What You Can Do in Discussions

Message no. 2 [Reply of: no. 1]

Author: Don Bell (belld2)

Date: Wednesday, September 15, 2004 3:55pm

Is that all?

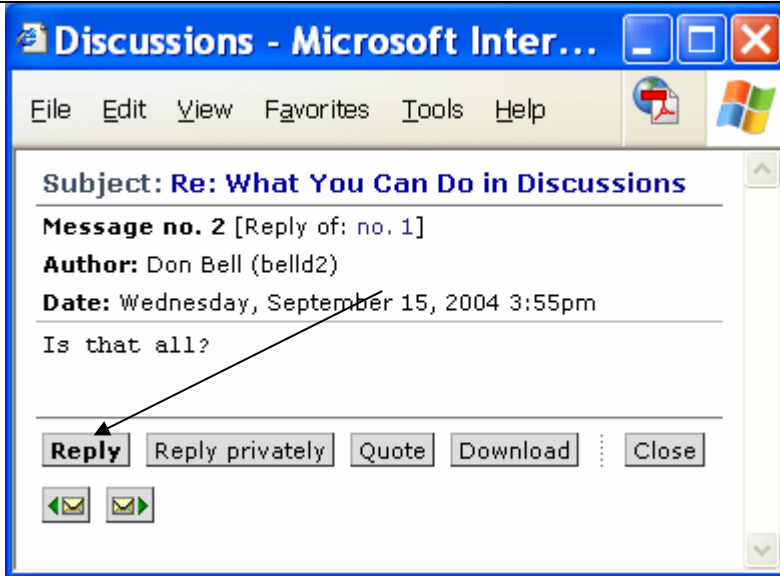
Reply Reply privately Quote Download Close

⏪ ⏩

# Reply to a Message

Display a message.

Click on 'Reply'

