Ten tips to make your Blackboard site
better for students

1. Instead of cryptic “Week 1”, “Week 2”, “Week 3” titles on your content folders (and who keeps track of which “week” of the semester it is,anyway?), say something *about* the content. e.g., “Week 3 - Protein transport”. That gives the student an overview of what they’re going to learn rather than a just a numbered list of hoops to jump through.

Even better - make the title a question! “Week 3 - How do cells move protein molecules around?” Pique your students’ curiosity!

2. Use the Description field of the folder to say something about what’s inside.

E.g., “This week, we’ll explore the four stages of teamwork: Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing. Think back on the times you’ve worked in teams and be ready to share that experience.” (Bonus: get them to recall what they might already know about the topic, if applicable!)

3. Set Due Dates for graded items. Students say that the #1 thing they want to know is What Is Due When. Due Dates show up in the Calendar, and in the Upcoming tab in My Grades. When you copy content to the next semester, go to Control Panel > Course Tools > Date Management to change the dates all on one page.

4. Use Student Preview mode to see what things look like from a student’s perspective. Submit an Assignment, take a quiz. When you exit Preview mode, click the option to save the data. In the Grade Center, enter grades and feedback for the Preview\_user, then go back to Preview mode to see how that looks to the student.

5. Don’t use midnight deadlines. Are you *really* going to start grading at midnight Sunday night? C’mon… you went to college. You pulled all-nighters. If you’re an early riser, set it for 6 AM Monday. Or 8 AM. Or noon. Whatever fits your schedule. But midnight? Have pity.

6. Hit the ground running. Have stuff due by Wednesday the first week of class. Require the students to email you, introduce themselves on the Discussion Board, and make at least one attempt on the syllabus quiz. (Huh?) Then use the Retention Center to identify and email students who missed the deadline. Get students engaged early - this has a big impact on retention.

7. Syllabus Quiz. Low-stakes, just a handful of points. Two or three attempts, and YES have the syllabus in front of you when you take it. What’s your instructor’s name? Late work policy? Extra credit policy? When should you expect to get a response to an email? (These ARE in your syllabus, yes?) 15-20 questions, max. Due Wednesday of Week One.

8. Have two Discussion Forums, even in an all-lecture class.

One is for introductions, and is due at noon Wednesday of Week One.

Yes, on Day One we go around the room… and the shy ones in the back corner say as little as possible. But online, when no one is looking at them? They open up.

Ask the typical “intro” questions: Where are you from? Why did you sign up for this class? What are your plans for after college? Then ask something to get them to start owning the course: After reading the course objectives and the syllabus, what are you most excited about learning in this class? What worries you the most? Then finish with a low-stakes icebreaker: Share a funny thing that happened to you. What’s your favorite ethnic food / restaurant? What’s something you would *never* eat? (These discussions can be very amusing.)

This lets the students get to know each other (and maybe find a study partner who loves to hang out at Panera), lets you get to know them a bit as human beings, but - and here’s the sneaky bit - gives you a writing sample in their authentic voice, in case a written assignment feels “off”. You know what I’m talking about.

The second forum is for posting questions about the course content. Subscribe to it (and tell the students that you subscribe) so that you get an email notification whenever someone posts there. In some courses it’s called “Muddiest Point.” In others, “General Questions.” Often, another student will answer the question before you get to it. Win-win!

9. Post some personal information about yourself in the Instructor Contact area. Don’t just list your academic credentials. Students *assume* that you’re qualified to teach the course; you don’t need to impress them. Tell them about you as a person. Make them not scared of you. Talk a bit about pets, kids, hobbies, whatever.

10.