

Responding to Online Student E-Mails and Other Posts

Errol Craig Sull

During any online course instructors will receive many e-mails and other postings from students; each of these needs to be answered by the instructor, but how to do this is an art. Be successful at it and you will help keep your class engaged, excited about the

course, and respectful of you; not knowing how to effectively respond, however, can lead to students dropping your course, not really interested in the class, and fed up with you as their instructor.

What follows is a miniguide to getting your online student response postings right each time. (The suggestions only apply to individual e-mails or postings a student sends you, not class discussion postings or the like that can be read by all in class—although you will find many items listed also apply to this latter category.) While these tips are comprehensive they are not fully inclusive, as each course may require additional guidelines; add yours to this list but keep all handy—they will assure you of smooth online responses ahead!

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR RESPONDING TO STUDENT E-MAIL AND POSTS

- **The overriding guideline: Once sent, it can't be recalled.** What you don't want to experience is an "Uh, oh!" or "I can't believe I sent that!" moment, so never



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respond to a student's posting to you hastily, overtired, emotionally, or not totally focusing on your message. Not doing so can result in information, tone, and/or vocabulary not appropriate—and possibly damaging to your reputation as an online instructor.

- **Follow all school guidelines for responding to students.** This is the umbrella guideline for all your online responses to student postings—your style, approach, vocabulary, tone, et cetera—must all be in sync with what your school dictates. Make a checklist of what is and is not acceptable by your school and check it over before you hit “Send”—especially if you are new to the school.
- **Prroffread, PROOFFread, and PROOF-READ.** It makes no difference the subject taught: your e-mails and other posts need be typo free, and the only way this is going to happen is by proofreading. Don't “dash off” a posting; rather, take the time to look it over: Are there any misspellings? Are all facts correct? Is your vocabulary at the student-appropriate level? Yes, this takes more time but it is your reputation on the line—and you want to do everything to keep it intact.
- **Reread each e-mail and other postings you write before sending them.** This goes one step beyond proofreading, for it reminds you to review your postings for content, tone, approach, and length. As with proofreading, this takes additional time but your postings make the umbilical cord that ties your students to you, and you to them—and you want that cord to remain strong.
- **Be timely in all responses.** Beyond following guidelines set by nearly all schools with online courses for when to respond, it is crucial simply because it is an online environment. Students cannot walk into an online instructor's office for a face-to-face talk; students do not have a set schedule knowing they will see an instructor each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 8-9 A.M.; rather, it is the timely interaction of instructors in response to student e-mails and postings that helps keep the instructors a vital force in the class and keeps the class engaging to the students.
- **Be sure you answer all points students raise in their postings.** Students' postings to instructors are their primary means to get questions answered and make comments. While many of these may have been covered in previous postings by you, each point must be covered, and in an upbeat, positive manner. Forgetting just one could have the student believing you don't care about him or her, something that can quickly weaken a course.
- **Be sure to end any response with an invitation to the student or on a positive note.** It's important that each response invite the student to contact you if more information is needed, if the student has additional questions, if the student needs additional input, and so on. This indicates you care about the student's progress in class and do not consider your response to be the final word to the student; it shows you to be an open, “I'm-here-for-my-class” instructor. And, if the student's posting doesn't require follow-up, be sure your response ends with a positive, upbeat sentence or two: instructor e-mails and postings always “taste” better with “sugar” on them!
- **Do not delete any student postings to you.** Save all student postings for three reasons: (1) To remind you of problems, concerns, and information related to the student; (2) For a trail of your actions in resolving student problems; (3) For any issues that may come up as a result of a student lodging a complaint against you. And do not delete these once your class ends; keep them for 6 months.

RESPONDING TO VARIOUS TYPES OF STUDENT POSTINGS

- **The bubbly, friendly, “I really like this class” and “You’re doing a great job, teach!” student.** All instructors enjoy students like this because they are upbeat, never offer negative comments, and generally follow all class guidelines. But two words of caution here: (1) Always respond to this student’s postings in the same professional and upbeat tone as you would others—never give the student any indication he or she is your “buddy” or that the class is better off or the like because the student is in it: writing something like this can quickly lead to charges of bias or favoritism from other students. (2) Read between the students’ postings lines—be sure the student is not complimenting you in an effort to curry favor or get some break in class.
- **The confused, doesn’t get it, “Hey, can you help me?” student.** This student may be new to the online learning environment, a bit slow in “getting” all the rules of and assignments in class, or find your method of teaching much different from that experienced in previous online courses. Whatever the student’s concern you need respond in a patient, sincere, “I’m-here-to-help-you!” manner, one that will have the student feeling more positive about the class after reading your response.
- **The angry, ticked off, “It’s your fault, teach”—when it’s not—student.** Begin with thanking the student for his or her concerns, then take a positive approach in detailing why the student might have the information wrong. Don’t get defensive, don’t show impatience. Go over each point the student raised, with detailed and clear points to refute the student’s dissatisfaction points. Also, depending on what the student is saying in his or her post, you might want to make your supervisor aware of it.
- **The justifiably upset, “You screwed up, teach” student.** We all make mistakes, no matter how much effort we put into getting all aspects of our course right. When a student calls you on a mistake, own up to it and apologize (and take appropriate action, if necessary); let the student know you are as human as he or she and an occasional oversight does happen. You’ll keep the student’s respect for being honest and forthright—and use your mistake to make you a better online instructor.
- **The disappointed in his or her efforts, “I really stink!” student.** This student has most likely received a “slap in the face” because of a low grade received from you. It’s important to let the student know what’s most important is overall improvement in your class, that you don’t expect students to master the subject in an XX-week course. Point out the positives the student has shown, offer additional assistance, and suggest resources your school may have to also help the student with his or her concern.
- **The flirtatious, too friendly, “I like you more than a teach” student.** Do not respond to any obvious flirtatious, “come on” text the student writes; rather, thank the student in a professional, upbeat manner for his or her compliment, then turn the direction of your student’s posting to one of the course subjects. It is important to invite the student to contact you again—not doing so can trigger an unwarranted yet real feeling of rejection in the student, opening the possibility for the student saying or doing something that can hurt your reputation. But be sure this invitation relates only to the course subject.
- **The always-late-with-assignments, “I know you won’t believe me, but ...” student.** We’ve all had these students: excuse after excuse as to why an assignment is late or not completed. Often, the school has set policies on student

excuses and these can be quickly used, but when these are not available and the student has a habit of making excuses tell him or her that a legitimate doctor's note or the like must be sent to you; additionally, you should build in a late/missed assignments policy in your syllabus (if the school does not have one). If the call on this problem is yours it must be one you make with sympathy yet judiciously, it must be a response that is patient and upbeat yet also professional and no-nonsense.

Two tips to augment your written responses:

1. **Phone.** If your school allows instructor/student phone contact use this—

but only as a secondary method (after your written postings). A call or two to students during the course can help strengthen the student-instructor bond and assist in resolving student problems.

2. **MP3.** Leaving MP3 audio files for your students can be very productive in explaining what you find difficult to fully explain in writing; it can also serve as an aid in keeping students engaged.

REMEMBER: Waves break and disappear, food is eaten and gone, voices go still and there is silence—yet the written word remains forever alive.



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