

# Tips for Online Instructors: Managing Files, Feedback, and Workload

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Teaching online is a rewarding experience; but any instructor who makes the transition to online education, thinking it will be easier and less time-consuming than face-to-face classroom teaching, is in for a big surprise! Establishing a regular presence in the online classroom, grading assignments and discussions, and maintaining records and notes from term to term are all time consuming – but essential – tasks. Learning to take care of the details of online teaching more efficiently makes it possible to be more effective in your teaching. The following is an abbreviated version of guidance I provide to new instructors about ways to keep their course files organized, students engaged, and workload manageable.

For every class, I have multiple folders on my computer:

- Current Term
- Past Terms
- Announcements
- Syllabi
- Assignments
- DQs (Discussions)
- Feedback

Within each of those folders, other folders and documents are nested. For example, each term I drag the current term folder into the past terms' folder; it's important to maintain records, particularly of grading and feedback. I refer to my announcements folder each time I teach a course; and, past terms' syllabi are the foundations for each new term's syllabi.

**Within the current term folder, I have multiple folders, one for each week's assignment.** I download all of the submitted assignments each week to that folder and re-label each student's graded paper with the grade earned in the file name. That way I have a quick and easy reference to old assignments, if needed, and a more efficient way to post grades; e.g. JohnSmith.125.

**Within the DQ (discussion) folder, I have a folder for each week, and within those, a document for each DQ.** I update those documents regularly, as I often write "keeper" posts during the term – i.e. replies to students in which I explain concepts that tend to give students some trouble. Each term, I actively look for opportunities to insert those "standard" replies as part of my response to students. For example, I'll comment on a specific student's points, and build on those (including asking questions) by including one of my standard replies in my post. If I make 15-20 posts in a DQ during the week, probably half of them include some standard text. These pre-written posts enable me to clarify concepts and stimulate critical thinking without reinventing the wheel, help me ensure that the specific learning objectives for a discussion are met, and ensure that the discussions don't devolve into non-productive (or unrelated) tangents.

**Within the feedback folder, I also have at least two folders, one for each DQ and one for assignments.** Within the DQ feedback folder, I have multiple documents, including one for each DQ each week. I then have a variety of standard DQ feedback responses that are unique to the topic of that DQ and that differentiate performance based on quality and quantity criteria. Including those pre-written feedback comments as part of each student's personalized DQ feedback saves me time and ensures that I provide the substantive feedback that is critical for learning.

The **assignment feedback folder** includes documents for every assignment in a course. The top of each document includes the rubric for the assignment, which I then have handy to copy/paste directly onto a student's paper. Also included are some standard comments, some of which I insert in the body of a student's paper when grading (to highlight a specific error/opportunity), and some of which I insert into the feedback sections of the rubric, as appropriate. These comments, like my DQ responses and feedback, continue to evolve from term to term, as I see repeated errors. I try to develop "tips" announcements for each assignment that provide guidance about these common errors so that some are reduced from term to term. I may also make modifications to assignment directions when I notice repeated errors – because if students lost points for the same reason from term to term, there's an obvious indication that there are some opportunities for clarification on my part!

In my experience, this approach allows me to provide comprehensive, personalized feedback to each student. I can identify and note specific opportunities for improvement throughout their submission, to facilitate their learning, and to support my grading. The fact that it reduces the time it takes me to complete my grading makes it easier and more likely for me to provide the type of quality feedback and guidance that the students need.

In other words, rather than typing the same comment 20 times in a week (because 10 students made the same error multiple times in their paper) or NOT noting the error over and over again because I don't have time to spend three hours on each paper repeating the same comment, I can highlight and make notes throughout each paper, providing detailed feedback, and I can do it efficiently. Typing something 20 times adds no additional value over pasting it in 20 times. But, not providing the comments at all, because devoting hours to grading each paper is onerous...and/or not returning papers in a timely manner because providing detailed feedback within a quick turnaround time seems impossible ... both of those practices definitely decrease the learning opportunities for our students.

My goal is always maximum effectiveness with maximum efficiency. One key to being a great online instructor is increasing your efficiency in managing your workload so that you can devote more time to teaching, guiding, and interacting with your students.

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