

10 Time-Saving Tips for Teaching English Online

by [Steven Humphries](#)

Teaching online can and should be a rewarding experience. However, other things being equal, it requires more time than teaching traditional face-to-face classes (Allen & Seaman, 2013). This challenge requires that teachers use their time efficiently.

This article provides practical tips for saving time when teaching English online. These tips may be used in courses taught synchronously, in which teachers and students meet simultaneously to collaborate through group video, voice or text messaging, or some other virtual method, or asynchronously, in which students participate at times convenient to them, though generally within assigned deadlines. They also may be used for teaching subjects other than English.

1. Create an “Ask the Prof”

Good students have questions, and many often have the same ones. A simple method to save time is to not have to answer the same questions multiple times. My colleagues and I do this by creating a specific Discussion Forum for questions—called “Ask the Prof”—and encouraging students to both ask questions and to seek answers there. In fact, if students e-mail us with questions already asked, we politely refer them to Ask the Prof.

There may be times when students have questions that are personal or embarrassing, or simply not their classmates’ business, so you should always leave the door open to private email questions for such cases.

2. Use Canned Correspondence

Often, much of the information students need is common not only within a course, but sometimes across courses taught by the same instructor. Students also often have some of the same questions from term to term, such as the appropriate format for written assignments, or how they should address the teacher. Online teachers can take advantage of this by keeping an easily accessible electronic file of commonly used responses to cut and paste into a reply. For example, I use the following “canned” response when students ask questions that they should already know the answer to:

*Hello (Student’s Name),
Thank you for the question; however, the information you need is explained fully in our course syllabus. Please check there first. If you still have questions, let me know, preferably on Ask the Prof.*

The example above is relatively short. The longer the response required, the more time you will save by using canned correspondences, which also work well with course announcements.

3. Set Space Limitations

As educators, we encourage students to express themselves knowledgeably, clearly, and thoroughly, but this does not require wordiness. Indeed, conciseness is a cornerstone of good writing. It is also a requirement for effective and efficient online teaching (Chang, Chen, & Ching, 2011; Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

To foster conciseness, enforce strict word limits on all assignments. This saves time in grading, but also pushes students to become better writers and more precise thinkers. In written discussions, it also gives them an incentive to read more broadly across their classmates' work and to participate more fully in the interactions.

4. Avoid Redundancy in Requirements

Another place to save time is to provide course requirements to students in one place and one place only. The danger otherwise is in providing conflicting requirements in two or more places, an easy mistake to make as you modify courses from term to term, thus having to correct them after the fact. Such mistakes can occur just as easily when you create new courses as well.

5. Be Consistent Across Classes

Setting course expectations and requirements consistently across classes has time advantages as well. This includes spacing and margin requirements for writing, grading scales, and late work and attendance policies. The more consistent you make expectations and requirements, the easier they will be for you to remember, and the less time you will spend checking and applying them correctly within a particular class.

6. Post Initial Readings

Online students are often located worldwide, but this does not guarantee access to an efficient postal service from which to receive textbooks on time. Even in countries with efficient postal systems, packages get delayed or vendors ship the wrong book. Some students may enroll in the class late. One way to avoid these problems is to use electronic textbooks, but these are not available for all titles.

Having electronic copies of initial reading assignments posted in your course will help those affected to keep up, but also save you from photocopying, scanning, and posting each time a student needs a reading, or from having to provide individual feedback for students who turn in assignments based on those readings late.

One warning: Be sure not to violate copyright laws by posting too much from any one source!

7. Provide Detailed Contact Information

A number of studies (Heyman, 2010; Rovai, 2003), and have found that effective student support is an invaluable retention tool in online programs. As an online educator, you may be the primary point of contact between students and the institution, and therefore asked to help with administrative issues. These may be technical matters related to the learning management system

(e.g., Blackboard), or questions, concerns, or problems for issues such as registration, financial aid, or graduation.

Explaining that answering such questions is not your responsibility is not in anyone's best interest. Instead, post a detailed list of contacts for appropriate administrative offices—names, telephone numbers, email addresses—to refer students to someone who can help.

8. Let Students Do the Work

No one would suggest that students do *your* work, but there are ways that using student work can ethically save you time while providing a valuable pedagogical function. One such way is to provide previously completed assignments as examples of what is expected, including discussion postings, essays, summaries, and individual and group projects. Student annotated bibliographies, for example, save time in creating required or suggested reading lists.

Be sure, however, to get permission from the students whose work you are using before you make it available to your classes.

9. Allow Absences

Students work hard in their online courses and, like their colleagues in traditional ones, sometimes have legitimate reasons for missing class other than those generally considered excused. Allowing a limited number of unexcused absences is not only fair to students, it can save time for the teacher as it can translate into fewer postings to read or fewer questions to answer for any given class.

This does not mean, however, that students should not be held responsible for their work.

10. Be Thorough and Accurate

This final suggestion may seem obvious, but it is perhaps the most important of all. Education is often high stakes and expensive, and students rightly have important questions about course requirements and expectations. The more detailed and accurate information you provide upfront, the less time you will spend clarifying what you expect. And the fewer mistakes you make, the less time you will spend correcting them.

References

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