

Online Teaching Tips: Sweat the Small Stuff

By: [Errol Craig Sull](#) in [Online Education](#)

When we teach online courses there are many fundamental issues that concern us: knowledge of our subjects, teaching strategies, engagement of students, school policies, deadlines, grading and returning of assignments, posting announcements, and responding to students—the list goes on.

There also are some “not-so-major items” that are important but don’t seem quite as crucial. However, when one of these is overlooked, it can become the ugliest wart on your class, resulting in negative student attitudes and a diminishing of your stature as instructor.

The following list contains a few of these “small things” that often are overlooked in online courses.

Look over your course before it begins. Because a course is usually preset by the school, many online faculty assume that everything is ready to go. But often this is not the case. Be sure to check for broken links, duplication of or missing assignments, and typos. Confirm that all course material is visible to the students and that grading/points have been assigned to each project, homework, and test; and that final exam dates (if applicable) and all related information are posted.

Check your spelling and grammar. Students will not appreciate emails, announcements, and other postings with spelling errors, typos, or punctuation/grammar errors. Sure, it takes a bit more time to check for these—but it’s your reputation and the school’s reputation at stake. While no one is perfect, students expect their instructors to be—and all it takes is one typo from you for a student to feel that you are not prepared to teach.

Be sure that page numbers in assignments match the text(s). Sometimes the assigned pages do not match the pages in the text(s) students have. This happens most often when an instructor is teaching a course again and again and forgets to check for a new edition of the text(s) being used, page numbers are entered incorrectly, or the text(s) you assigned does/do not match the one(s) ordered by the bookstore. Be sure all assigned readings are in sync with the text(s) used—your course will proceed much more smoothly if they are.

Make a checklist of all school policies applicable to your course. It is so easy to overlook or forget one or two school policies or procedures, especially if you are new to the school. Make a checklist so you won’t overlook any. If you are unsure of a policy, ask a supervisor.

Always be positive in your feedback and postings. You will be teaching many students, so you will be typing many thousands of words during one course; this can make it easy to overlook your tone or word choice now and then. Don’t let it happen. A negative tone, use of all caps, and no positives in assignment feedback, emails, or other postings can be devastating to a student. So check all before you send, and always end each missive with an upbeat, optimistic tone.

Be substantive in your announcements, feedback, postings, etc. Students can’t see you (except in rare webinars) or shake hands with you; all they have are your words, so it is crucial that they are, for the most part, many. The “Great paragraph, Tom!” or “Good point, Cathy!” postings are fine, but they should never be representative of your writings to

students. Be substantive (and do so often, not occasionally) in these so they know that you are invested in the class, care about the class, and are interested in the class.

Keep track of the errors and oversights you discover for future courses. We all make mistakes in each course we teach. But as long as we use these errors as lessons to improve ourselves, they are not for naught. Make a list of these errors and keep them handy so that when you next teach a course the same problems will not occur. Your class will run more smoothly, the students will have a more positive learning experience, and you'll feel more relaxed.

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