

Ask Errol!

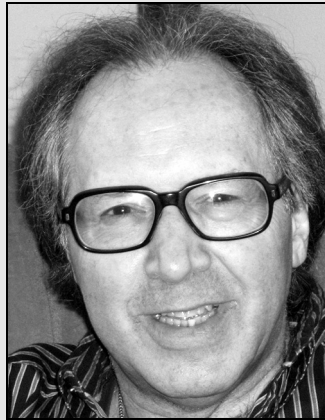
Errol Craig Sull

The challenges, problems, and concerns experienced by distance learning educators arrive in a seemingly endless stream. Not only has COVID thrown educators new to online learning into the mix, but added teaching strategies, classroom guidelines, and student demographics can equal confusion. Certainly, I'm here to help as much as I can! By the way, please have your queries to me at erroldistancelearning@gmail.com for our next issue. This edition's selection of questions:

MAKING CONTACT WITH SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS ALTHOUGH NOT ASKED

Errol, I make no excuses for it: I am an enthusiastic and sometimes too-much-over-the-top online instructor (I teach two psychology courses). I regularly reach out to my faculty peers, either sharing a new teaching strategy that works for me or asking for their input. Also, my supervisor and I get along great, with a nice, but too much, exchange of emails and twice-monthly calls. However, I have certain ideas that I think would help to improve my courses, the department, and the school, and to this it would seem I need reach out to the dean, the provost, and school president. Do you think this would be okay? Are there guidelines for this type of correspondence? Thanks!

I applaud your enthusiasm and willingness to get involved in your school beyond only teaching! However, what you want to do is, at best, a balancing act on a high wire: if not careful you can fall. Many schools, if not all, really like it when faculty go through the "chain of command," rather than skipping around it. From what you write you obviously have a solid relationship with your supervisor, but will your supervisor like it if you go directly to the dean or the others without first clearing it with him or her? Only you can answer that question. Another item to con-



Errol Craig Sull,
Faculty, English and Writing Across
the Curriculum, Purdue Global University.
Email: erroldistancelearning@gmail.com
(for column submissions)

sider: what fallout might occur to your supervisor if you write the dean, provost, or president without your supervisor's knowledge? Is it possible your supervisor might be chastised for not knowing what you were doing? There is a major exception to this chain of command guideline: often, when a dean, provost, or president holds an online meeting for all faculty the ending might include something like, "If you have an idea for what I've just discussed please do contact me!" That gives you the green light to contact this person directly, but I would still cover all bases and let your supervisor know you did this. Always, always think of possible ramifications to you and your supervisor before writing directly to one of the folks you mention!

A NEW INSTRUCTOR NEEDS GUIDELINES IN WORKING WITH A MENTOR

I've written you previously, Errol, regarding two so-called problems I had. Although you did not select my email directly obviously my concerns were important enough as you did respond to others with the same challenges, so that was great. Well, here I go again! I was just hired to teach at a new school (the courses will be online), and I've been told I'll have my first course in about 2 months (I need first go through a 4-week orientation program). Part of the first class is a mentor I'll be assigned, to answer questions that might come up for me and to make sure I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing (and not doing what I shouldn't be doing!). As I've never worked with a mentor where I am the mentee can you give me any suggestions on how to work with a mentor?

I appreciate you letting me know I did respond to your questions, albeit through others. So many emails come my way with various problems and challenges I look for those where more than one or two have the same concern. But now it is your turn :)

It would be easy to write a full column on what you ask (and I'll probably do that in one of my "Try This" columns in the future!). But there are some critical items I can mention here I believe will help you (and any other distance learning instructor in the same situation): (1) You will no doubt have an opening chat or email with your mentor—have a list of 5–6 major questions (Why not more? You don't want to appear overly needy and that you did not pay attention in orientation!); (2) Hopefully, your mentor will suggest a weekly short call-in to answer questions and give you added guidance throughout your first course; if this is not brought up I suggest you do it; (3) If possible, save questions, concerns, or needed clarification that comes up between weekly chats for the weekly chat; your mentor will have other responsibilities aside from you, and this approach not only helps your mentor but also shows you as more in command of your course. Certainly, if there is an immediate concern that can't wait do reach out immediately; (4) If you do something in class—a teaching strategy, a seminar, a live chat, et cetera—that has an especially good result let your mentor know; it shows your chops as an online educator; (5) Ask your mentor for any tips, PowerPoints, approaches, et cetera he or she can share with you to help you get a more solid start in your course; (6) After Week 3 or 4, if your mentor has not given you an overall assessment of your progress thus far do ask for it; you'll want to know what you are doing right and where you might need to improve. Follow these six guidelines: they will help make your mentor-mentee relationship a more fruitful one!

CLEVER APPROACHES NEEDED FOR TEACHING RESEARCH

I teach a research course in a second-level writing course, Errol, and I've had this course for about 6 years. My strategies for

the course range from the traditional (for example, having students learn correct APA formatting, visiting our library, obtaining articles, and correctly including it in their essays) to something a bit more exciting (I've devised a scavenger hunt where they need search for X or Y in our library, then write a paragraph where they include either a quote or paraphrase from their "find," including correct citation). But I know there must be some other clever ways to teach research; can you share any? As I've been reading your columns for years, and they always prove helpful, I'm hoping your response to this will be especially helpful!

