

# **Online Teaching Tips**

## **Online Teaching Tips**

**Dr Holly Ordway**

**hollyordway.com**

For all the college profs suddenly faced with teaching online with approximately zero prep, I wrote a thread of miscellaneous tips from 7 years of teaching online very happily for the fully-online MA in Apologetics at Houston Baptist University. I built all my own courses, too. Here are all my tweets, arranged now by category.

Note: when I tweeted the original thread, I just jumped in and got some material out there. Then I realized I wanted to add more, and did so. Later, I realized that the threading was unclear (I don't usually make long Twitter threads or add to them, so this was a new tech for me). So I made a tweet that collected the different sub-threads more clearly. Lastly, I had some requests to pull this all together into a document, so I did so – and decided to take this opportunity to arrange the tips by category, to be more useful.

Then I realized that all this actually MODELS what I'm saying about online teaching! Jump in, with what you have, in the mode that is available; don't worry about whether or not it's working perfectly – just start engaging; in response to your audience, go back and adapt/reframe as needed; don't try to be perfect; keep it simple.

Patience, kindness, a can-do spirit, humility, and a sense of humor are all really helpful. Even if you go back to teaching residential courses after this, you'll have learned a lot about teaching from this experience. Godspeed!

**Feel free to share these tips; just, please, include my name and website (hollyordway.com) in the attribution, please.**

So, here are the tips:

### **General course design:**

Focus on the essentials: what is the primary nature of your course? if it's a discussion course, on discussion. If it's a writing course, on feedback and revision. If it's a lecture course, on providing lectures.

Be as old-school as you can. No bells & whistles. Email and discussion boards are all you REALLY need. You can always add other things later. All those Blackboard / Moodle / etc. features that look great if you can figure 'em out? JUST BACK AWAY. Use the forums.

**Don't try to do synchronous activities** (like live video chats) unless you've done them before.

Even then, try not to. Go asynchronous. Your students may be in the same time zone as you, but trying to figure out tech with time pressure & at home w/other people around: much harder.

Embrace the positive aspects of online. You can require ALL your students to participate, including the shy introverted ones who never raise their hand in class. And ALL the students can have a voice, not just the ones who process quickly enough to respond on the spot.

Other positives: You can ask students to "go deep": discuss an idea at length over a whole week. You can make forums for group work and, because you can see their posts, you can ensure that everyone participates. Students can post rough drafts or outlines & get feedback.

Lastly — have realistic expectations. It's OK for this all to be a bit of a mess. Teaching online effectively is a skill like any other teaching skill: you get better at it with time and practice (I've had a lot of that!) Don't expect marvels of yourself or the class.

PRO TIP for administration: Trust that your faculty are skilled teachers. Provide resources but don't impose what a consultant says is best. Much of what these "learning management" programs/consultants are about is based on what makes money for their company. (Alas.)

Administrators: please remember that subjects differ. An online class will look different for English, accounting, biology, business, etc. Faculty teaching styles differ: this is good, students want real profs, not robots. /end admin soapbox.

Back to tips for faculty. Students benefit from fundamental consistency (like expectations that they'll participate) but they don't need or want all classes to be the same. Know your teaching style. Your online class won't have the same feel as a colleague's. This is fine!

**Figure out your expectations and make them clear – and be prepared to answer questions about them. Repeatedly. Be patient.**

BONUS TIP: Less is more. REALLY. No, you don't need to have a video for every lesson/unit. No, you don't need supplemental materials and an interactive quiz (ugh!) for each topic. YES you can stick with the one book you had assigned for this week. There will be plenty to discuss.

**Relating to students:**

BE PATIENT. Students are unsettled by new things. (Aren't we all!?) They're worried about being able to do their work. They WILL ask questions about things that seem obvious. Answer them patiently. Your calm and patient responses will shape their experiences.

Use this as an exercise in empathy. How does it make YOU feel to have to teach in a new format, with anxiety about other things in your life? Well, that's what ALL our students feel like when they start classes – just because we're used to how classes run, doesn't mean they are.

Be honest with students about any difficulties you have with technology, etc. If you can't upload docs or get the videos working, admit it! The "we're all in this together" spirit helps make for a better classroom (and students appreciate a prof who's recognizably human.)

