



Adapting Your In-Class Teaching to an Online Environment

by Collins Editor Erin Brenner

Distance learning is different from in-class learning. Because your interactions are so limited, you don't get to know your students as well and you can miss out on visual cues to students' needs. It takes a lot more thought to put together a successful online class—even without having to learn a new piece of technology.

As a former online instructor, my best advice to you right now is don't try to create a true distance-learning course.

Don't try to learn all the technology. Learn what you need to do what you must.

Don't try to rewrite all your lesson plans. Adapt what you can and let go of the rest.

This isn't a forever switch. This is about getting by until you can be in the classroom again—even if it's until the end of the year. This isn't a normal time, so don't treat it as such.

Here are some tips for transitioning to online teaching for the short term.

Keep technology demands simple. Some of your students may not have a reliable internet connection. They may have an older, slower laptop, they may be sharing a laptop with a sibling, or they may only have an iPad. The simpler you keep the technology usage, the easier it is for all students to participate.

Don't assume students know how to use the technology. If you ask students to use technology that you haven't used with them before, they may not know what to do. Again, keep tasks simple. Provide directions for the tasks you've assigned. Provide screenshots or link to the technology's how-to page, if you can.

Lower your expectations. We're all a bit anxious, and it's likely that neither you nor your students are used to distance learning. Let your goal be to give your students a little normality, smaller learning goals to occupy their minds with, and opportunities to connect with you and their classmates.

Prepare for technology to fail. Technology fails us at the best of times. When I was teaching online, the technology always seemed to fail at the worst possible times. Assignments wouldn't reach their destinations. Answers to online quizzes would get wiped out. The software would just not work as it should. Be lenient on deadlines and have a Plan B.

Record your lectures. Being able to give a lecture via video is a wonderful opportunity. We're all a little distracted now, however. Recording your lectures will enable students to replay them later.

Set up discussions by topic. If you'll do online discussions, categorize them by topic. This will allow you and your students to easily find them later. Give everyone a chance to find what they need quickly and easily.

Chunk your lessons into 10–12 minute segments. Shorter lessons are easier for you to adapt, easier for students to absorb, and easier for you both to review later.

Have downloadable options. Planning for technology fails makes distance learning much less stressful. Any assignments, readings, and directions that you put directly in your teaching software are unavailable if the software or your student's internet connection fail. Duplicating the information in a simple Word or Google Docs file means students can download the files. Duplication is a lifesaver!

Give options for how to submit work—but not too many. Choose a couple ways to turn in assignments. Too many choices creates too much work for you, but having a couple helps ensure all students can submit somehow. For example: students can upload a file to a common place (such as your school's chosen platform) or they can email a file to you. For students who work better on paper, they can take a *clear* picture of printed paper and email that to you or upload it to the platform.

Take advantage of Collins Writing [free resources](#) to adapt your assignments. Now is a great time for using [Ten Percent Summaries](#) to help students focus on the important parts of their reading. [Peer editing](#) using video can help students connect with each other. Seeing a classmate can help students feel less isolated while letting them learn. Assign [focused editing tasks](#) and make strong use of [Focus Correction Areas](#) to target the learning.

Create short group assignments. Once you've got your classes going again, consider replacing a test with a group assignment. Students can work online together to create a short slideshow or video, for example. Maybe you just adapt your test slightly to make it a group test. Give your students a chance to work together and ask less of each student.

All of these ideas are designed to get you up and running quickly, but don't worry if it takes a while to get a good system in place or your system isn't perfect. Let done be good enough. You'll be making the best of a tough situation, ensuring your students can do some learning while still feeling part of your classroom community and maybe reducing anxiety, if only for a short time.

That's a gift they'll carry with them always.