

Getting Started / Best Practice: Remember the Student

As you set up your online course, think about how your students will experience your course. If possible, ask someone who is not familiar with the material to critique it through the eyes of a student.

A Clear Beginning

In a face-to-face classroom, after welcoming the students to class, you likely spend the first class session distributing the syllabus, elaborating on its contents, reviewing expectations, and answering questions.

In an online course, this familiar pattern is missing, and students may feel anxious about what to do next. In fact, the start of an online course can create more student anxiety than a traditional face-to-face course. Here are some tips on how to put your students at ease:

- Be absolutely clear about where and how to begin the course. Put first steps or orientation materials in prominent locations.
- Be prepared to spend the first few days establishing rapport with your students. Be available to answer questions, clarify expectations, and generate excitement about the course.
- Explain tasks clearly. Carefully select clear wording that will not be misinterpreted. Ambiguity in objectives, descriptions, or directions can be magnified in an online course, causing additional work and stress for you and your students.

The Visual Appeal of Your Course

Another way to ensure a positive start for both you and your students is to understand the principles of good web design and to examine your course with a critical eye. A simple yet professional course design is the gold standard. Simple does not mean uninteresting. Clean design styles are inviting, easy to view, and most importantly, easy to navigate.

- Use consistent page design or consider developing page templates to keep your use of headings, fonts, and colors the same throughout the course.
- Make sure images have small file sizes and download quickly. If you have a large image, provide a thumbnail that links to the full-sized image. Avoid using too many images on one page.
- Add visual interest with meaningful icons and attractive banners.
- Keep it clean and simple. Very dramatic or highly animated designs are distracting. Make unneeded elements unavailable and introduce them as necessary.

Design Easy to Read Pages

Students will become frustrated and skip content if pages are difficult to read and scan. Design pages that are concise, organized, and visually appealing.

Studies¹ show nearly 80% of users scan a web page for information, rather than read it word for word. Instead of copying printed course material into your online course, reformat the material so it is easier to read online.

Here are some tips to make your pages user-friendly:

- Use a straightforward, casual writing style. Elaborate language is not only disliked by web users, but reduces comprehension.
- Present text in small chunks by including one idea per paragraph. Use plenty of headings and white space. Use bullets to present lists and summarize important points. This allows users to easily scan the page for important information.
- Use appropriate font size—between 12 and 14 points—so text can be read easily on the screen. Use no more than two or three different fonts. Consider using a sans serif font, such as Arial or Helvetica, for paragraph text.
- Keep pages short. While some vertical scrolling is acceptable, if a page is longer than two or three screens, consider breaking it up into shorter pages. Some instructors find it useful to think of each page as a chunk of information or a brief lesson.

Remember ALL of Your Students

Make sure your content is accessible and can be used by students who rely on adaptive technology to navigate your course. Here are some accessibility tips:

- Use a white background with dark text—the most readable color combination. If you choose to use a colored background, select a light color to maximize contrast between the page and the text. Avoid dark pages or loud colors, such as bright red, green, or yellow. These color choices cause eye fatigue, obscure text with glare, and are difficult to read.
- Do not rely on color alone to relay key information because color is not accessible to all students. Instead, use bold or different font sizes for emphasis.
- Use the alt attribute with images. The alt attribute provides alternative information about images and can be read by text-based browsers and screen readers. The alt attribute also allows students on slower modems to see an image's description or label while they wait for it to load.

¹ Nielsen, Jakob. "How Users Read on the Web." *useit.com*. Nielsen Norman Group. 1 Oct. 1997. Web. 22 Sept. 2009.