First let me respond to what you wrote at the end: I thank you so much for letting me know my columns have been helpful! My one goal in the 10+ years I've been writing these columns is to enhance the distance educator's teaching efforts! As to your question, boy, did you pick as subject I really enjoy. I'm always on the lookout for new and exciting ways to teach what can be a boring, arduous subject: research. There are three I use that have had excellent results:

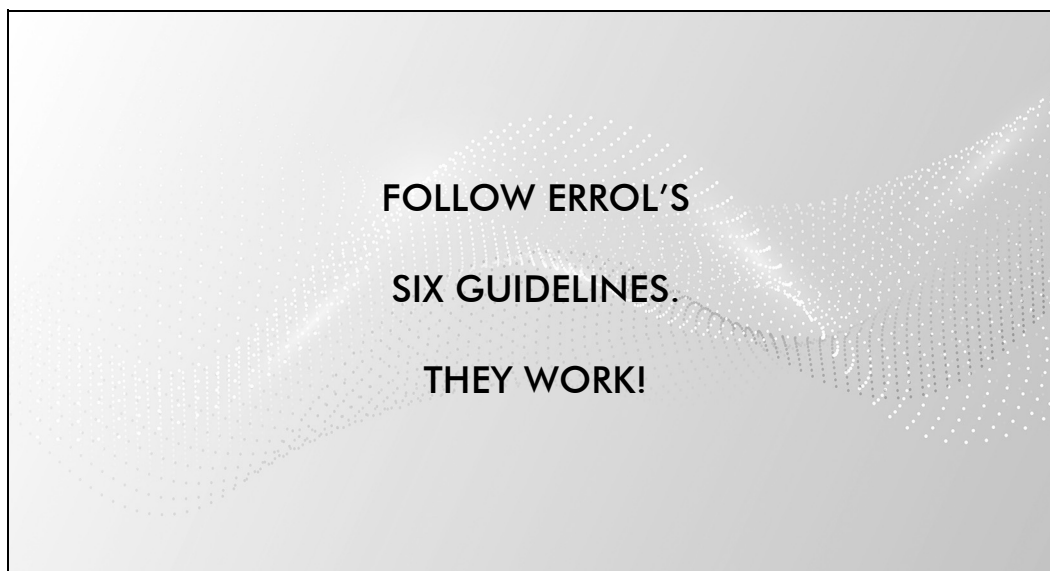
1. **Use Kahoot.** If you are not familiar with this it's a free online game where you develop a series of questions—usually 10—about a specific subject. The attendees—here it would be your students—press a button on their computer screen to record their answers. At the end of the game the winners are listed. What important is correct answers are always given, so students who made a wrong choice can learn. I've used this many times for teaching research, and it's quite successful in teaching various components of it. Use this link for instructions on: How to set up a Kahoot! Quiz - Bing video (<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=How+to+set+up+a+Kahoot!+Quiz+-+Bing+video&docid=607995690791434708&mid=D8924CEB>

45B8369210F3D8924CEB45B8369210F3&view=detail&FORM=VIRE)

2. **Have students create a Wikipedia page.** Wikipedia is dissed by many educators as a source never to use for research papers. The reasons are often valid: unsubstantiated information; information that can seemingly be added by on anyone; accurate contributors can be silenced; and Wikipedia entries can be woefully outdated. However, a great way to use Wikipedia as a research teaching tool is to have groups of students create a Wikipedia page. This takes extensive research, and is more than a 1- or 2-week project. After the basics of research are first introduced in the course the best way to approach this project is by breaking students into groups, have each group select a subject (ideally, relating to the course subject), and give the group 3–4 weeks to create a Wikipedia page. At the end of that time have one student from each group prepare a paper detailing what the group members went through in setting up the page, ending with the URL for that page. Here are two websites to help, one on how to teach students to use Wikipedia, the other on how to set up a Wikipedia page: <https://www.edutopia.org/article/teaching-students-how-use-wikipedia-wisely> and [Wikipedia:How to create a page - Wikipedia \(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:How_to_create_a_page\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:How_to_create_a_page_-_Wikipedia)
3. **Create and have students post to a blog on research.** Blogs are simply fun! You can pick your subject—in this case research—and start it off with anything you'd like pertaining to research. Have students make their own posts and respond to posts. This is a great way to get more information circulated on research, the instructor will learn of areas where students need assistance, and students have a fun way of improving their research skills.

This video is a basic one on how to create a blog (before using it check your learning management system, like Blackboard: some have already built-in blank blog sites): <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=How+to+Create+a+Blog+for+Beginners+Free&&view=detail&mid=640BDD878D9A3F4E2959640BDD878D9A3F4E2959&&FORM=VRDGAR&ru=%2Fvideos%2Fsearch%3Fq%3DHow%2Bto%2BCreate%2Ba%2Bblog%2Bfor%2Bbeginners%2Bfree%26FORM%3DVIRIBQP>

Remember: Entrées have side dishes, condiments, sauces, and glazes: each takes the main course to a much higher level of satisfaction.



It seems clear that the evolution of the field has progressed from “nifty hardware” to innovative approaches, and ultimately to topics dealing with infusing the field with modern approaches. It could be said the field was growing up.

One issue not yet mentioned is design. Instructional design, sometimes called the *critical element*, was regularly written about during all phases of the new era of distance learning. Design has been constant as an issue, an idea, and a necessity. But, as what often happens with really important

ideas, design has had the tendency to be so obvious and necessary that its importance is overlooked.

The journal, *Distance Learning*, is one source of information about the changes occurring in the field. Certainly, there are others. One conclusion is clear. The field has matured.

And finally ... the new era of distance education was not learned from the reading of a *book*, but from the reading of a *journal*—*Distance Learning* journal.

