

# Errol's Miniguide

## Successfully Motivating Online Students to Complete Weekly Assignments—and on Time!

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Two major problems online faculty members encounter are students not turning in assignments and students turning in late assignments. These problems are so pervasive, in fact, they have become the #2 and #3 reasons for students losing points in a course/on an assignment (#1: not following directions/not including all assignment requirements). While the suggestions in this edition's column will not fully eliminate the two problems, incorporating at least a few will decrease the number of missing assignments and/or late assignments. (Please send suggestions that have worked for you in overcoming these problems. I'll include them in the next issue!)

The suggestions ...

- *A pre-Day One "Are you with me?" e-mail is crucial.* Sending students an e-mail about a week or so before their course begins, with its sole focus on completing all assignments and completing all assignments on time, is a strategy that students do not expect—but they certainly appreciate. On the short end, it introduces them to an instructor who obviously cares about their success, but the long end secures student feedback

indicating, yes, you can count on them. Let them know one of the top reasons students do poorly in a course is simply by not completing all assignments and/or all assignments on time, and you do not want this to happen. Not all students will respond, but enough will to prove the value of this e-mail.

- *Post a Day One reminder of why completing assignments and completing them on time is important.* We do not want students to forget our reminding efforts; while a precourse e-mail is a great start it is just that: a start. With the official start of class students will be streaming in to see all that awaits them, including announcements postings. There should be a separate announcement (to emphasize its importance and to be sure its message does not get lost among the other important start-of-course information) that again stresses the importance of completing all assignments and all assignments on time. Two items: (1) Also send this announcement as an e-mail to the class; (2) Any posted announcement remains throughout the course, thus students can refer to it and faculty can reference it.

- *Ongoing reminders result in improved student compliance.* Students not only have responsibilities in their lives besides their courses but the reality of students is they often must have constant reminders to keep them on track with assignments. That is fine: we need do whatever it takes to allow students the best possible learning experience in our courses. Certainly, ongoing does not need equate to every day (there are exceptions, such as final exams, and each instructor must decide which ones merit daily reminders), as students can become numb to seeing so many reminders. A tip: include a visual with the reminder—this lightens the message and is an attention grabber. Also: include some humor, as this also acts as a neon light that brings in the students.
- *Give weekly “extenders” that relate assignments to the professional world.* If students feel the assignments are only for grades in a course it can be easier for them to overlook the assignment or turn in late assignments. But beginning each week with an e-mail that shows the assignments’ importance to “the real world”—that is, the world of work—can make assignments more meaningful to the students. Include specific examples of how the assignment can help on the job, as well as examples of where not knowing the info in the assignments can negatively impact an employee, a company, customers, et cetera. Also, demonstrate how timeliness of assignment completion is crucial as a professional—and how being late can be detrimental. The more students understand the relation of assignment completion and assignment timeliness to the world outside of school the more likely they are to do both.
- *Be sure all assignment feedback is positive and motivating.* We all enjoy positive feedback; it encourages us to continue on with our project, assignment, experiment, et cetera. When students receive feedback on assignments that is positive and motivating the same happens: it encourages to “keep at it,” to do the work. And in that feedback there are a few items that can be included that subtly address completion of assignments/ completion of assignments on time: thanking the students for getting in the assignment on time, reminding the students of the assignment’s relationship to the world of work, telling the student you are eager to see his/her next assignment.
- *Offer “rewards” for students to complete weekly assignments/complete assignments on time.* Incentives are wonderful to offer folks if they complete X or Y—and on time. What types can you dangle in front of students that are ethical, allowed, and fair? Certainly, nothing to do with grading can be considered, nor can a letter of recommendation or a phone call to say hello. But the silly or the informative—that will certainly work! So ... offer your students a story from your past, a recipe, a video related to the course subject that is especially interesting or video that is pure fun, an interesting video of how something works—these and other possibilities are harmless, yet can often result in incentive enough to get a few students making sure they complete their work, and on time to boot.
- *E-mail—and perhaps call—“problem” students to learn what is not obvious.* Occasionally, you will have a course where no effort to get students to complete their work—and doing so on time—is successful. At this point it is important to contact any such student on an individual basis, for two important reasons: (1) Sometimes, it is that personal communication from the instructor a student needs to finally motivate him or her, perhaps feeling the instructor really does care, truly is interested in is or her success in class; (2) A student may be experiencing a personal problem that

trumps putting forth effort in class; knowing about this the instructor might be able to find a way to work with the student so assignments can be completed (and while maybe not on time this would be an occasion to flex the deadline dates).

