

# Communication strategies for instructors

## WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

This resource provides suggestions for effective communication with students to advance your teaching goals and to help maintain work-life balance and wellbeing for both instructors and students. It lists an array of options for communicating with students and identifies campus resources available to faculty when communications require intervention.

## HOW DO I USE IT?

Review the list of tips and modes of communication to evaluate your current approach. [CET](https://cet.usc.edu/contact-us/) is available to discuss pedagogical options for course communication.

### Modes of instructor-student communication

Communication is a critical aspect of instruction, both inside and outside the classroom. As such it can be a significant source of stress because it can be challenging to stay organized and be proactive. For students, knowing when and where to look for communication from their instructors can ease the cognitive load and make it more likely that they succeed in your course. Review this list and identify types of communication that align with your teaching style, discipline, course modality and student population.

* Written course documents, i.e., the syllabus or assignment descriptions.
* Course Learning Management System (LMS) announcements.
* Email
* Direct messages in the LMS.
* Announcements in class
* Discussion forums.
* Zoom chat, group or individual.
* Feedback or annotations on assignments.
* By phone.
* **Social media:** Some instructors choose to incorporate social media into their courses. In these cases, it is important to consider whether all students will be able to access the social media platform. Other considerations are addressed in this [CET resource on social media use in academic courses](https://cet.usc.edu/teaching-resources/use-of-social-media-in-academic-courses/).

### Tips for communicating effectively with students

As instructors, we want to ensure students have the information they need to engage with course material and successfully complete assignments. There are many communication platforms available to instructors, where students can engage in a variety of ways, and on multiple devices. This list of tips can help you develop an efficient and effective strategy for communicating with students.

#### Consider clarity, consistency, and tone.

* Always keep the tone professional and respectful. Avoid writing anything that you would not be comfortable sharing with colleagues, chairs, or deans.
* Try to write and speak concisely and avoid using jargon.
* Establish a clear policy for communication in your course that is feasible for you and include it in your syllabus.
	+ Communicate to students the appropriate method for contacting you (for example, using the Learning Management System (LMS), or email).
	+ Let students know what days and times you will be able to respond to emails, and what kind of response time they can typically expect.
	+ Explain which types of questions you will be able to answer via email, and which are better suited for office hours or an individual meeting.
	+ Establish communication expectations with students.
		- Inform students if they should include course or section numbers in the email subject line.
		- Provide examples of appropriate tone or structure, and consider relating this to relevant expectations for professionals in your field.
		- Consider including these expectations in your course [community agreements](https://cet.usc.edu/teaching-resources/a-menu-of-discussion-norms/), or sharing [“netiquette” guidelines](https://cet.usc.edu/teaching-resources/netiquette-considerations/) with students.
		- Be prepared to reinforce these boundaries and expectations and to redirect students if necessary.
	+ Find ways to reinforce your communication policy. For example, provide group feedback if expectations are not being met, or provide reminders before important assessments on how best to solicit help, receive feedback, or broach conversations about grades.
	+ Clarify for students the kinds of questions that are appropriate for the instructor, and those that should be answered by contacting a TA, reviewing the syllabus, or asking a peer.
	+ Identify ways to make your communications accessible. For example, video communications should be captioned.
* Organize communications so that students can find information they need.
	+ Whenever possible, send communications via the learning management system so that all important information is stored in one place that students can refer to at any time.
	+ Use descriptive subject lines or titles for emails, discussion forums, or announcements in the learning management system.
	+ Send communications at a regular time and day of the week. Keep in mind that emails and announcements can be written in advance and then post-dated.
	+ Avoid including information that is not relevant to the subject of the message as that will make it more difficult for students to locate later.

#### Whenever possible, communicate proactively.

* The syllabus will likely be the first place many students go to get information about your course. Review your syllabus before each term to ensure it is clearly written, up to date, aligned with program or university requirements, and reflects current expectations and assignments for your course. You may wish to start from the [USC syllabus template](https://cet.usc.edu/teaching-resources/syllabus-template/).
* Review other written communications, statements, and course documents before the start of the course to check for errors and alignment with your current syllabus. This might include:
	+ [Assignment descriptions](https://cet.usc.edu/teaching-resources/assignment-description-template/)
	+ Rubrics
	+ Announcements in the LMS
* Consider pre-writing announcements in the LMS and post-date or hide them so that they become available to students at the appropriate time during the course. This can help reduce instructor stress and cognitive load during the semester and ensures that announcements follow a consistent format.
* Anticipate important dates such as exams, university holidays, or other events, and adjust your communication strategy to support yourself and your students’ efforts to balance obligations.

#### Encourage engagement and retention of information.

* Frame directions and expectations in terms of what students *should* do and avoid excessive focus on negatives.
	+ For example, “submit assignments before the due date in order to receive feedback in time for the next draft.”, versus “late submissions will not receive feedback”.
* Consider using multiple modes of communication. For example:
	+ If you send announcements through your LMS, you can reinforce this practice by including the information in assignment descriptions, in slides shared with students, or verbally during class.
		- Keep reminders timely and brief, and make them at a time when you have students' attention. Consider asking students to answer follow up questions to encourage engagement.
		- For asynchronous courses, instructors can record announcements and add them to existing recordings using video editing software.
	+ Consider incorporating media into course announcements to make them more engaging and memorable.
	+ While multiple ways of communicating can help reinforce important information, be selective to avoid cognitive overload or making too much work for you or your TAs.
* Communicate student feedback in an accessible and timely manner.
	+ Be sure to provide feedback in time for students to make adjustments before the next submission or on similar tasks or assignments.
	+ Focus feedback on student work, especially aspects that align with course learning objectives. Consider the best forum for feedback on other aspects of student performance, such as professionalism or study strategies, which may be better suited to an in-person conversation during office hours or after class.
	+ Consider incorporating multiple modes of feedback such as:
		- Annotations or notes directly on assessments, by hand or in the LMS,
		- Written, audio, or video feedback,
		- Rubrics,
		- In-person, in-the-moment group or individual feedback.

