

Inside Independent Learning

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Thank You!

Thank you to everyone who took the time to introduce yourself to me! I am looking forward to getting to know everyone better in the coming year. Later in this issue, you will notice a section titled "Introducing...." Each month, we will feature a different IL Instructor. This is a great way to get to know your IL colleagues!



Student Communication

Independent Learning courses are different than face-to-face courses. One of these major differences is the method of communication we use with our students. In face-to-face courses, communication is based on verbal communication (such as the spoken word, tone, and inflection) and non-verbal communication (such as body language and facial expression).

In face-to-face courses, email correspondence and discussion boards are supplemental means of communication with someone you speak with in person on a regular basis. Therefore, when reading an email, you can imagine verbal and non-verbal communication cues you are already familiar with from

face-to-face interactions. In Independent Learning courses, email and discussion board messages are the primary means of communication. Unless an instructor decides to post a photo on the course website, students will not know what their instructor looks like, and instructors may never know what their students look like. Since we do not meet with

our students face-to-face, we cannot rely on our verbal and non-verbal cues to convey meaning. Similarly, our students cannot rely upon our verbal and non-verbal cues to help them understand our communication.

This can lead to communication breakdown and frustration on the part of instructors and students alike.



Challenges of Written Communication

“Hey Bro, I need a quick credit in order to graduate, so I just need to do the minimum to complete my course in the next 2 weeks.”

“I don’t understand what question 3 is asking me to do.”

**IDK how 2 get the exam.
THX**

With more technology available, IL instructors and their students are dealing with

email as a primary communication tool. Many people can receive and send emails on their cell phones or other personal computing devices. Email as a medium has



inherent challenges, including: conveying tone, appropriate register, and responding to emails that seem more like text messages or tweets.

As professionals, we understand the importance of the standards of written

communication and word choice to help convey our meaning without the verbal cues we can rely upon in face-to-face courses. One of the skills we can help our students learn, no matter which content course they are taking, is the importance of writing conventions when communicating via email. Some instructors have found it helpful to provide an email template for students so that their students know the tone and style of communication expected in a university course.

Tone

Tone refers to the way we convey our attitudes in writing through sentence structure and word choice. Careful consideration of sentence length, sentence composition, and word choice can help to convey a professional tone in email communication.

Tip: Before beginning to write your email, consider how you want your student to feel when reading the message and what you want your student to understand from the message. If the

tone is wrong, your students will be paying attention to how your message made them feel instead of what you said in your message, which can lead to miscommunication, misunderstanding, or even a lack of desire to complete the course!

Tip: Before you hit the send button, reread your email for tone and make any needed adjustments. Feel free to contact Sarah (skorpi@dcs.wisc.edu) with any email tone questions.

Register

There are 3 registers that all word choices can be sorted into: Register 1 (used in informal settings, includes slang and regional varieties), Register 2 (language used in professional situations), and Register 3 (used in very formal, legal, and professional in-group settings). Word choices that belong to register 2 are most appropriate for email communication. (Just compare the following ways of saying hello: Yo! Dear Student, and Heartfelt salutations! Feel free to explain the 3 registers to your students and remind them to stick with Register 2 when dealing with their university course.

Emails that read like text messages or tweets

One of the advantages of mobile phones is that users can almost constantly check their email, text messages, facebook, and twitter accounts. Unfortunately, since users do all of these things on the same device, the conventions of text messaging and tweeting at times creep into emails.

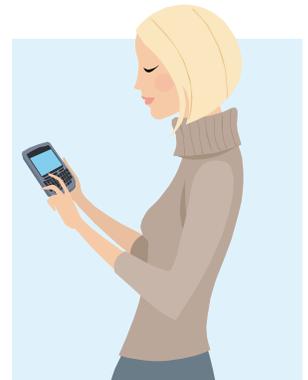
When students use these conventions as a quick response that acknowledges an email reply, it is ok to ignore them.

However, when a message from a student involves a new question, but no name, no course, and is lacking other conventions, the following response has helped students recognize the importance of acceptable email conventions:

Dear Student,
Thank you for your email.
When you send an email, please be sure that you in-

clude your name, the course you are taking, the unit you are asking about, and a specific, detailed question. This information helps me to better address your questions.

Best Wishes,
Your Instructor



Translating what we mean to say

Sometimes, what an IL instructor would like to say is difficult to phrase in a way that students will perceive as constructive and supportive instead of abrasive. Here are some helpful “translations” for things you may need to say to your students.

Your tone in your email is not acceptable.

When you compose your emails, please keep standard email writing conventions in mind.

You are going to fail the course.

Given your progress and performance in the course thus far, I am concerned that you may not succeed in the course.

You need to slow down.

Slowing down, taking your time, and integrating course material will improve the quality of your work.

You have academic deficiencies.

There are some knowledge gaps in your *subject* background that need to be addressed in order to increase your chances of success in this course. Have you considered working with a tutor?

