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Determining Deadlines when Teaching Online

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Teachers starting out with their first online class often wonder, “OK, this is very different. Students have a lot more work to do at home to make up for time lost in a traditional class. So how do I determine deadlines?”

For both Riverside Community College and Westwood College of Technology, I have taught the same classes both online and traditionally. I would have to say that when I taught traditionally, students had more time to work on things in class and ask me questions; they generally got a lot done in class and really did not have many other questions for me throughout the remainder of the week. I usually assigned most of my deadlines on a weekly basis. I have discovered by teaching online that this, too, is the best way to set deadlines; make work due once a week, perhaps twice a week depending on the type of assignment, but no more than that. And always make work due on the same days every week (i.e. maybe Thursday and Sunday). This establishes a set timeline for the students so they are never guessing when their assignments are due.

Not all online students will enter the online environment up to the challenge of doing more on their own. However, the fact that they, unlike traditional students, do not have to show up to class once or twice a week means they have to make up this time doing work on their own. This usually means, for the most part, extra time spent on reading lectures instead of hearing them and extra timespent on work that may have otherwise been completed in task. However, although they have more work to do on their own, this does not mean they are doing any more work than a traditional student. Thus, I tend to keep my deadlines the same, and I find that by maintaining the same timetable each week, students are less likely to turn work in late. The are also less likely to ask: “When is such and such assignment due?” cutting back on Emails for the teacher.

Regardless, if a teacher teaches online, he or she is going to get several Emails. One way to cut
down on this and to give students another option or method to contact their teacher is to establish an FAQ area in the course. This also presents the same question from being asked twice because if the teacher answers it once, it is there for the entire class to see. If the same question is Emailed to the teacher more than once, it is a good idea to post an answer to this question to the announcement area or the FAQ area so the other students can easily find it and not have to Email the teacher. Unlike traditional teaching, where the students will get the change to ask their teacher questions and establish understanding in class, online students will generally be forced to ask more questions and send more Emails than a traditional student. A good thing to establish with your students is a deadline for Emails. Let them know you will respond within 24 to 48 hours, so they should not Email the same item twice. Also, if they have a question about a unit, they cannot expect an answer if they Email their instructor ten minutes before the unit is due. Let them know they can ask questions about a unit up until, say, one day before the unit is due. Give them a deadline so that they do not wait until the last minute to ask questions, and play the “I didn’t understand the assignment and you didn’t answer my question so I should get an extension” game. (Stating all this clearly in the syllabus is a good idea because it will give you a point of reference throughout the course). These types of deadlines should also be applied to the FAQ area so that students do not try to post in that area at the last minute, either.

It is also important that timelines are established with students on a daily basis, so they understand that they cannot Email or call their teacher at a certain time, or bother their teacher on the weekend, etc. I usually tell students they can contact me and expect a quick response between 9AM to 4 PM Monday-Friday. If they contact me after 4 PM, they will probably have to wait until the next day for a response, and I take no phone calls after that time. Giving students a deadline in which to contact their teacher will allow the teacher to maintain his or her sanity and lifestyle like any normal job.

What if a student turns something in late? This is clearly up to the teacher. However, I do not tend to accept late work, whether I am teaching an online or traditional class, unless the student has contacted me prior to the deadline and we have agreed on an extension. I find that with online students, this seems to work, as long as the routine remains fair for all. Missing a deadline whether one has an excuse or not is still missing a deadline, and without prior contact about the reason for the assignment being late, it really is not an acceptable notion in a college environment. Deadlines are very important in life, as well as in traditional college, and they are also very important for online colleges. (Some students will get that online course equals easy course notion in their head; they may try to push the instructor about allowing work to be made up or may just simply disappear off the face of the planet until the last week). This is not to say that traditional students do not pull disappearing acts, too; they do, but are far less likely to do so because traditional schools have established reputations for not accepting that kind of attitude, where online schools, which are relatively new, do not have those kinds of ideals tied to them.

Another thing to keep in mind about accepting late work, especially for new online instructors, is that it can be very stressful on a teacher. If something was due three weeks ago, the teacher may have completely forgotten the assignment and may have to go back and review all to grade
one piece of work that should have been turned in weeks ago. If the students learn that the teacher tolerates this and doesn’t penalize by deducted late points or rejecting the work altogether, deadlines really fail to mean anything, so they will turn work in when they feel like it, resulting in a very stressed out teacher. Teachers need to be fair to themselves and focus on one assignment at a time; this ensures they are doing a good job fairly grading work and following requirements of assignments.

Ultimately, all deadlines and whether or not late work is accepted is really a final decision for each instructor based on the types of classes he or she is teaching. When I teach, I generally have two deadlines each week; the first an easy deadline, usually a discussion posting due by mid-week. I then usually have the larger assignments and a second discussion posting responding to other students due by the end of the week. Having a light assignment due in the middle of the week is generally a good idea because many students do not have time to turn something large in during mid-week, but what this small posting does is forces them to check into the class, review their work, and it also gives them the chance to ask any questions about the larger assignments if they need to. It gives them a chance to check on the unit, check on themselves, and check on me, if necessary.

The most important thing to remember is to set deadlines and not to waiver from them without some sort of penalty. Make sure that you, not the students, are in charge of the class. This does not mean that the teacher has to be a tyrant or teach items that are not fun or interesting; it just means that he or she needs to make sure the students understand the importance of meeting deadlines.

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