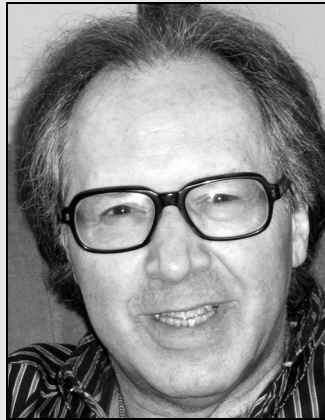


# Ask Errol!

**Errol Craig Sull**

**C** OVID has brought a host a folks to online teaching, some who have never previously taught online and some with limited distance learning experience. Add to this the many teaching online who have been around for some time and we are ripe for new challenges, new concerns, new problems. I'm here to help you, and have been doing so for 12+ years; it will always be my pleasure to assist whenever I can! (Please send your queries to me at [erroldistancelearning@gmail.com](mailto:erroldistancelearning@gmail.com))



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

Here is this column's queries ...

## **THE BEST WAYS TO GRAB STUDENTS' ATTENTION DURING A LIVE WEBINAR**

*I've read and used your columns for years, Errol, and they have often proved helpful in my online teaching. Thanks for that. Now it's my turn to ask for help! My school requires I give four live seminars—webinars, actually—to my students each course. The timing of when I give these is up to me. I know the material well (my subject is criminal justice administration) and I'm knowledgeable in the technical aspects of the presentation software. My students have also mentioned they appreciate my tone when giving the presentations. Yet I think there is a piece of "magic" missing: not as many students show up as I would like and I can't seem to get the ones who do show up to be as involved in the chat box as I believe should be. From what I've read in your past columns I know you've given many webinars, so can you give me any advice?*

First, a tip of the hat for your kind words! It's always nice to know my advice has been of assistance to others. As for your question I consider it somewhat of a specialty of mine. After giving more than 500 seminars/webinars I've developed approaches that not only draw students to my presentations but also keep them

actively involved. First—and this is crucial—is personality. It is important to give a presentation with a cheerful, lively personality; it fuels excitement on the students' side and they also see the instructor as likeable. As for the presentation, there is a variety of items I employ; these are some: writing/performing rap songs (about the course) at the end of some presentations; giving students puzzles to solve (again, related to the course) at the close of a few presentations; sharing some of my personal background that relates to the course subject; making sure I address each student by name and respond to as many chat replies as I can; asking the students for info from their lives as it relates to the presentation subject; inquiring what still confuses or challenges them in the course, then weighing in; offering recipes of some of my cakes (I was at one time a chef) for any who attend; always having one "crazy" question (e.g., "If writing were a color what color would it be and why?"). Of course, all of these are merely teasers; the primary thrust of each presentation is the solid subject. Yet what I offer you will help—I guarantee it! (Note: don't be afraid to tap into your interests, such as music, virtual tours, art, etc.)

### **FEARFUL IF TAKING TIME OFF MIGHT HURT FUTURE COURSE-ASSIGNMENT CHANCES**

*I have been teaching online as an adjunct instructor for 7 years, and have had an enjoyable time doing so. My students seem to like my approach (they constantly give me good evaluations), I'm really invested in my subject (chemistry), and my supervisor has praised me for my efforts. Recently, my wife and I received an invitation to what is known as a destination wedding for a relative of mine, and we would very much like to go. Normally, this would not be a problem for my teaching, as for any vacation I've always stayed where there was good inter-*

*net connection. But my relative has decided to get married at a so-called eco-friendly resort, and this means no internet! Our school is always reminding us we can take time off with no repercussions, but I'm a little bit worried. There are many more online educators looking for employment, and I would be gone for 2 weeks, right in the middle of a course session. Errol, any suggestions on how I can handle this?*

Your question is a common one, and it's one I lump into the category of what I call "Adjunct Fears." Schools do not like their "boat to be rocked," and so when their faculty need to take off time not built into their contract—especially adjuncts—it can be a bit unsettling. But let me say unequivocally: you don't need worry. First, you indicated your school has stated—in writing—you can take off needed time and not be fearful for doing so. Second, from what you stated you are considered a valued teaching asset at your school. While there are, indeed, many looking for online teaching positions it's always nice for a school to have one in the corral whom it can depend upon—and that is obviously you. Last, have a candid conversation with your supervisor, including relating to this person your concern about being replaced because of taking the time off. I think you'll find your supervisor not only supportive of you but also appreciate of you being upfront about your worry.

### **DOES NOT LIKE SUPERVISOR— HOW TO HANDLE IT**

*Let me cut to the chase, Errol: I simply don't like my supervisor! If it were only the person's personality I could deal with it, but it goes far beyond that. He is very abrasive and cold in every conversation with me; he obviously has more interest in metrics than in what it takes to be a good online teacher; he seldom acknowledges the good I do in my classes, but almost seems to relish finding any small thing in my classes he feels could*

*be improved and blows it up much larger than it should be. This person has been my supervisor for 3 years, and has always given me the maximum number of courses I'm allowed to teach as apart-time instructor. Each one of his evaluations for me reads "Meets expectations." While my teaching and my classes are pure joy for me this supervisor always seems to throw a wet blanket on all. I'd like any insights you can offer. Thank you.*

Probably anyone who has taught online—including me—has experienced the type of supervisor you describe. While it's great to think—in a la-la land kind of way—that every supervisor is going to be fully appreciate of their charges' efforts, and respond in kind, the reality is that is simply not always true. The reasons for this are many, and that's another column. But let me address your concern. The good news is your supervisor obviously does respect and regard worthy the efforts you put in your classes; if not you would not be continually be given the max amount of classes to teach. As to the "ugly" sides of

your supervisor, from what you describe this person is not doing anything that breaks the law, but rather is simply—sadly—a person who doesn't know how to effectively supervise others. The choices you have are each drastic, but there is no other "wiggle room": (1) Simply know that this is how your supervisor is, put up with the nuisances, and use the salve of the joy you mention to soothe them; (2) You can always quit, but I don't see that as a viable option for you; (3) I don't know if you have an opportunity to teach a different subject (for which you are qualified), thus probably getting you a new supervisor. However, as you are always assigned courses and there is nothing negative on your evaluations I'd simply roll with what you have.

**Remember:** It's better to use the help of tongs to pick up spaghetti rather than our fingers; a shovel to dig soil rather than our hands; and a scissors to cut paper, rather than to tear it—assistance can make life just a bit nicer at times!

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1. There should be a commitment to the science of systems, and the field of instructional design.
2. There should be expectations that those who hold the title of instructional designer are highly and formally prepared in instructional systems. The typical instructional designer holds at least a master's degree in the field.
3. There should be a requirement that when courses are planned, modified, improved, or updated that instructional designers are actively involved.

A three-part team is best practice for course design. First, is the subject matter expert—the teacher, trainer, or professor who is the expert in the content. Next, is the instructional designer who takes the instructional ideas of the subject matter expert and forms them into a viable college course, training session, or school lesson organized into units, modules, and topics. Last is the instructional developer—the graphic artist, audio specialist, videogra-

pher, or web developer—who builds the plan into media that provide access to content.

There is an emerging rule of thumb in the distance education community that says there is a direct correlation between the quality of online programs offered by an organization and the number of instructional designers there are on staff. Perhaps this rule could be the topic of a doctoral dissertation.

*And finally*, as Burnham the architect said, “make no little plans, they have no magic to stir the blood.” In distance education, instructional designers make plans that stir the *mind*.

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