Pro Tip: Be accommodating. Remember that some students may have difficult/distracting home environments; they may not have access to tech at home & have to use the library – and have to travel to get there; they may suddenly have small siblings at home to care for.

**Students will remember your kindness a lot longer than they'll remember any particular homework assignment.**

Students need CONSISTENT responses but NOT instant ones. Set a time daily for logging in & responding to emails/messages. Finish and leave the rest to the next day. This makes a healthy boundary for you & students relax as they learn your response time.

BONUS TIP: Teaching online can be tougher because it can feel like you have to be "on" 24/7. Set a time for your teaching each day (you need to have your time spread out more than in face-to-face teaching) so you're not always at the computer. Take Sunday completely OFF. Reach out to colleagues for mutual support & encouragement.

**Moving lectures online:**

Keep it simple with lectures. Do AUDIO not video by default. Video can be hard to get on a weak connection. Also, it's harder to do well.

"Keep lectures under 15 (or 5) minutes" is a commonplace of advice. I agree in general: do multiple short lectures so students can easily find and review what they need & the file size is manageable.

But remember: audiences differ & the interest factor is key. There is no one length that is ideal. Your students may well be watching hourlong YouTube videos on topics that they care about & listening to long complex podcasts. Don't assume your students have weak attention spans.

A short lecture is great for the PROF as it forces us to focus! We don't have a captive audience in class! They can turn it off if it's rambling and not useful. DO NOT lecture extemporaneously. Much harder than it looks. Write your text & read it. (Or at least have notes.)

### **Adapting assignments:**

Simplify your assignments. Cull the smaller ones; don't try to replicate all in-class activities. Focus on the most important pieces. Less is more.

Clarify directions. Then clarify them some more. All the things you're used to explaining in class after you give the assignment? You have to spell it out. Make sure you tell students that they should ASK QUESTIONS and above all make sure you MEAN IT and welcome those questions.

Remember the three Ps: Panic Produces Plagiarism. Being asked to work online, some otherwise honest students may freak out and act unwisely. Now's the time to raise your essay-prompt game! This is actually good for YOU too. Makes essays more interesting to read.

Write new prompts that require discussion of ideas from class, or apply the ideas. Try new forms, like dialogues or creative options like stories. And make sure that you recognize this is harder & reassure students: the work will be rougher and it's OK! (And BE OK with it.)

Better, more distinctive essay prompts = less plagiarism, because students CAN'T just copy / buy stuff online. (And if they do, they'll fail anyway for not doing what the prompt asks, so it's self-policing to a great extent.)

Crafting assignments to be near-impossible to plagiarize (for ex, requiring a 'process' component: "How did you apply what you learned in class?") helps ALL students learn & be engaged.

BONUS TIP: Keep documents simple. Students don't really care if there are nice headers and colored fonts. They don't care if your document is 'boring' plain text (like this one is!). They care about FINDING THE INFO THEY NEED.

If you haven't done timed online tests before, Do. NOT. Start. Now. (It can be done, but it's MUCH more complicated than it seems. BTDT.) If you rely on in-class tests, consider if you can make essay questions, or do tutorials so you have a (scheduled) Q&A with each student.

### **Discussion forums:**

Figure out how you'll measure participation, and make sure that it's clear, moderate in amount, & easily measurable by you, like X number of substantial posts per week. Not: "x number of posts, y number of replies, z number of responses to others' responses..." (You'll thank me.)

By the way, the old-school way of just doing hash marks on a sheet of paper with the students' names on it = perfectly good way of tracking participation. No need to wrestle with online "participation" or "attendance" features.

Don't grade individual posts or threads. Way too much work for you, stressful for students, & discourages exploratory discussion/asking questions. Grade participation holistically by engagement, not mastery of the material.

PRO TIP: You know how there are a few students who are great at participation & extra-responsible? Designate them as Discussion Leaders and give them a chance to exercise leadership in the classroom. Rotate new students in after a couple of weeks if desired.