- *Post completion rates on a weekly basis as if a fund-raising drive.* This is a fun way to visually give students an inner look at the course (students are always interested in a peek behind the scenes!) while also motivating them to complete all work, and complete it on time. At the start of each week, beginning with Week 2, post the completion rates of students getting in their assignments and getting in assignments on time. The use of a graph (with color) is ideal—such as those used in fun-raising campaigns—because it is visually fun to see how far one needs for 100% to be reached in each category. And challenge your students to reach 100%, perhaps offering one or more incentives (described above). And when 100% in either category is reached in a week not only make good on the incentive but also include a graphic that shows something like a thermometer bursting out of the top, along with very exciting words from you.
- *Make use of any available audio/visual for added reminders.* These come in many forms, from live chats, self-made YouTube videos, audio messages, videos of others that are motivating, Jing-type presentations, PowerPoints and Prezis, and others. There are three primary benefits to including video and/or audio as reminders: (1) These help bring the course more “alive,” and thus make the reminder message come more alive; (2) They are extremely effective as reminder tools because they make the message “dance,” that is, rather than be static black-and-white print these offer reminders in another perspective; (3) These forms of reminders are in line

with the technology with which many students are familiar, and thus some students will be more inclined to view or listen than to read assignment reminders.

- *Bend the rules for late submission penalties in the first 2 weeks.* The first 2 weeks of any online course are when most questions are asked, most confusion occurs—and a large number of late assignments are encountered. Students are getting used to the course, the course presentation platform (such as Blackboard, eCollege, LEO, et cetera) may be new, this may be some students’ first experience with an online course, and there will be students who are trying to find the right time management balance for their course(s) with the non-school portions of their lives. For these reasons some leeway should be given for late submission of assignments, but do let students know this only extends for 2 weeks; after that any course penalties for late or missing assignments will apply. (Note: Do not make this a general e-mail or class announcement, as it will serve as an open invitation to others in the class to turn in late assignments; rather send this only to students who have to submit a Week 1 or Week 2 assignment or whose Week 1 or Week 2 assignments are late.)
- *Send to each student one of many free online reminder software programs.* There are many free software reminder programs that can make students’—and faculty members’—lives much easier by sending reminders for assignments, due dates of assignments, other class-related items, and any daily life events or deadlines. Most people are used to checking their e-mail and texts several times a day, certainly more often than they will check into a course, and thus this reminder “service” becomes a way to help students with their assignments and assignment deadlines beyond the course. Send one or two to your students—they do help!

- Some of the best include Memo to Me (memotome.com—e-mail), LetterMeLater (lettermelater.com—e-mail), HassleMe (hassleme.co.uk—e-mail), RemindTime (remindtime.com—e-mail), ohdontforget (ohdontforget.com—texting), TextMemos (textmemos.com—texting), and Texting-Home (textinghome.com—texting).
- *Create weekly “clarity” discussion threads for students’ better understanding of assignments.* When the option is available, set up a nongraded discussion thread each week where students can post questions about the week’s assignment(s). If live chats are a feature of your course, that’s great—one purpose of live chats is to explain the week’s assignment(s). However, the reality is that not all students attend, but all students must participate in discussion, thus there will be students posting in this optional thread who will not attend the live chat. **NOTE:** Some courses have a preset Q&A (nongraded) thread each week; this is excellent, but these are general—include a note that focuses on the assignments and any problems students might encounter with getting in an assignment on time.
  - *Offer time management tips early in the course.* A major problem with students taking online courses is an inability to effectively manage their time; this can result in missing assignments and/or assignments turned in late. Various time management tips abound in the Internet, and it is helpful to post some of these in one time management sheet in the course that students can access at any time. (I have a minipebble on time management that I created; it is posted in each of my courses, and is often requested by other faculty—if you’d like a copy just drop me an e-mail.) Of course, occasionally remind students to check the time management tips—they can forget!
- Remember:** The online educator must grow from a 1950s dial phone into a 21st century smartphone—interacting, connecting, motivating, reminding, announcing, and captivating.