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Course Overview and Introduction

The first thing students should encounter upon entering the online classroom is a statement summarizing the course so that they have a clear idea of what they'll learn and how they'll learn it. The simplest option is to post a written statement, but many instructors also provide a short introductory video or other audio-visual presentation.

Students also want to know who you are and what you're like as an instructor. When we teach in a traditional bricks and mortar classroom this is obvious in the first two minutes of the first class period, but online we have to make more of an effort to introduce ourselves. Creating a video in which you make the same introductory remarks to your online students as you'd deliver in a regular class is a good idea. Students like to see your face and hear the sound of your voice. It makes you seem more approachable and human than just being the disembodied person behind the words they read in your announcements, emails, and discussion posts.

Furthermore, students need to learn about one another. That's why the first assignment in many online courses asks students to introduce themselves. To generate greater engagement than the standard "name, hometown, major, and reason you're taking this class" typical of these self-introductions, you might pose a question requiring a narrative response. Asking students to "tell about a time when you felt a strong sense of academic accomplishment," or "describe an experience you've had during your studies that was personally transformative" can lead to a more fruitful discussion and help build a sense of community. Our stories are what make us human, so sharing them begins to establish peer-to-peer rapport. Be sure to post your own response to the question to lead off the discussion thread. I always share my story about returning to full time study in higher education when I was 40 years old, undergoing a complete career change and completing my bachelor's degree while simultaneously running my own business. Students often comment that this story encouraged them to pursue their own goals – if I can do it, they say, then they can, too. It lets them see more of who I am as a human being instead of thinking I'm just the judgmental, faceless critic who grades their work.

Along with the self-introduction, it's helpful for students to post a photo of themselves, and the instructor should also follow suit. Some LMS providers include an option for each user to personalize their avatar or profile image. This feature allows the instructor to see students' faces alongside their posts or replies rather than just their names. I've found this to be quite helpful, and students have commented that they liked seeing my face (…yes, even my face…) alongside my comments as well.

The more we can personalize our course and set it up to make our students comfortable, the better they will learn and the more they'll achieve.

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