# Preparing Students for Your Online Course: The Welcome Letter

Here are suggestions for information to share with students before the class begins via an email "Welcome Letter." Much of this information could be/should be included in your course syllabus as well.

1. **Date class begins.** Note that class starting dates are staggered during the summer session. Some begin in May, some in June, and some in July.

2. **Number of weeks and ending date.** Class lengths vary during the summer session and a student may be taking courses with different start dates – this can be a little confusing if students don't realize that not all classes are the same length.

3. **Textbook Information**. If you would like students to have textbooks on the first day of class, it's important that you provide them with all of the pertinent information (author, title, edition, ISBN number) they will need in ordering the correct text from online vendors. If you are willing to allow students to use the "international" edition, provide that ISBN as well. You may also opt for an "older" edition if your text is used primarily for reference and its content changes very little.

4. **Number of <u>required</u> synchronous meetings (if any) including when and how they will take place.** If you require students to "attend" a "real-time" web facilitated, virtual meeting, provide them with the necessary information so that they can make arrangements to be "present" or opt to take the course at a future date.

5. **Number of <u>optional</u> synchronous meetings (if any) including when and how they will take place**. For example, you can hold "virtual" office hours so that students can reach you at a particular time. How you hold these office hours is up to you, but some ideas include being available for instant messaging (IM), chat, Skype, e-mail, and (for those who are more "old-school") telephone! If you are using ReggieNet then live chat sessions can be conducted using the 'Chat Rooms' feature built in. [Skype](#) is a powerful free web- conferencing tool that allows you to interact with your students using audio, video, or text. Contact CTLT to learn more about using Skype.

6. **Course access information**. How will students access your course? Students using ReggieNet can access their courses through their My Illinois State portal using their ULID and password. Also, ReggieNet users can log in directly from [http://reggienet.ilstu.edu](http://reggienet.ilstu.edu)

   If you have a web-based course that does not use Illinois State University's course management system (ReggieNet), provide students with the web address for your course home page and give them instructions on what they should do next. This is where those orientation activities can help get the course going.

7. **Technical Requirements**. Explain what types of hardware, software, and internet access students will need to complete the work for your course. Will students need MS Word? Will they need to have at least DSL internet service to download video files? You should make those expectations clear so that students can evaluate whether they can meet those requirements before your class begins. Please note: If you plan to use Reggienet you should inform your students that the preferred browser to access ReggieNet is Mozilla Firefox. While other browsers may appear to work well with the system we have found Firefox to be the most compatible and problem-free.

8. **Amount of time that students will need to spend in the course**. The "rule of thumb" often used in academe is that for every course credit hour, a student should expect to spend 2 – 3 hours per week engaged in "class work" for that course. For a 3-credit course, using this formula, we expect a student to spend six to nine (6 - 9) hours per week in a typical 16-week course. In a compressed schedule, such as a three-week summer course, the required time could translate to be as much as 48 hours per week! That works out to 4.5-10 hours per day, depending on whether a student allocates study time to five or seven days of the week. Students are rarely used to compressed semester schedules and often do not know how to allocate sufficient for their coursework. They need to be alerted to the time commitment required to be successful in these compressed course schedules. Your expectations may include a greater or smaller time commitment, but that commitment should be clear to students before the class begins.

Here is a table to help you communicate time expectations to your students. Find the row with the length of your summer course to see the per-day amount of time students should be prepared to invest. They might be a bit surprised, but perhaps better prepared, when they understand the time commitment required in compressed course schedules.

**Total "Classwork" Time Expectations for a 3 Credit Hour Online Course**
(rounded to the nearest ½ hour)

|  | Hours per Week | Hours per Day (assuming 7-day week) | Hours per day (assuming 5-day week) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 16-week course | 6 – 9 | 1 – 1.5 | 1.5 – 2 |
| 8-week course | 12 – 18 | 1.5 – 2.5 | 2 – 3.5 |
| 6-week course | 16 – 24 | 2.5 – 3.5 | 3 – 5 |
| 4-week course | 24 – 36 | 3.5 – 5 | 5 – 7 |
| 3-week course | 32 – 48 | 4.5 – 7 | 6 – 10 |

9. **Support information**. Students should be focused on your course content rather than struggling with the course management system! Provide them with links to tutorials, handouts, etc. so that they can familiarize themselves with ReggieNet BEFORE the course begins. CTLT hosts a variety of documents and tutorial video clips at https://ctlt.illinoisstate.edu/technology/reggienet/students/.

Students having technical difficulties (computer issues) can contact the Technology Support Center at 438-HELP, or visit their website at https://ithelp.illinoisstate.edu/ for assistance.

Some students may also find it helpful to have information about academic support. The Julia N. Visor Academic Center can provide students with that type of support.

You should be sure to include the contact information for Disability Concerns as well! **Any student needing to arrange a reasonable accommodation for a documented disability should contact Disability Concerns at 350 Fell Hall, 438-5853 (voice), 438-8620 (TTY).**