#### Plan your communication approach for sensitive or private topics.

* Avoid using email to communicate about grades. The LMS is best for this as it will have the most robust privacy protections.
* Communicating about student issues:
	+ Consider documenting issues or individual communication with students, for example regarding absences, lateness, or concerning or changed behavior.
	+ Incorporate automated communications into your course to help keep students on track. The LMS can be set up to send an automated message in response to student patterns of behavior, such as failure to log in for an extended period of time, missing assignments, or other signs a student may be struggling.
		- Let students know that they can expect to get automated notifications of this sort and provide context for why you think it's important. For example, you might remind students that struggle is normal and getting a notification like this could be a cue to open a dialogue with their TA or the instructor about how to improve.
	+ Reach out to [Campus Support and Intervention (CSI)](https://campussupport.usc.edu/) regarding concern for students, or let students know how to access support themselves.
	+ Note that Instructors may not solicit or accept [medical documentation](https://studenthealth.usc.edu/medical-policies/).
		- Students may use the Student Health Services self-reporting [Medical Absence Form](https://issuu.com/uscedu/docs/medical-absence-form_self-verification_patient_to_).
		- Accommodation letters, including for temporary accommodations, must come from the [Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS)](https://osas.usc.edu/).
	+ Remember that the [Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)](https://arr.usc.edu/students/ferpa/) prohibits instructors from disclosing student information to any third party, including classmates, friends and relatives.
	+ USC instructors and TAs are designated employees and are responsible for reporting concerns regarding discrimination, harassment, and retaliation involving community members to the office of [Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title IX (EEO-TIX)](https://eeotix.usc.edu/). If a student shares this sort of information with an instructor or TA, remind them that you are required to report.
* For questions regarding communicating about sensitive topics, consider reaching out to [CET](https://cet.usc.edu/contact-us/), your department, or a trusted peer or mentor for feedback on your approach.

### CET resources

[Faculty decision guide](https://cet.usc.edu/teaching-resources/faculty-decision-guide/%22%20%5Cl%20%22%3A~%3Atext%3DThis%20document%20is%20a%20job%2Cor%20recommended%20actions%20are%20specified.), a job aid designed to assist faculty, including online faculty, with supporting students in certain situations by listing required or recommended faculty actions.

[Writing course-specific policies](https://cet.usc.edu/teaching-resources/writing-course-specific-policies/).

[What to say: communicating with students who may need additional support](https://cet.usc.edu/teaching-resources/what-to-say-communicating-with-students-who-may-need-additional-support/), a step-by-step guide to begin a conversation with the student in a way that shows you care - created in collaboration with USC Campus Wellbeing and Education.

### Additional resources

[Effective Communication: Faculty and Students with Disabilities](https://www.washington.edu/doit/sites/default/files/atoms/files/Effective-Communication-Faculty-Students-Disabilities.pdf), from DO-IT (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology.

[Best Practices for Communicating with Students In Online Classes](https://dl.sps.northwestern.edu/blog/2017/05/best-practices-communicating-students-online-classes/), from the Northwestern School of Professional Studies.

[Strategies for communicating effectively with students across learning environments](https://studentbehaviorblog.org/strategies-for-communicating-effectively-with-students-across-learning-environments/#:~:text=Keep%20the%20guidance%20clear%20and,deep%20breath%20might%20be%20helpful!), from SRI Education.

### References

Aboagye, D. N., Hooker, J; and Simonds, C. J. (2023) [The Basic Communication Course Syllabus as a Rhetorical Document: The Impact of Mediated Immediacy on Communication Apprehension with Instructors and Out-of-Class Communication](https://eric.ed.gov/?q=instructor+student+communication&id=EJ1388312). *Basic Communication Course Annual*: Vol. 35, Article 5.

Kaufmann, R., & Vallade, J. I. (2021). [Online student perceptions of their communication preparedness](https://uosc.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01USC_INST/273cgt/cdi_crossref_primary_10_1177_2042753020950873). *E-Learning and Digital Media*, 18(1), 86–104.

Putulowski, J. R., & Crosby, R. G. (2019). [Effect of Personalized Instructor–Student E-mail and Text Messages on Online Students’ Perceived Course Quality, Social Integration With Faculty, and Institutional Commitment](https://uosc.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01USC_INST/273cgt/cdi_crossref_primary_10_1177_1521025117696823). *Journal of College Student Retention : Research, Theory & Practice*, 21(2), 184–201.

Vareberg, K. R., & Westerman, D. (2020). [To: -) or to ☺, that is the question: a study of students’ initial impressions of instructors’ paralinguistic cues](https://uosc.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01USC_INST/273cgt/cdi_proquest_journals_2436315159). *Education and Information Technologies*, 25(5), 4501–4516.