

10 Tips for Distance Learning Instructors

Here are some things I've learned from teaching online; they are things that can make web-based class experiences more rewarding for both you and your students:

1. **Remember that your adult learners are a very different population than traditional students.** They often work full-time jobs, have kids, and husbands, and wives, and sometimes (unfortunately) major illnesses. Most are sacrificing a great deal to take even a couple of classes each term. For this reason, most really want to learn, not just make it through the course (although they want that too). They rarely make excuses that aren't true and most often take responsibility for not doing something. Almost without fail, you can trust them to accept a great deal of responsibility for their own learning, which is very important for students to succeed in a web-based course.
2. **Keep careful records (both online and hard copies).** It will save you time and grief in the long run and sometimes your online information can become unavailable to you.
3. **Remember that as the instructor of the course you are teaching, it is your job to help students succeed.** You can't make sure they succeed, but you do want to do all that you can to facilitate your students' learning in your course: help them understand what will be expected of them; really listen to their feedback when they offer it; if you see confusion brewing on a Bulletin Board thread (even if the students don't know they are veering off track), speak up and try to help clarify things for your students or create a path back to the relevant course issues.
4. **Respond quickly and often to student questions.** It will save you time and grief in the long run. Studies show that if you do not respond to students in a timely fashion (that is, according to the schedule you have told them to expect), you can expect the number of messages you receive to increase by as much as three times the amount you would otherwise receive.
5. **Reassure your students that you will work with them and help them through rough spots (both technology- and content-related) if needed.** You will be rewarded for doing this by having a more relaxed class and a happier one, too (read: fewer panicked emails and better course evals). The first few weeks can be tough because your students are anxious about doing a writing course and doing it online.
6. **Always respond to student questions, complaints, and concerns by saying, "Thank you for asking about. . ." or "Thanks for letting me know of your concerns, [name]" or "Good question, [name]."** Since tone over email is hard to convey, doing this will create some room for you to say what you need to say firmly and directly without being heard as being inconsiderate or lacking in understanding.

7. **Always end emails and Bulletin Board posts which respond to student questions, complaints, and concerns or make announcements about work due by saying, “Does this help?” or “I hope this helps” or “Please let me know if you have any questions.”** You can’t say this enough for them. They come to you anxious and wanting to succeed. They will often tell you, “Yes, it is clear now. Thank you.”
8. **Organize your Blackboard course content so that it is easy to navigate, and so that you don’t confuse students or distract them from learning.** In other words, do not have multiple links to the same content, schedule of work due, etc.
9. **Reflect on your own experience of the course periodically.** This can help you make important adjustments to how you are using your time and energy to work with your web-based students—which can, in turn, help students' experience of the course. For example, are you spending so much time responding to individual email that you have less energy for responding to student writing? If so, you might consider posting some of your responses to student questions to the Bulletin Board, to head off other student queries about the same issue, assignment, technology glitch, etc.
10. **Feel free to dialogue with your distance learning colleagues about teaching effectiveness issues (not just technical issues) if you have a question, concern, or complaint, or if your students do and you’re not sure how to respond.** Most colleagues (and support staff) are quite happy to help, even with the small stuff.

NOTE: The author of these tips is Dr. Catherine Gouge, who shared them with me when she was an Assistant Professor of English at West Virginia University. I’ve made some minor revisions to them to keep them current and relevant for my own use.