

Understand Blackboard's online structure before you begin building your online components

Each area of a Blackboard course should be used for a specific purpose. Plan your organization so students can locate course materials as easily as possible. See "Suggested Uses for Blackboard Course Areas" for some suggestions.

Develop an organizational plan before you start uploading materials

Experiment with different organizational structures for your online materials before you load all of them into the course shell.

Create course components offline

Save course components on your hard drive, and organize them into folders that correspond to the structure you will use in the online course. Then you can just copy and paste them into Blackboard. If you write all of your course components directly into Blackboard, you may lose your work if your computer suddenly freezes up or if you lose your internet connection.

Choose the most efficient, "user-friendly" mode of presenting materials

Keep in mind the challenge of reading dense, text-heavy documents on a computer screen. If you want students to download large documents, remember that some of them will be dialing up on slow modems (long download times). Blackboard can house many different file types (MS Word documents, HTML pages, Powerpoint presentations, audio files), but students must have access to software that can translate these file types. Downloads of some common "plug in" applications are available at the Blackboard support website.

Think about transitions between online course materials

Without a clear indication of how different course components relate to one another, your Blackboard site can feel fragmented rather than coherent. If students will participate in a discussion that is based on an assigned reading, indicate this in your descriptions of the reading assignment and the discussion. If you want to share recommended links to online resources, indicate the relationship between specific course materials/activities and specific links.

Use "redundancy" wisely

Communicate important events and activities in several different areas of your course: use the Announcements area, send e-mail, post something in a discussion board, and/or add an item of information in an appropriate Course Documents or Assignments location. This type of redundancy is a good idea in the online environment, where you cannot dictate how students will navigate your site. "Bad redundancy," on the other hand, involves posting materials in a haphazard manner throughout your site. Create a system and organizational rubric and stick to it: students will come to expect certain types of information in certain areas of your course site.

Go easy during the first week of class

Many students will be experiencing the online course environment for the first time. They will need a little time to grow comfortable navigating the Blackboard environment. Don't overload the first week with content-heavy assignments; design some low-pressure activities to guide students through the online course environment. Post a brief, clear overview of your Blackboard course site in the Course Information area. Explaining the logic of your organization will help students navigate the online course environment.

HELPFUL HINTS:

Many faculty work their way into Blackboard slowly, beginning with posting announcements and their syllabus, and then adding more functionality each semester, such as discussion forums and digital homework submission, as they become more comfortable with the interactive tools available.