Some tips for discussion forums:

- 1) Post an intro to the week's material: what you'd say at the start of class.
- 2) Provide a selection of discussion questions & allow students to exercise agency by choosing from amongst them.
- 3) Praise good posts & ask follow-up questions.
- 4) Tell students to use descriptive subject headers for posts (seriously, it helps)
- 5) & to flag questions for you w/ "QUESTION FOR PROF. X" so you're sure to see it.
- 6) If they email you with a good Q, say "Good Q, go ask it in class so everyone can learn!" (& answer it there!)
- 7) Make a separate forum for general chat: remember, students don't have the opportunity to catch up with their friends after class now.
- 8) Make your discussion topics directly relate to the assignments (write better assignments as needed)
- 9) Think about the questions you'd ask in live discussion & learn to ask them online. It's the same process, just spread out over time (& potentially involving more students!).
- 10) Direct students to particular concepts / passages in a text. Ask how & why questions. How does this work? Why does this matter? Online discussion has many of the features of small-group/reflective writing activities bundled into class discussion.

If the discussion topics are clearly related to the assignments, & assignments require critical thinking, then students will have a natural reason to engage (other than "I have to participate for my grade"). This boosts motivation & engagement.

PRO TIP: Assign each student to write a reading response to a section of the assigned texts (divide it up each week). Make the RR include 1) summary, 2) discussion of the ideas, and 3) a couple of questions for discussion. This will be an eye-opener for you...

Assigned Reading Responses show where students are missing or misunderstanding key ideas. This might never show up in regular discussion, & students naturally avoid (or gloss over) topics they don't understand when doing assignments. But all is laid bare in the RR.

This allows for genuinely interactive online teaching: you find where students are confused, you ask leading questions ("Are you SURE that's what the author is saying here?") & let the class try to figure it out, and THEN you confirm correct answers & supply answers as needed.

**Patience, patience, patience! With your students, with your colleagues, and with yourself.**

Pro tip: directly praise questions that reveal confusion about the material. "I'm glad you asked" & "Great, that allows me to explain" = reassurance on how learning happens in a new format.

BONUS TIP: Discussion forums may seem like an 'extra' not an essential, but they can be the heart of the learning experience for your students: if they're graded holistically (so students feel free to have genuine questions / explore new ideas without getting a low forum grade), structured and guided (with discussion questions & student leaders), and you are present but don't micromanage.

**Interacting with students:**

Students need CONSISTENT responses but NOT instant ones. Have time daily for logging in & responding to messages. This is healthy for you (so you're not "on" 24/7) & students relax as they learn your response time.

Pro tip: ask students to share briefly in class how they're managing / what their circumstances are. This reassures students that you care & helps you assess if your expectations are reasonable or need adjustment.

Encourage students to connect with you. Try emailing a doc with assignment directions to students in addition to having it on the platform. Then ask students to reply with a picture of something fun like a kitten. Then you'll know they got it & it opens a line of communication for things they might not ask in class.

BONUS TIP: If a student doesn't reply as directed in that email, then reach out individually: "Hey, I haven't heard from you. Is everything OK?" This makes a huge difference: students realize that being online doesn't mean being invisible.

PRO TIP: develop a more relaxed policy for late papers. Students freaking out bc they did the work but their WiFi went down or they can't figure out how to submit it: not conducive to learning. Tell students to let you know if they have a prob & then be kind and charitable.

Are you stressed? Yes? So are your students (probably more so). Keep things simple for everyone's sake & don't be afraid to drop things that don't work.

BONUS TIP: When responding to students (discussion forums or emails), use their names! And sign emails with your name, not just your official auto-signature (I always signed off w/ "Cheers, Dr. O"). This humanizes the interaction. Little things count.

**Closing thoughts:**

You might not have chosen to teach online, if given the option, but it's a legitimate mode, DIFFERENT from face to face. It can be done badly: so can residential. It can be done very well. It has its own strengths & weaknesses. Explore it for what it is, not what it isn't.

As someone who taught for years in a residential classroom & then switched to 100% online: these modes are not in competition. Both are valuable; they meet different needs & serve (usually) different populations. But GOOD TEACHING and HUMAN KINDNESS & RESPECT transcend modes.

Fellowship & relationships have to be built more intentionally online; it's easier for students (and faculty) to feel isolated. OK. So, make the effort to connect and provide opportunities for casual chat; make the effort to respond to students by name. The effort is worth it.

It's not about the technology per se: it's about using technology to interact with our students, build relationships with them, help them to learn, mentor them, advise them. Keep this firmly in sight & you'll do fine.

Be the online teacher you'd want to have.

Be the online teacher you'd want your kids to have.

It's not about the tech or the apps; it's about helping people learn & grow. You can do it. And it's beautiful to see when it happens.

Godspeed!