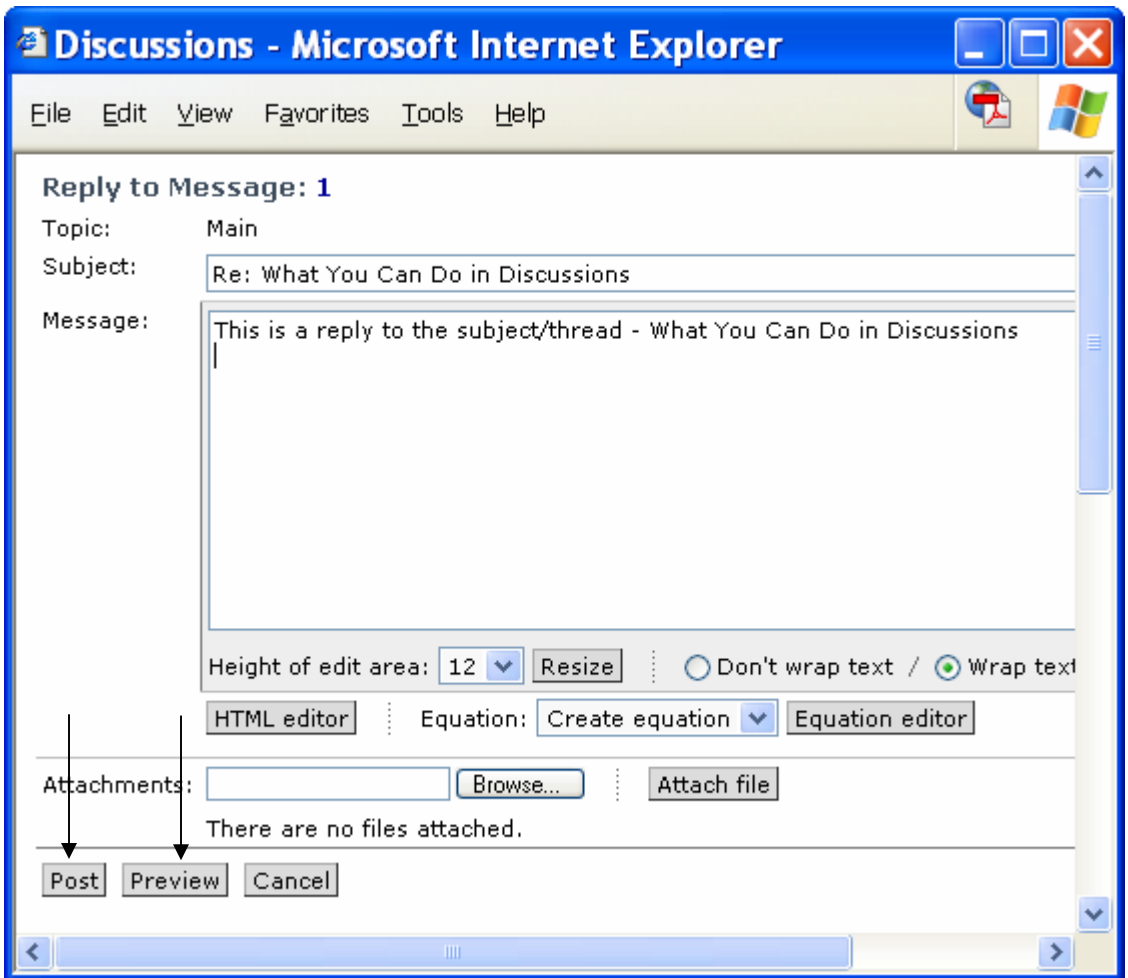


Enter your reply in the text box. You have the option of including html formatting commands – text size, bold, underline, italic, color, etc. e.g. `<font color=red>text </font>`

Optional  
- insert equation using Equation editor  
- attach files.

Preview the message to see how it will look when posted.

Click on 'Post'



# Verify New Message Posting

Click on 'Update Listing' to verify your new (unread) message

Homepage > Discussion > All

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Discussion Messages: All

**Compose message** | **Update listing** | Search | Mark all as read | Message options ▾

Display:  All  Unread |  Threaded  Unthreaded | Select topic: All ▾ Go

Status	<input type="checkbox"/> Subject	Topic
▼ 0/3	<input type="checkbox"/> What You Can Do in Discus...	Main

The new message will appear in the table listing messages.

Homepage > Discussion > All

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Discussion Messages: All

**Compose message** | Update listing | Search | Mark all as read | Message options ▾

Display:  All  Unread |  Threaded  Unthreaded | Select topic: All ▾ Go

Status	<input type="checkbox"/> Subject	Topic	Author	Date
▼ 1/4	<input type="checkbox"/> What You Can Do in Discus...	Main		
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> What You Can Do in Discus...	Main	Webct Admin (rpi)	July 24, 2003 5:17pm
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> Re: What You Can Do in Di...	Main	Don Bell (belld2)	September 15, 2004 3:55pm
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> Re: What You Can Do in Di...	Main	Don Bell (belld2)	September 15, 2004 4:02pm
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> Re: What You Can Do in Di...	Main	<b>Don Bell (belld2)</b>	<b>September 29, 2004 10:48am</b>

# Compose a New Subject/Thread

Click on 'Compose message'

Enter a short, descriptive subject.

Add content to the message window. You can include URL addresses and html format commands for text size, bold, underline, italic, etc. e.g. `<font color=red>text </font>`

## Optional

- insert equation from Equation editor
- attach files. (browse for file, then click on 'Attach File')

Preview the message to see how it will look when posted.

Click on 'Post'

Click on 'Update Listing' to verify your new subject posting.

Homepage > Discussion > All

Discussion Messages: All

Compose message Update listing Search Mark all as read Message options

Homepage > Discussion > All

Discussion Messages: All


Compose message Update listing Search Mark all as read Message options

Display: All Unread Threaded Unthreaded Select topic: All Go

Status	Subject	Topic
0/3	What You Can Do in Discus...	Main

# View Read/Unread Messages

You can choose to view unread messages only or view all messages.



