

7 Guidelines for Setting Up Clear Online Lessons

The way a lesson is laid out online can make all the difference in whether a student can follow along and execute it successfully.

Online Learning

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When our classrooms moved online this year, many of us

scrambled to find ways to engage students with lessons remotely, only to find that it was no simple task. Many of us, myself included, didn't know where to start.

Even the most basic communications, like the daily lessons that I posted for students, were trickier than I anticipated; my posts careened from being too wordy to too vague, from too content-heavy to too task-heavy. Students felt overwhelmed by their new, independent workload, and I wasn't streamlining our learning effectively. It just wasn't easy to transform a 50-minute lesson into a clear, pithy post that would serve my high school students.

Fortunately, my students weren't shy about giving feedback that helped me hone my daily posts, and over time, I was able to make my lessons more navigable, readable, and engaging.

7 Guidelines to Set the Stage for Online Learning

1. Same time, same place: Post your lessons in the same place every day. Once students know where you'll be posting your materials for the day—whether it's on a certain page of a learning management system or via email—be consistent and encourage kids to bookmark the landing page. Be sure to publish at the same time every day, too. If other teachers in your school can align and post in the same

way, all the better.

2. Remind and reinforce: Your first few posts should begin with reiterating where and when students should check for lessons. I always posted my daily lessons in the announcements section of our learning management system at 8:00 a.m., and my first week of posts included a reminder that students should always check that space at or after that time. When students or parents emailed with questions, including a stock phrase about when and where to locate lessons helped keep everyone in the know.

3. Emphasize the date: Title your posts the day of the week and date. Because some students may fall behind and others may want to refer back to lessons, organizing with the date keeps your posts immutably anchored and sequenced. Students won't always see the continuity implied in posts that are labeled with the lesson's focus (such as a thesis statement lesson that precedes the lesson on quotation selection), but they'll definitely know that Tuesday, September 1, comes before Wednesday, September 2.

4. 1-2-3: Use numbers to drive students through your lessons. For me, the first item listed was always attendance, and after that, I listed content for the lesson, relevant documents, and links for submissions. I got positive feedback from students when I kept my posts light on

language, organized by simple numerical signposts. This was also a helpful way for me to see when my lesson was getting out of hand; once I got to number five, I knew that I was probably at the outer limits of what most students could reasonably tolerate from me in a day.

5. Link everything: During online learning, students are already in a tough spot (just like we are), and any little roadblock—like being unable to locate a rubric—is going to feel insurmountable. It takes an extra minute to link a document, a helpful website, or an assignment submission, but if you don't have links in the post, you'll spend a lot more time answering emails and chasing after kids who didn't do the work or didn't do the work properly.

6. Remember when...? At the end of most posts, I included a summary of the previous day's post, cut down to the most important points and links. This was usually just a few sentences long, harvested from the previous post in a simple cut-and-paste, but students appreciated the convenience of being able to access refresher materials easily. I found this was also helpful for kids who tended to access the course inconsistently; if they tried to jump into a day's lesson, this brief review was helpful in orienting them to the day's learning. And, because this is the last section of the post, students who didn't need it became acclimated to skipping it, which was easier to do at the end of the post

than if it had been inserted elsewhere.

7. Include a video overview: Lastly, create a short screen cast with a voice-over that walks students through the day's post. This was a step I skipped for the first few weeks of remote learning, and when my students asked for it, it felt a little silly—why do they want a two-minute video of me reading the post to them? But once I did it, I saw that it helped knit together all of the seemingly disparate pieces of the day's lesson, giving students a more holistic view of their "in class" time that day. This also turned out to be a helpful way to proofread my own work, ensuring that none of those typos or dead links made it to my final publication. Once I made a video overview, I inserted it at the top of my post, above the first element in my list.

Online learning will never replicate our time in the classroom, but following these simple steps can help keep learning accessible, which is a pretty good place to start.