

Digital Support & Streamlining Instructions for Multilingual Students

by Jovilin Grunewald

Summary: This article discusses how to organize digital classrooms, convey classroom routines and expectations, and streamline instructions to facilitate more intuitive learning for ELL students.

Keywords: organization of digital classrooms, streamlined instructions, intuitive learning, ELL

As a secondary ELL teacher, I support almost every subject offered at our high school. Students email or message me the same comment almost daily: “I don’t understand what to do.” Navigating the wilds of distance learning and a variety of hybrid models this school year has shown that we can provide crucial support by ensuring that students who are unable to ask questions in person can easily understand what they must do for credit in each class. Formatting online classrooms with intention and writing clear, easily comprehensible instructions can help multilingual students achieve academic success with minimal in-person support.

Manage the Online Experience

Our national distance learning experiment has shown us how difficult online learning is for multilingual students. Although many schools are returning to in-person instruction, online classrooms will no doubt continue to be used. Precisely organizing these digital classrooms and

using consistent formatting for lessons, assignments, and assessments can provide the opportunity for students to show what they have learned, and minimize confusion and online fatigue when they do not understand what to do.

Organize information

Ensure that expectations, lessons, and assignments are clearly labeled. If a student missed class, can she easily find the lesson and the assignment? Is the policy about submitting late work clearly presented? It is helpful to post work chronologically and label lessons, lectures, and assignments in a consistent format. For example, the link to a documentary might be labeled, “4/13 WWI Video,” while the related assignment might be called, “4/13 WWI Video Essay.” (see Figure 1).

Basic online routines should be consolidated in one place—for example, in a document called “Class Expectations.” Include directions to access online textbooks/

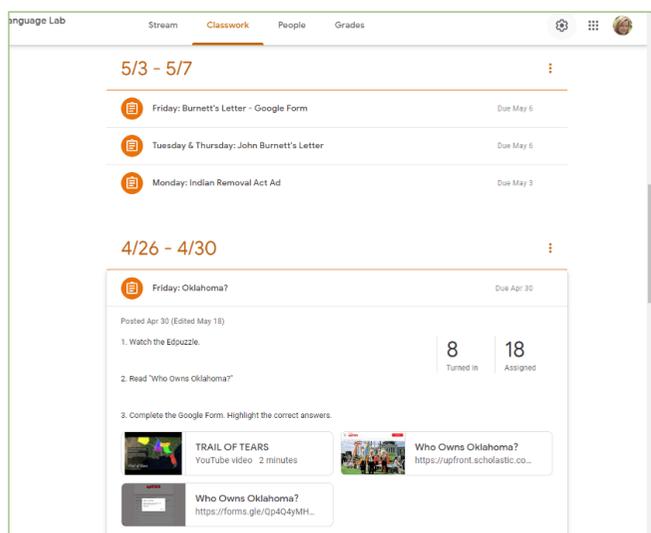


Figure 1: Example of linked assignments named for clarity

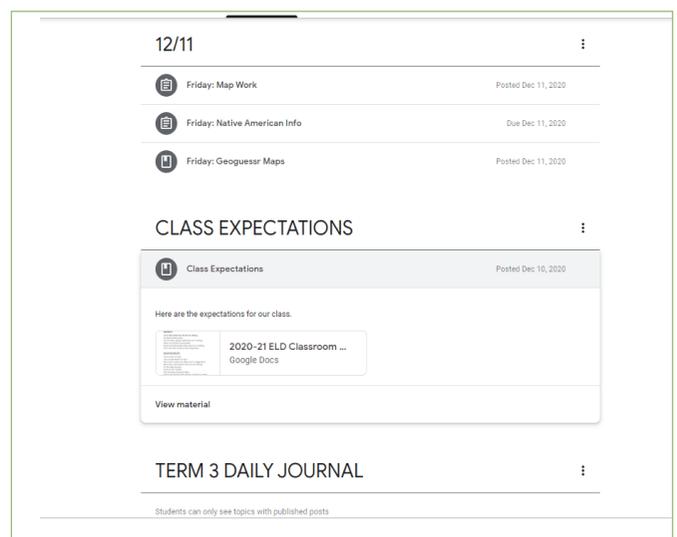


Figure 2: Example of Class Expectations posted in Google Classroom

platforms and submit completed work, so students and parents can refer to this information as needed (see Figure 2).

Finally, teacher- and student-views of online classrooms may be different. Make sure to view an online classroom from the student perspective before addressing questions about where assignments are, or how to access different platforms or lessons.

Create assignments with intention

Instead of assigning work that has been part of the syllabus for years, consider the specific goal of each assignment. What is the minimum a student must do to show that she understands the material or that she can accomplish what you want her to do? Craft assignments with the fewest possible technological barriers, then write instructions using as few words as possible.

Streamline Instructions

Along with designing easily-navigable online classrooms, simplifying instructions can help students start assignments with less stress. When attempting online assignments, too many multilingual students get hung up trying to figure out exactly what to do, and never get past the initial “Create a Document” stage. Some students give up, while others make a guess, write a few sentences, then click “Submit.” This frustrates both teachers and students. Writing concise, clear instructions takes some practice, but the benefit to students is worth the effort. Some suggestions follow.