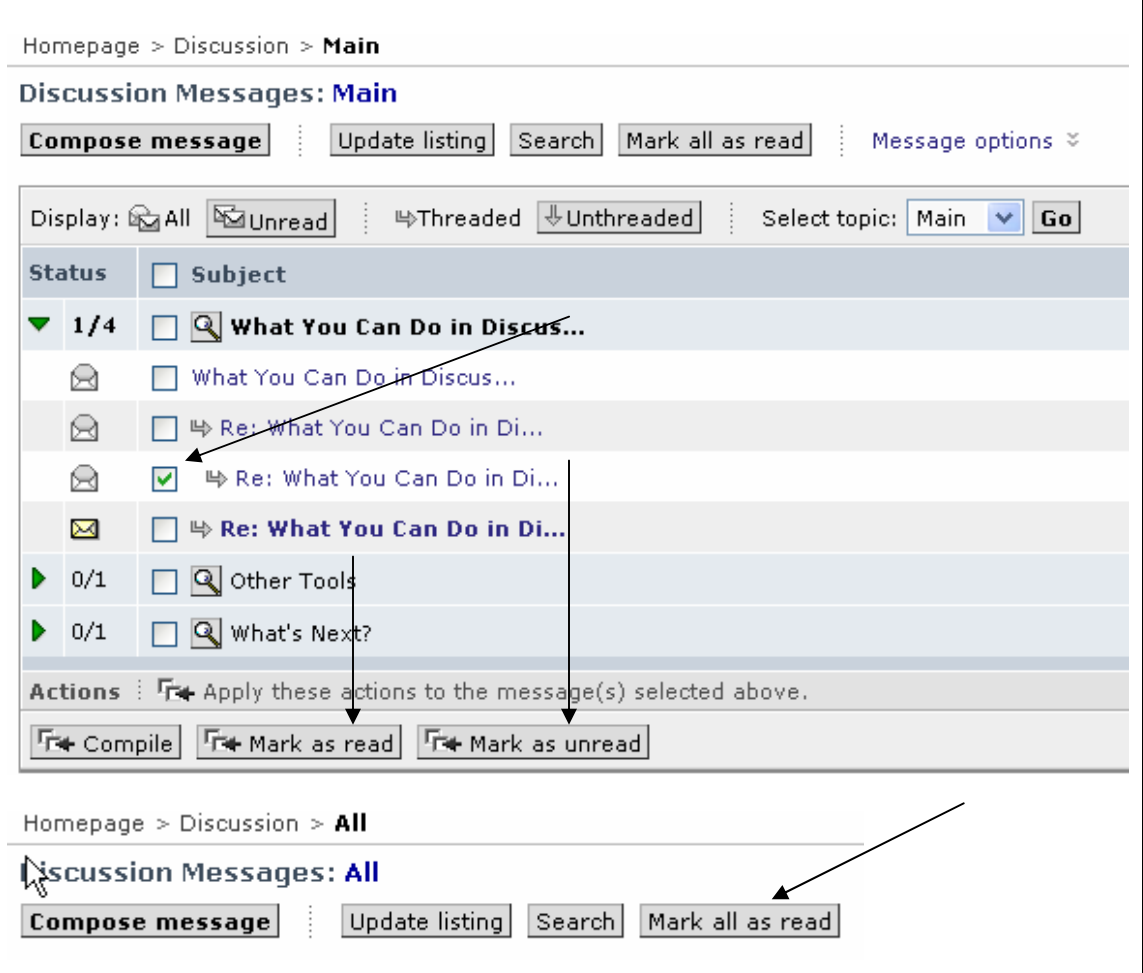
The screenshot shows the 'Discussion Messages: Main' interface. At the top, there is a breadcrumb trail: 'Homepage > Discussion > Main'. Below this, the title 'Discussion Messages: Main' is displayed. A row of buttons includes 'Compose message', 'Update listing', 'Search', 'Mark all as read', and 'Message options'. The 'Display' dropdown is set to 'Unread', and the 'Message options' menu is open, showing 'All' and 'Unread' options. The message list shows one unread message: '1/1 Re: What You Can Do in Di...'. Below the list, there are 'Actions' buttons: 'Compile', 'Mark as read', and 'Mark as unread'.

Messages you have read are normally flagged as 'read' and will not appear when you are viewing only unread messages. If you want to continue to view some 'read messages' along with other unread messages, you can change the status of those messages from read to unread.

