

What's the Difference? Teaching Online

Teaching an online class demands a different set of skills than teaching on campus. First, online courses usually require more advance planning and preparation than when we teach on campus, since everything in an online course is expected to be available to students the first time they log into the virtual classroom. Second, talking and listening – the bedrock of face-to-face learning – are notably absent online, forcing us to approach instruction differently than we're used to. Online learning also differs from the traditional face-to-face environment in several important aspects.

- **Time:** nearly all online interaction between the students and instructor occurs in writing, and this is subject to time delays between one person's original post and another person's reply.
- **Information Delivery:** online lectures tend to take the form of PowerPoints or similar slide-based formats, with or without embedded verbal narration. Lectures are also commonly presented as videos. The course developer must create and upload these resources prior to first day of class. (If you're teaching a course that someone else developed, the lectures might have been created already, but you should still read or watch all of the lectures so that you know what the students were supposed to learn.)
- **Written Instructions:** *everything* you want your students to do, from discussion posts to important assignments must include step-by-step, explicit instructions. All expectations should anticipate potential misunderstanding. They should also be clearly explained and easily accessible within the online classroom. It's important to think through every detail ahead of time, such as:
 - a. How many words are required for a good discussion post or peer comment.
 - b. The exact date and time each assignment or other course requirement is due.
 - c. The format you want your assignments to take and the types of files students can submit. (Ex: You might tell students they can submit their paper as a Word doc or PDF but not as a Pages, Google Doc, or WordPad file.)
 - d. The file names you want students to use.

When we teach on campus, we have time to develop our courses as we go. It takes a great deal more thinking, planning, and preparation to be ready to teach online because we have to anticipate students' needs and possible misconceptions in advance. Small details matter to most instructors, but students can't meet our expectations unless we tell them – clearly and in detail – what they are.