

Starting Off a New Semester

How do you get your online course off to a great start?

TIP
1



Set up your Blackboard course with logical, consistent, and efficient navigation. You will receive access to your Blackboard course shell about one month before the semester begins.

TIP
2



Provide clear instructions for how to get started and where to find various course components. Include a "Start Here" or "Week Zero" module with course overview information.

TIP
3



Prepare a detailed syllabus. Provide course requirements, expectations, learning outcomes, schedule, grading scale, rubrics, and course and university policies. Also include links to student services and resources.

TIP
4



Post a welcome announcement or instructor introduction. This will help students know a little more about you. Share your enthusiasm for the subject matter or for teaching, and provide contact information and the best ways to reach you.



Aim to build all online course content before your course begins. It is extremely challenging to create course content and teach online at the same time.

Manage Student Expectations

Students often have unrealistic expectations for online courses. Help manage these expectations:

- State students' responsibility for their own learning clearly
- Explain your role as online instructor
- Provide clear criteria for success [grading scale, rubrics, deadlines, etc.]



Use Our Syllabus Checklist

The syllabus sets the structure and tone for an online course.

We have prepared a brief checklist with standards for a quality online syllabus. Consult this checklist as you prepare and finalize your syllabus:

odl.gmu.edu/resources/syllabus-checklist/

Best Practices from Mason's Online Faculty

How do YOU get your online course off to a great start?

Create a Course Orientation Video

"In my first week, I have two essentials. (1) I create a course orientation video, using screen-capture to guide students through how to navigate the online course. I also explain the goals of the course and major assignments. (2) I include a 'getting-to-know-us' activity. This consists of a discussion forum where students share information about themselves and then reply to one another. I usually tie this activity to the theme of the course."

- Dr. Stephanie Dodman, Assistant Professor, Advanced Studies in Teaching and Learning, CEHD

Prepare a Clear, Engaging Syllabus

"In an online course, you have no guarantee that students read the syllabus. There is no 'syllabus day' to review it with the class, ensuring that students know what to expect from the course. Using the Mac program Pages, I made my syllabus more engaging and student-friendly, something that students can quickly glance at and find the information they need. I found and edited a basic template to create a more colorful and inviting syllabus. This interactive syllabus engages students from day one. I also provide a plain-text, accessible version for any students who may prefer it or use a screen reader."

- Dr. Margaret Slavin, Assistant Professor, Nutrition and Food Studies, CHHS

Take a Student Perspective

"I prepare my online courses by becoming a 'student' myself. I analyze the course materials and ask myself the questions that a student may ask. I try to simplify concepts by creating review sheets with explanations, exercises, and cultural information. I revise these each semester based on course level and specific student needs.

I also hold online interviews with each student. I learn more about their individual goals for the course and for learning French. I personalize the course by keeping their interests, goals, and needs in mind.

Having a good relationship with my students is very important to me, and a friendly class makes for better learning. During the course, I try to be available and reach out to them to help them succeed."

- Prof. Saima Ashraf-Hassan, Instructor, Modern and Classical Languages, CHSS

Learn More!

Biro, S. (2011). Get your online course off to a good start. Faculty Focus. Magna Publications.

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