

# Assignment and Assessment Strategies that Keep Students on Track

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Technology enables students to connect with each other, the instructor, and the content. However, distractions—in the form of real-time electronic conversations and a barrage of dozens of commercial and personal interjections—can be omnipresent. Perhaps the online instructor needs to provide his/her own steady stream of engagement that can serve to interrupt (at least temporarily) the flow of extraneous information that competes for both time and focus.

A simple, but often-overlooked solution is to require students to submit work on a daily/weekly basis. Assignments that tie reading to the application of material are a standard part of pedagogy, but far too often we presume that this connection will be made without providing a structure. We assume that college students are mature enough as learners to automatically connect the dots. Certainly some students are, but many—especially those who are first-generation college students—lack the sophistication to employ a holistic approach to their own learning.

What types of practical, out-of-class assignments are needed? Certainly, some of the work can be rote; there is no substitution for quality repetition. Many texts now come with test banks that can easily be uploaded into Blackboard or course management systems. Quizzes that reinforce vocabulary and principles, once set up, can be required at least once a week.

At least part of the assignments should, however, connect the reading with previously covered material in an analytical way. The idea of creating a thread is not unlike that of online blogs in which a person's history becomes part of the present context. For maximal learning, this threaded learning should be consistent (daily) and predictable. These threads can be part of a small discussion board or blog group and can contain material that connects assigned reading to classroom activities (lectures, labs, etc.).

The completion and submission of daily assignments seems like such an obvious practical strategy, but many instructors just do not require this. The reasons are obvious: assignments demand assessment, and of course, assessment requires time. The key ingredient, therefore, is to design assignments that are easy to grade (multiple-choice questions can require analytical thinking) but challenging.

Step two in the thread is creating a daily in-class assessment. This works well as a bonus-points opportunity and when presented precisely at the class start time, provides an incentive for students to get to class and to be there on time. These assessments are brief (three to four carefully crafted multiple-choice questions will suffice), and they include material from the reading as well as the homework. Therefore, if the student did the out-of-class assignment/reading, he/she would likely score well on the in-class assessment.

The feedback that comes from daily assessment can serve two important purposes. First, the instructor gains insight into how the students, both individually and collectively, are doing in the course. Second, and most important, the student can see tangible evidence of how he/she is performing.

In conclusion, it is natural to find ourselves thinking, “Students aren’t self-motivated” or “Students should be mature enough to direct their own learning” or even, “Students just don’t care”. The truth is that a small percentage of students will take ownership of their education without intervention, but many more will not. This does not mean that the other students can’t do the work or that they don’t care. It merely reflects competitions for their time that override the requirements that we as teachers lay out. A return to carefully planned and consistent assignments and assessments can lead to impressive rewards, when it counts.

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