

Ask Errol!

Errol Craig Sull

A h, a new year! How invigorating with the possibilities for distance learning experiences—and our constant striving to be the best distance learning instructor possible. To help you I have included another batch of questions from my readers, and each of these was asked (in different fashions) by at least five other instructors, so I deem them especially important. Happy New Year—and good teaching in the months ahead!



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Thanks for your columns! You write in an easy, down-to-earth style, and seem to believe that no question related to distance learning is too basic to answer. That's good for me, as what I want to ask may seem like a "duh" question, but I will ask it anyway as I really need some help. I teach courses in the sciences, and my students must present papers and other assignments that include correct APA [American Psychological Association] citations. Unlike courses such as English where textbooks offer much on this type of formatting, our science books pay scant attention to APA. Can you recommend any websites or other materials I can post in my classes?

This question is far from a "duh" question, especially because the need to properly cite sources has gained added importance since the corporate spotlight on this was turned on a few years ago as a result of egregious cases of plagiarizing. And you are fortunate in the area of available resources: the Internet has anything you need regarding how to cite, when to cite, and proper formatting of citation. While there are many great sites available—type in "APA citations" in the subject line, and you'll find many websites willing to help you—three are especially helpful:

1. the American Psychological Association (APA) site on APA style, <http://www.apastyle.org/index.aspx>;

2. the APA blog, where there is ongoing info, questions, and answers on APA from students and faculty, <http://blog.apastyle.org/>;
3. and what is really a compendium of sites for what are called citation builders—websites that will properly format APA, MLA, CMS, et cetera in-text citations and the References page—simply type in “citation builders” in the subject line. Note: for MLA citations the best all-around site is <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>

Two additional suggestions: (1) Be sure to stress the importance of proper citation, and it would help to post examples (again, easily found on the Internet) as to what can happen when one does not properly cite sources; (2) Develop one “How to Correctly Cite Your Sources—and Why” fact sheet for posting in the class—and continually remind your students to consult it.

I have noticed many of my students are asking me to become their “friend” on Facebook and do something similar in an online campus community my school offers its students. Your thoughts on this?

As social media/networking grows so will invitations from students; seldom do they mean any harm or have ulterior motives (at least when these invites come after a class has ended, when most of them appear). Yet the students are not looking at what is professionally correct and ethical for you; they just think you have been a pretty cool professor and want to “hang” with you in cyberspace. Don’t. And I use the one-word sentence fragment to give “Don’t” the emphasis it needs. There is an old adage that remains true: be friendly to your students, but never a friend. Your relationship with your students is strictly a professional one, that is, they are students, you are their teacher. Sure, that relationship officially ends once class is over, but the Internet allows for any word, image, or

sound posted on any social networking site to be distributed to whomever and wherever one chooses—and it can be too easy to relax one’s professional demeanor in these sites. And even if that does not happen you do not want a former student telling his or her friend currently in your class that you and the former student are “buds”—just not very professional looking. So ... either ignore these invitations or graciously decline them.

Although I post a “Welcome to the Course”-type of announcement to greet students on their first day of admittance to my online classes and have my classes well stocked with materials, is there anything else I can or should be doing on this all-important first day?

Remember that old saying that you only get one chance to make a first impression? Well, this is especially true—and so important—in the distance learning classroom, as students seek out your words to get a feel of the class that lies ahead, for initial injections of motivation, and to put them at ease in an online environment. So, let us start with what you are already doing: the welcome letter. The first and closing paragraphs of these are most important, as in-between is peppered with the nitty-gritty of the class—procedures, policies, deadlines, et cetera. Have all of your letter upbeat, and begin with much enthusiasm, indicating you look forward to working with your students; end by emphasizing you are always available and, again, you are eager to help them grow in the subject area. As for additional items, resources beyond what comes with the course—think of it as adding whistles and bells to the standard model!—can give the students an indication of how helpful the course can be, of the transition of course material to the professional world, and of your attempt to make the course enjoyable (cartoons, puzzles, quotes, interesting articles relating to your subject can do this). Of course, before posting anything check it for

proofreading, grammar, punctuation, and spelling: you are held to a higher standard, and thus you want nothing to detract from your messages or professionalism.

I straddle two worlds, so to speak, in my teaching subjects, English and criminal justice. It is because of these two subjects I write you: I really am a bit unsure as how to judge to writing of my non-English course against that of the course where writing is what is being taught. Should I have two standards? Or should I judge all students' writing the same, no matter which course I teach?

This question gets batted about so often! On one side it can be subjective, i.e., the distance learning instructor with an interest in and schooled in English will pay closer attention to the writing of his/her students, while others may have the major focus on the content, with scant attention paid to the quality of writing. What we must remember is students use two life skills more than any others throughout their lives, writing and public speaking, as these are what allow us to get information across to others—and that information must be clear and easy to understand. While one may be teaching criminal justice or chemistry or finance the students will be submitting the majority, if not all, of their assignments in a written form; thus, it is important for all educators (online or face to face) to place a strong emphasis on the students' writing abilities. Certainly, in an English/writing course more of the nooks and crannies of writing will be considered as the primary focus is on all things writing—but to dismiss writing to little importance in a non-English class is forgetting students will always need to write ... and they will always be judged by others based on their ability to write.

Should I be entertaining in my teaching? My personality, admittedly, is somewhat on the quiet side, and when I taught in a face-to-face classroom the one complaint my supervisor had was that my teaching style was a bit dry. I thought this would not make a difference in online teaching, but lately I have been seeing some suggestions that being humorous, or at least being a bit entertaining, is a plus in the classroom. What do I do?

There is one word that succinctly answers your question: balance. You must strive for a balance between a “just the-facts, ma'am” approach and a class clown approach to teaching online. The students see and read info in your class; there is not much there to make it truly come alive, save you—your approach, style, and personality to and of teaching. For most of us, the teachers we remember most fondly from our days as students are those who knew how to get the information across yet showed a bit of humor, had an outgoing or easygoing personality, and were willing to incorporate some unusual or “out-of-the-box” approaches to teaching. We can do and be the same—and it is easier than you might think! By always being positive, incorporating unusual or fun facts related to your subject (but stay away from jokes—they can easily backfire!), making minivideos or audios to kick off each week, and keeping your language in posts serious yet upbeat will all kick you into the category of one who is highly professional and entertaining—a great recipe for being an effective distance educator.

REMEMBER: A person is only best when striving to be better—and asking questions is a great start.