Student Letter Participation

Getting There: From the main course home page, click on the “Blackboard” button. You will then be on the ‘Blackboard Instructions’ page. There you will find detailed instructions as well as a link to BlackboardTM where the forum is located.

Logging on When you try to “Login” to BlackboardTM, you will be asked for your ‘user name’ and ‘password’. These will be the same ones that you use to access your VCU email. Once you are logged on, you will get a “Welcome” page with a list of “My Courses”. Select the link for this course. Once you have the Blackboard course home page, click on the button labeled “Letters Journal” to go to the Student Astronomy Letters.

Reading the journal: Links to the available issues are given on the opening page of the journal. Next to each link is a description that indicates whether the issue is still open for submissions. Click on the link and you will see a list of titles. After each title comes the author’s name, and the date of posting. Click on a title to read the message. Any responses to that message will be listed and you can read those by clicking on their titles also. When you are through reading a message, click the “OK” button.

Submitting a Letter: Click on the link for the most recent issue. Then click on the “Add New Thread” button, which is found at the top of the opening page. A form will come up with blanks for subject and message. Because the letter format is complex, it is best to compose the letter using a word processor such as MS Word and then copy and paste the text into the message box. Do not just attach the word processor file (1) because that will not appear in the display that the grader uses and (2) because people reading the journal should not be asked to click on links to files of unknown origin — Your computer might have infected your file with a virus.

Checking Status: Your letter or reply goes into a waiting area where it is visible only to the journal moderator, who publishes it if it is OK and returns it if it is not. It may take up to a day for the moderator to review your submission. During that time you will not see it on your discussion forum display. If your submission is accepted, it will appear in your display with "published" in the "Status" column. If your submission is returned, it will still appear in your display, but not in anyone else’s and will have "returned" for the status along with a link that you can click on to see why it was returned. You can then edit your post and resubmit it. By far the most common reason for returning a post is that it consists only of an attached file.

Checking Letter Grades: Each issue of the journal receives a letter grade in the Blackboard Student Gradebook. If you did not submit a letter to an issue, the letter grade will be zero. That is OK. You do not need a letter in every issue. If you did submit a letter to an issue, and wish to see exactly how it was scored, place your cursor over the letter grade. A downward pointing arrow should appear. Click on the arrow and then choose "View Grade Details" from the resulting menu. Then click on the "View Rubric" button to see how the letter was graded.

Responding to a Message: You may comment on messages in any of the issues. Click on the “Reply” button, which may be found at the lower right of the message. Replies go to a waiting area until the moderator can decide if they are appropriate to be published.

Reply Content: The reply messages should be original, and should be about the content of the post that they are replying to. The key point is that the reply should include enough content from the original post to make it obvious that you actually read the post.

All-purpose Responses: These are responses such as “I don’t know,” “Cool,” “Read the notes,” and any others that could be made without even reading the post they are replying to. The moderator will delete such responses. If you actually want to say that something is “cool” provide some details so that the moderator can be sure that you actually read the post that you are responding to.

Rubric Scores: These are responses that grade a letter using the scoring rubric, possibly with some comments about style, but no actual content from the letter. The moderator will delete such responses unless they include some actual content from the letter.

Formulaic Responses: These are essentially all-purpose responses in which you paste something from the message you are responding to. For example "I did not know that (pasted statement from
message)." The moderator will return such responses as soon as he catches on to what you are doing.

**Slip-streaming:** That is when you echo someone else’s published reply without adding anything to it. The moderator will delete such responses even when they are not exact duplicates. Note that you may still see some duplication in responses that were submitted at nearly the same time.

**Link-only Replies:** Replies that just give a web location without indicating what can be found there will be deleted. To get credit, you need to either summarize what the internet site says or copy and paste a key part of it. That way, someone reading your response can judge whether or not they wish to visit the web location.

**Objectionable Messages:** One strict rule is that messages attacking individuals or groups are not permitted. The moderator will not publish such messages.

**Posting Limits:** You may publish no more than one letter and no more than ten replies in each issue of the Letters.