To change the status of a message from read to unread, select the checkbox next to the message and then click on the 'Mark as unread' button.

In a similar way you can change the status of unread messages to read by selecting the message and clicking on 'Mark as read'.

You can mark all messages as read by clicking on the 'Mark all as read' button near the top of the screen.



The top screenshot shows the 'Discussion Messages: Main' page with the 'Display' dropdown set to 'Unread'. The message list shows four messages, with the first one selected. The 'Mark as unread' button is highlighted. The bottom screenshot shows the 'Discussion Messages: All' page with the 'Mark all as read' button highlighted.

# Threaded vs. Unthreaded Messages

It is usually most helpful to view messages as “threaded”, i.e. grouped under the relevant subject/thread.

In the screen below, messages are “threaded”. Notice that replies to messages are indented and the messages are not all in chronological order.

Homepage > Discussion > **Main**

Discussion Messages: **Main**

**Compose message** | Update listing | Search | Mark all as read | Message options

Display:  All  Unread |  Threaded  Unthreaded | Select topic: **Main** | **Go**

Status	<input type="checkbox"/> Subject	Author	Date
▼ 0/4	<input type="checkbox"/> What You Can Do in Discus...		
<input type="checkbox"/>	What You Can Do in Discus...	Webct Admin (rpi)	July 24, 2003 5:17pm
<input type="checkbox"/>	↳ Re: What You Can Do in Di...	Don Bell (belld2)	September 15, 2004 3:55pm
<input type="checkbox"/>	↳ Re: What You Can Do in Di...	Don Bell (belld2)	September 15, 2004 4:02pm
<input type="checkbox"/>	↳ Re: What You Can Do in Di...	Don Bell (belld2)	September 29, 2004 10:48am
▼ 0/1	<input type="checkbox"/> Other Tools		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other Tools	Bill Bell (dontest)	September 17, 2004 2:14pm
▼ 0/1	<input type="checkbox"/> What's Next?		
<input type="checkbox"/>	What's Next?	Bill Bell (dontest)	September 17, 2004 2:15pm

If you wish to view all messages in chronological order, then click on the ‘Unthreaded’ button.

Homepage > Discussion > **Main**

Discussion Messages: **Main**

**Compose message** | Update listing | Search | Mark all as read | Message options

Display:  All  Unread |  Threaded  Unthreaded | Select topic: **Main** | **Go**

In the screen below messages are in “unthreaded” chronological order.

Homepage > Discussion > **Main**

Discussion Messages: **Main**

**Compose message** | Update listing | Search | Mark all as read | Message options

Display:  All  Unread |  Threaded  Unthreaded | Select topic: **Main** | **Go**

No.	Status	<input type="checkbox"/> Subject	Author	Date
1.	<input type="checkbox"/>	What You Can Do in Discus...	Webct Admin (rpi)	July 24, 2003 5:17pm
2.	<input type="checkbox"/>	Re: What You Can Do in Di...	Don Bell (belld2)	September 15, 2004 3:55pm
3.	<input type="checkbox"/>	Re: What You Can Do in Di...	Don Bell (belld2)	September 15, 2004 4:02pm
4.	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other Tools	Bill Bell (dontest)	September 17, 2004 2:14pm
5.	<input type="checkbox"/>	What's Next?	Bill Bell (dontest)	September 17, 2004 2:15pm
7.	<input type="checkbox"/>	Re: What You Can Do in Di...	Don Bell (belld2)	September 29, 2004 10:48am

**Actions** | Apply these actions to the message(s) selected above.  
 Compile |  Mark as read |  Mark as unread

Chronological order

# Search Messages

You may search messages by

- first name of the message author
- last name of the message author
- user name of the message author
- thread subject
- unique message number
- date that the message was sent
- content of the mail message

After you have searched your messages, you may [compile and download](#) them.