You missed the point and need to resubmit.

It seems like you really struggled with the content of this unit. Take a look at my comments and feedback, and please let me know if you have any questions. I strongly encourage you to work through the unit again and resubmit the assignment for credit.

I am not going to put more effort into this course than you do.

I am/remain as committed to your success in this course as you are.

Did you cheat on the coursework/exam(s)?

I have corrected your midterm/final exam and I am greatly concerned by the difference in mastery of the course skills and content between your assignments (grade average here) and exam(s) (grade average here). Could you explain this discrepancy to me?

“Your tone in your emails is not acceptable.”

“You are going to fail the course.”

Good Practice Reminder: Vacation Messages

With the summer comes warm weather, sunshine, and the opportunity for many to get away for a while. If you will be away and unable to follow the 3 day turnaround time for grading assignments and/or the 24 hours email response time, please be sure to alert Sarah (skorpi@dcs.wisc.edu) of the dates of your vacation and

your plan for job duties while away. It is also important to alert your students that you will be away, and when you will be available to respond to emails and assignments.

Often, IL Instructors are able to access their email and dropboxes 2 or 3 times a week while away. If that is the case, setting an autore-

ply in your email program letting students know when you will next respond to their emails and submissions is a great way to keep students moving through the course while you are away. The autoreply lets students know why their instructor is not responding as usual and when they should expect a response. A vacation mes-

sage could be worded this way: “Thank you for your email. I am currently out of the office, but I will be checking my email remotely on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays at 10 am Central time. “

Some instructors even use autoreply all the time so that students know that their email has been received and that their instructor will respond soon.

Who to contact when...

As an IL instructor, it can be a challenge to know who you should contact in different situations. Use this list to help!

Contact Extension:

Technology Issues (i.e. D2L is down, forgotten passwords, etc.)Extension (techsupport@uwex.edu)
 Student Services Issues (i.e. Ok to email an exam to a proctor, you cannot update grades in LRMS)IL Extension (il@uwex.edu)

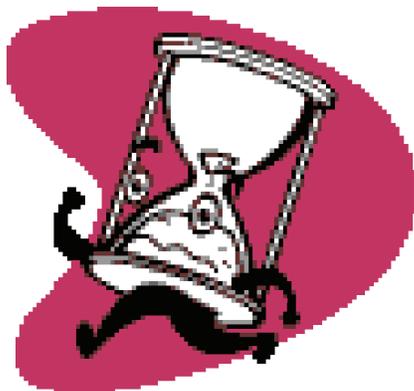
Contact DCS:

Course policy issues (i.e. Unusual student questions, resubmissions, etc.)your DCS coordinator* or Sarah (skorpi@dcs.wisc.edu)
 All other issues (There are no questions that aren't worth asking!)Sarah (sdkorpi@dcs.wisc.edu)

*if you do not know who your DCS coordinator is, it is probably Sarah

Ideas & Suggestions

Remember, if you have any questions or concerns that you think would be of interest to your IL colleagues, please submit them for future IL e-mails.



Coming Next Month: Dealing with Time-Crunch Students

One of the major advantages of Independent Learning is that students can complete the coursework for a semester-long class on their own timeline within the space of 12 months. However, some students find that life events (or procrastination) prevents their timely completion of the course. Sometimes, the two allowed extensions are still not enough time for the students to complete their course. For other students, the looming deadlines of graduation or the start date of

a new program or project put a tight timeline on their IL course completion plans. As instructors, it is our job to help students progress through the course at a reasonable pace. Next month, look for an article with suggestions for notifying students when they are entering a time-crunch situation, working with students who are under a time restriction, and mentoring students toward realistic course expectations when their timelines are unreasonable.

Introducing: Mark Quigley

I originally joined the Division of Continuing Studies in early 2002. I had (unwisely) moved from a postdoc with the Astronomy department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to a postdoc with the Medical Physics department, and took a huge cut in pay by crossing from one side of Charter Street to the other. I was sure that I had misheard the salary the department chair quoted, so I signed on the dotted line, and immediately found myself \$5000 below the threshold to qualify for food stamps. This resulted in some very serious financial difficulties, even with the free food. Fortunately, the grad student who had been the instructor for Astronomy 101 was moving on to bigger and better things, so I got the position which I have held ever since.

In 2003 I became the instructor for the basic physics classes, which I have taught until now, except for a hiatus of 18 months.

For most of the students, the physics and astronomy classes make a significant difference in how they view the world, which is a sense of reward I don't get with my real jobs in the military industrial complex. As I tell the students at the start of Astronomy, despite all the worries troubles we have on earth, the fact remains that we live in an amazing and wonderful universe, and that's a good thing to remember as you go through life.

In the picture, the young lady in the rear is my niece. The other three children are my kids, expressing the three main emotions in the repertoire of kids: Rage, Goofiness, and "Space Aliens Abducted Me and Sucked out my Brain".