Manage information

Don’t include clearly obvious steps, like “Create a Document.” List critical formatting information in a “Class Expectations” or “Assignment Requirements” document explaining how to create and submit assignments. In Google Classroom, teachers can format a Google Document, then select “Make a Copy for Each Student” to ensure the font size, margins, and spacing will be consistent. This sets students up for success by minimizing the time spent deciphering details about presentation instead of working

on comprehension or content (see Figures 3 and 4).

Explain step-by-step

Instructions should not be a full paragraph. These guidelines can help teachers construct clear instructions.

- **Use white space.** Double-space text, and add as much white space as possible to instructions and reading material. This allows multilingual students to “chunk” the language instinctively, helping make texts easier to read.
- **Use bullets; start with verbs.** Online classrooms are not the place for elegant, grammatically-perfect sentences. The shorter the steps, the more likely all students will understand them. Think of this as “instruction haiku,” but remember that it is important to model correct grammar even in abbreviated forms.
- **Work chronologically.** Start at the beginning and move forward. For example, “Before watching the documentary, answer 2 of the 5 intro questions,” can be shortened to “Answer 2 questions. Watch the documentary.” From the word order in the first example, it might not be clear that students should do the questions before watching the video.
- **Work cumulatively.** Large, complex projects may need to be broken into smaller assignments while working remotely or online. Multilingual students may struggle to grasp long, complicated projects, but can make consistent progress working on one part at a time.

Revise

After writing instructions, reread them. Eliminate wordiness or redundancy.

- **Read aloud.** Do the instructions start at the beginning and flow logically through the assignment process? Will they make sense to someone who has never done something similar?
- **Minimize subordinate clauses.** Subordinate clauses often start with words like ‘which’ or ‘that,’ typically adding information to an earlier topic in the

Separate Routine Expectations

Good Morning! We arrive at the start of week five of distance learning. I hope you completed and submitted the work for week four. If you haven't, take a moment and do that now before diving into the week five work.

This week you are reading stories about repressive governments testing the beliefs of someone. A suggested breakdown of the week's assignment is included at the top of the document. Each story has a link for you to follow. If you are having trouble with the links, you can always search the title and author of the story and find a copy.

I have created two documents this week - one for regular credit and one for Honors - and am hoping this will help you know what is required for you to complete. Since you each receive your own copy of both documents, please delete the one you are not intending to complete and only submit the document in which you work. The Honors work is intended for students who are pursuing the Honors label on their transcript and is offered to all students regardless of English course enrollment. Those pursuing the Honors label are required to complete each assignment through June. This is not required for all students and you do not have to complete the Honors extension to earn credit for regular English 10.

Please take a moment to let me know how you are doing by completing the temp check. Thanks and have a great week!

Figure 3: Example of complicated, hard-to-read instructions for an ELA reading assignment

Keep Instructions Specific to Current Assignments

Good Morning, and welcome to Week 5!

Background:

This week we are reading stories about governments that restrict and control citizens by force, and how this tests citizens' beliefs.

Click on the links to access the stories. If you cannot open the links, search the title and author to find a copy online.

Assignment:

- Answer the questions in the Google Doc.
- Click “Turn in.”
- Complete the Temp Check.

Figure 4: Example of revised instructions for the same ELA reading assignment

Avoid Subordinate Clauses

Before:

Today you'll have the period to read and complete the imagery and story structure worksheets, which will be due before the next class. We will have a quiz over the story as well as the vocabulary that we studied in class on Friday.

After:

Today we will:

- read the story.
- complete the worksheets. *They are due tomorrow, 5/19.*
- take the vocabulary quiz.

Figure 5: Example of revised instructions with subordinate clauses

sentence. These long sentences can confuse students with low English proficiency. Shorten sentences and work with bullet statements to avoid overcomplicating directions (see Figure 5).

- **Use simple verb tenses.** Aim for clarity in a less-than-intuitive academic environment. Keep it short and simple.
- **Eliminate pronouns.** References to anything belonging to the student, like “your textbook,” or “your paper,” can usually be eliminated. Students will read the instructions individually. They know who is expected to do the work. References to the teacher or class (“my lecture,” or “our discussion”) should be dropped. Antecedent-free pronouns only complicate instructions for non-native speakers.

- **Limit prepositions.** It is almost reflexive to add prepositions to certain phrases, such as “the document below.” This is a consequence of centuries of paper-based education, which required precise references to physical points in texts, documents, or attachments. In online classrooms, assignment components are posted adjacent to the instructions, so using prepositions to refer to attachments may be unnecessary. For example, “Read the document below,” can be shortened to, “Read document.” If you need to distinguish between documents, use the name of each one to be specific. Any prepositions in instructions should be critical for clarity.
- **Use the fewest possible words.** Even articles like ‘a, an, the’ can be dropped if not critical for comprehension. For example, “Submit the essay after it is completed,” can be shortened to, “Submit essay.”

Writing instructions often seems like an afterthought. While some teachers include expectations about every imaginable detail, others expect students to intuitively know what to do with minimal guidance. Taking the time to write instructions with intention—to be as transparent and brief as possible—can greatly benefit multilingual students, along with other at-risk groups. Simple, concise instructions support student efforts to complete assignments as designed, which is helpful for everyone involved in the process.



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