To search messages:

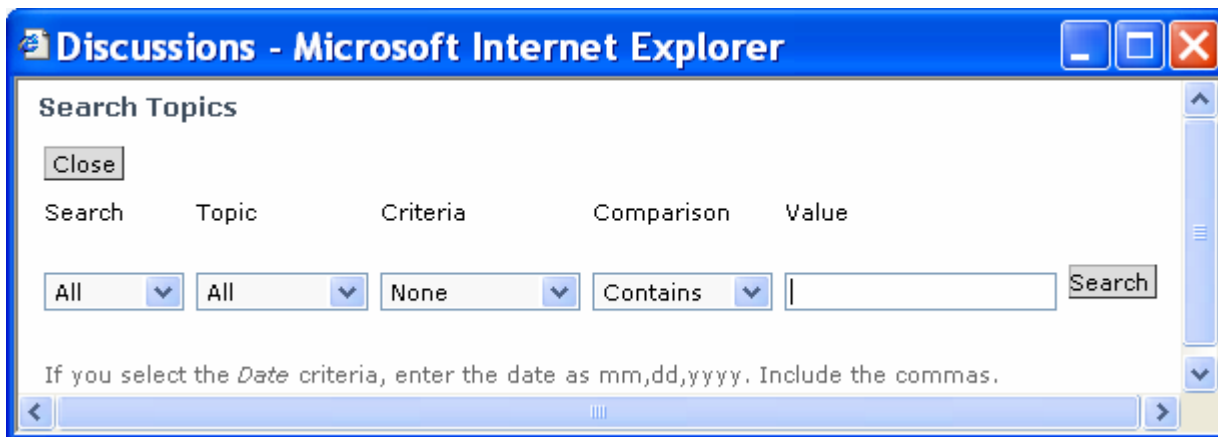
From *Discussions*, click Search.

Homepage > Discussion > **All**

Discussion Messages: **All**

**Compose message** ... **Update listing** **Search** **Mark all as read**

The Search Topics screen appears in a new browser window.



# Search Messages

Select your search parameters:

- From the Search drop-down list, select the messages to search – all or unread
- From the Topic drop-down list, select the topic to search.
- From the Criteria drop-down list, select the filter to apply to your search:
  - None = no filter
  - First Name = first name of the message author
  - Last Name = last name of the message author
  - User ID = user name of the message author
  - Subject = the thread subject
  - Message no = the unique message number associated with each message
  - Date = the date that the message was sent
  - Message = any of the words in the text of the mail message

From the Comparison drop-down list, select how the information entered in the Value text box will be compared with the search Criteria

- Contains = retrieves messages containing the letters or numbers entered in the Value text box
- Equals = retrieves messages that match exactly the letters or numbers entered in the Value text box
- Before = in combination with the Date or Number filter, retrieves all messages before the date or number entered in the Value text box. In combination with a text filter (Name, Subject, Message) retrieves all messages containing letters that occur alphabetically before the word entered in the Value text box.
- After = in combination with the Date or Number filter, retrieves all messages after the date or number entered in the Value text box. In combination with a text filter (Name, Subject, Message), retrieves all messages containing letters that occur alphabetically after the word entered in the *Value* text box.
- Starts with = in combination with a text filter (Name, Subject, Message) retrieves messages with words that begin with the letter entered in the *Value* text box.
- Ends with = in combination with a text filter (Name, Subject, Message) retrieves words that end with the letter entered in the Value text box.

In the Value text box, enter the words or numbers you want to search. If you have selected the Date filter, type the date in the format mm,dd,yyyy including the commas.

Click Search. The Discussion Messages screen appears listing all messages that satisfy your search requirements.

# View Members of Your Private Topic

**Note:** Depending on administrator settings, you may not be able to view the members of your private topics.

1. From the *Discussions* screen, under the *Status* column, click **private** for the topic whose members you want to view. The *Private Topic* screen appears.

Homepage > **Discussion**

## Discussions

[Compose message](#) |  [Topic settings](#)

Click on a topic name to see its messages.

Topic	Unread	Total	Status
Main	0	6	public, unlocked
Notes	1	1	public, unlocked
Group 1	1	1	private, unlocked
<b>All</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>8</b>	---

Homepage > Discussion > **Show members**

## Private Topic: Group 1

Name	User ID
Bill Bell	dontest
Don Bell	belld2
Mark Miller	millem

2. To return to the *Discussions* screen, click the **Discussions** link in the breadcrumbs.