

Optimizing Brightspace: little tweaks that make your Brightspace course more student-friendly

Below are some tips and tricks you can use to make your Brightspace courses operate more smoothly for both you and your students.

- ❑ **Set Up Email Forwarding.** Students tend to reach out to faculty through Brightspace email. If you are not checking Brightspace every day, you might want to forward your email to your @msun.edu email account. In Brightspace, click on your name in the top right, click “Account Settings” and choose the “Email” tab. Scroll down to the bottom and check “Forward incoming messages to an alternate email account.”
- ❑ **Encourage Students to Set Up Email Forwarding and Notifications.** On the first day of class, consider showing students how they can enable email forwarding. They also have the option to turn on notifications that alert them about upcoming due dates, new announcements, released grades, etc. Let OTLE know if you want us to do a 15-minute presentation about these topics in your course; you can also use [this video demonstrating the setup](#).¹
- ❑ **Use the Content Area.** Brightspace’s Content area is the best place to organize your course content because it creates a visual schedule for your students to follow and check off as they go. In our surveys, the most frequent student comment is that they prefer that EVERYTHING they need for a course (especially a 900/online course) is in the Content Area in sequential order. See our Brightspace Tutorial [video on Organizing Course Structure in Brightspace](#) here.
 - **Create a Syllabus or “Course Documents” Module.** Create a module folder called “Syllabus” or “Course Documents” and place important course documents in it. This allows students to find your syllabus without wading through old course Announcements or emails.
 - **Create a Zoom/WebEx Module.** Create a module folder called “Zoom link” or “Webex link” and place your link there (if you use either of these services). This allows students to find your link without wading through old course Announcements or emails.
 - **Link Assignments, Quizzes & Discussions to the Content Area.** When you create an Assignment, Quiz or Discussion, link it in the corresponding weekly module by clicking the “Add Existing Activities” button. This helps you maintain a visual schedule that keeps students on track each week. When instructors *don’t* do this, we often get calls from students who “can’t find” their Quiz or Assignment.
 - **Keep a Routine.** Maintaining a routined schedule for new content and due dates will help students stay organized and on track in your course (e.g., new content comes out Monday morning and that week’s work is due the following Monday at noon). If students know when to expect the release of new content and assessments for your course, they are much more able to establish their own routine and are less likely to miss something.
- ❑ **Use the Gradebook.** This is the second most frequent request we see in student surveys about Brightspace. Especially for a 900/online course, students are much less stressed when instructors use the Gradebook to communicate student grades. The Gradebook also saves instructors a LOT of time because you can link Quizzes, Assignments, and Discussions directly to the Gradebook.
- ❑ **Use Due Dates.** When you assign due dates to your assessments in Brightspace, students see that due date in their Brightspace calendar, where students can see all of their due dates in all of their courses. If they have notifications set up, they will get a text or email reminder 48 hours before that due date. ***OTLE recommends setting due dates no later than 10PM, as later times will trigger late night notifications about upcoming due dates.
- ❑ **Use Rubrics.** Grading rubrics are easy to set up and easy to link to Assignments and Discussions. Rubrics speed up your grading and help students see exactly where they are losing points, which can help prevent confusion and grade disputes.
- ❑ **Maintain a Clean Announcement Area.** The Announcement Tool is a great place to maintain ongoing communication with your students, but it can get cluttered when Announcements are never set to expire or when they display old posting dates. When you create new announcements, consider setting end dates so that the most important announcements don’t get buried. **NOTE:** Make sure essential course documents also get placed in the Content Area because students can accidentally “dismiss” an Announcement and then they may not be able to find it again.

¹ OTLE videos are all also accessible by visiting the “MSU-Northern OTLE” video library on YouTube.

Communication and Presence during Covid-19

COVID-19 has caused more stress to both students and faculty than during normal semesters. Establishing your presence first in your courses (especially for online courses, but also in face-to-face courses) will help ease students' fears.

- ❑ **An Introduction.** In your Brightspace courses, using the “Announcement” tool to introduce yourself and welcome students is a good way to establish immediate presence. Adding an introduction video or photo establishes a “face-to-face” connection.
- ❑ **Ongoing Announcements.** The “Announcement” page in Brightspace is the first page your students will see when logging into your course throughout the semester. Using this tool to check-in with your students regularly will signal your presence in the course. (Note: see the “Maintain a Clean Announcement Area” note in the previous section.)
- ❑ **Set Clear Expectations for Communication.**
Be as straightforward and upfront as possible with students about the Covid-19 situation and your expectations for communication. Sample syllabus statements are at msun.edu/otle.
Let them know:
 - How they can expect to hear from you about important course matters (through Brightspace emails, Announcements, etc.).
 - How you prefer to be contacted and when they can expect a response.
 - When and how to attend your office hours.
 - How you expect them to notify you if they need to be remote.
 - How you plan to deal with remote attendance and/or work.
 - That you're available to help connect them to any campus resources they might need during this strange time.