

# Ask Errol!

**Errol Craig Sull**

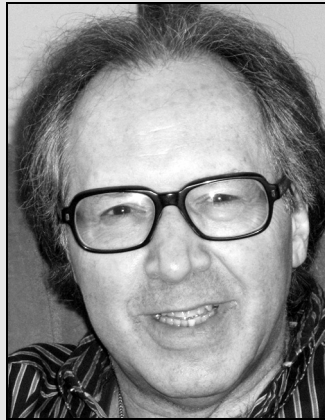
**W**e are in 2021, and thus a new year that will bring more distance learning possibilities with our classes. In many schools we know the pandemic has challenged educators, whether new to online learning or veterans of this wonderful educational environment. Everyone will get through this—both educators and their students—yet we know challenges will remain, new wrinkles will pop up. To help you I'm here—send me your distance learning questions, “hiccups,” and problems; I'm

happy to help out as I have for more than 10 years in this column! (Please send your queries to me—[erroidistancelearning@gmail.com](mailto:erroidistancelearning@gmail.com)—for our next issue.)

I bring you the first batch of 2021's questions ...

## **NO-ONE SEEMS TO CARE— UNLESS SOMETHING IS WRONG**

*Although I am always excited about my online teaching (I teach a freshman and sophomore biology course), and it especially makes me happy when I see my students progress, there is never any input from my supervisor, unless I make an error of some sort. Certainly, I don't teach for praise; it is the teacher in me that simply enjoys teaching. Yet it is disheartening at times when all the good I do in my classes is overlooked by my supervisor, yet if I make one mistake, no matter how small, my supervisor or one of her minions immediately shows up to shake a finger at me. This can, and at times does, “take the wind out of my sails,” so to speak. Is it not human nature to need a bit of external positive motivation to help one's interest and enthusiasm grow? I have no idea if this is prevalent at other schools, but this lack of a small pat on the back now and then is really deflating the morale of not only me but other faculty at my school as well. Any suggestions? Thank you.*



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(for column submissions)

Ah, you touch on a subject that is certainly not limited to one school, but again and again I hear this complaint from online faculty members at other schools as well. One might not know what the guidelines or parameters are from higher up administration at these schools, but where it is a school's policy or merely a supervisor's approach it makes no difference: this approach is simply wrong. Period. The online environment can be a lonely one: it is you and your computer, with a number of students who are seen, either only for the overwhelming majority of the time (read: occasional Zoom or Adobe Connect or the like live chats), as words, sentences, and paragraphs. Yes, as you write, there is that pure satisfaction that comes from teaching and student improvement, but how nice to once-in-awhile be told by a supervisor, "Hey—you are doing a nice job."

I once taught at a school where the environment mirrored the one you describe. Finally, I got fed up, and was able to arrange a phone conversation with my supervisor. In a delicate way I mentioned all the good stuff I was doing, and asked if she saw this, as it seemed all the input I received was when I made some type of mistake. Her response was one I will never forget: "Errol, we just want you to always strive for improvement, and when we see an area where we feel you could be better we step in. Your evaluations do indicate you are doing a good job." That was it—I had to simply rely on my evaluations; there was not going to be any positive emails or conversations! (I did leave the school a few months later for a much better paying situation.) I relay this story because it is difficult to give any suggestion on how to reverse the situation you describe. Try what I did: arranging a meeting with your supervisor; you might be pleasantly surprised by what you are told or you might encounter what I experienced!

## **WHAT ARE THE BEST WAYS TO USE STUDENT COMPLIMENTS AND PRAISE?**

*Errol, I have read many of your columns over the years, and I know they have made me a better distance learning educator. What has proved especially helpful are small items you spotlight at times, items I had not previously considered, but then I find are important. I believe part of the result of your columns helping me to grow in my online teaching efforts is the nice amount of kudos I receive from my students. These thrill me, of course, and no doubt are a major reason why I receive such high evaluations from my students and supervisor. Yet I'm also reminded of that oft-used axiom that today's newspaper is tomorrow's fish wrapper, meaning one the nice words come in that's it; they are placed in some file or simply remain in my emails. Can you offer some suggestions as to how I can keep these nice compliments from becoming distance learning fish wrappers?!*

Thanks so much for the letter, and I'm grateful my efforts with my columns have contributed to your efforts as an online educator. As for your question, it's always nice to read that one teaching distance education has done so to the point where students pour in praise for the educator's efforts. You mention they make you feel good, and they should, but there are three ways you might turn these into golden arrows of assets. Consider these: (1) Without using students' names (unless they give you permission), you can use a few when you start a new course. Let students know how previous students considered you: this can help ease new students' nervousness while also giving them a bit more confidence that they've landed in the right course! (2) If you decide to look for additional distance learning teaching situations, you can (a) include them on a separate sheet that you

would submit with your resume/curriculum vitae or (b) include a few of the comments in your resume/curriculum vitae or cover letter, or (c) if you need send an email in an initial outreach for a new teaching position you can include a few there. (3) If doing a presentation to other faculty with a focus on how to enhance one's online teaching efforts you can include a few of these comments on a slide, not to brag, but rather to indicate one possible outcome of the attendees embracing your presentation suggestions, while also giving a bit more confidence that what you are about to present really does work! Letting compliments sit on a shelf do no good after your initial rush of fulfillment (save perhaps help secure your employment by your school); rather, use them to better your ability and stature as an online educator with others.

### **WHAT MAKES FOR AN EMAIL THAT GRABS STUDENTS' ATTENTION?**

*Errol, I hope your year is starting off grand! Of course, in the area of distance learning it has really blossomed because of the number of schools that have switched from face-to-face learning to remote learning. My question is one that comes from a source you probably don't hear from too often, a high school teacher. (It was suggested I write you by my next door neighbor. He teaches at a local college, reads your column, and said you'd have the info I need!) My school is one that has switched to remote learning, and for many of us who have not previously taught online it has been a huge learning curve. We have managed, but one problem I—and my colleagues—have is writing emails to students relating to their courses that not only holds their attention but also helps to engage them. Any help you can give me would be greatly appreciated.*

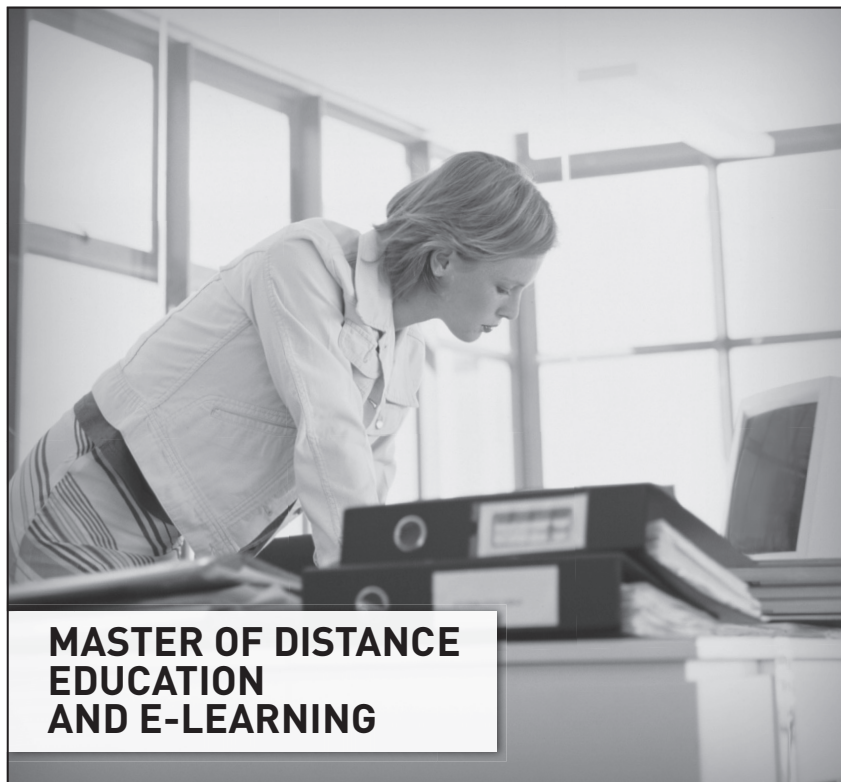
Thanks so much for writing, and you are somewhat right about not receiving

many inquiries from high school teachers: prior to the pandemic it was extremely rare, but I have more now because of what you indicate, so many schools switching to remote. (My next "Ask Errol," in fact, will have questions that only came from primary and secondary school teachers.) As for your question, I'll try to make your neighbor's recommendation a good one! I have written much in these columns over the years on composing emails, but high school students do bring some tweaks to a few of my suggestions.

These would help: (1) Be sure your emails have a catchy, interesting title in the subject line; it's the first item someone reads, and you want it to entice a person to open the email. (2) Always begin with a positive, motivating item or two, and especially helpful is using something specific that relates to your students. (3) Never make an email too long—your readers may skim it, perhaps not even read it. Use short sentences, and ideally use a bullet form. There are exceptions, of course: if you are explaining a process or assignment; if there is an important piece of news you need share; or if there are specific directions you need to relate. But even here don't go overboard with the words. (4) If possible, at the top of the email body include a visual—it helps to grab attention. And when needed to spotlight especially crucial items use highlighting and different-colored fonts, but don't go overboard with these. (4) End on a positive note, and stress you are available for help when students need it. (5) Always proofread before sending the email: not only do you want good writing (including no typos) but you also want to be sure the email has the message and tone you want. If you do want more details don't hesitate to write me; I'll respond to you.

**REMEMBER:** It's important to reach out to others when input is needed: the president of the United States has a Con-

gress; the chief executive officer of a company has an executive board; help columns abound in newspapers and magazines; and turkey hotlines are kept busy around Thanksgiving—going it alone can be commendable, but the results may not be the best.



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- essary to teach, interact, evaluate, and interact with distant learners.
- **There Are a Few Key Ideas for Everyone:** Basic concepts of distance education must be stressed rather than having software or hardware-specific training. For example, course management systems should be understood first, then systems such as Teams or Canvas can be studied.
  - **Instructional Design and Designers Are Critical.** Teachers, even when effectively prepared, are not instructional designers, nor should they be. A school without qualified media specialists, and colleges or training organizations without instructional designers are schools or organizations at risk when a crisis happens.
  - **Plans Are Needed:** Contingency plans for a move to online instruction are needed and have become almost as important as “code red plans” and “fire drill training.”
  - **Best practices research must be ongoing and exhaustive.** Already, the “snake-oil-salespeople” are emerging promising miracle cures, and quick fixes. Science and scientific inquiry are the only ways to continuously improve the way educational organizations offer instruction, especially instruction at a distance.

*And finally, as they say during Marine Corps recruit training, “A little sweat now saves a lot of sweat later!”*