

Maintaining and Supporting Your Online Learning (Slide 1)

Welcome to "Maintaining and Supporting Your Online Learning", a workshop series offered by the Student Success Centre at the University of Calgary.

Overview of This Workshop Series (Slide 2)

The topics covered in this workshop series are: Keeping up with your readings, taking online-lecture notes, processing lecture slides, studying online with others, doing group work online, and online etiquette.

Course Maintenance: Where the Race Is Won or Lost (Slide 3)

In between the big milestones of major exams and assignments is the less spectacular terrain of course maintenance: keeping up with assigned readings, attending lectures (or, in the online environment, watching lectures), and going over lecture slides. In the online-learning environment, it is especially tempting to save all your strength for the milestones, but ask any long-distance runner, and they'll tell you that the terrain between milestones is where the race is won or lost.

Keeping up with Your Readings (Slide 4)

In this segment of our workshop series, we'll be talking about the first of three course-maintenance activities: keeping up with your readings. By the end of this workshop, you'll appreciate the importance of this activity, especially in the online environment, and you'll have learned a couple of strategies for getting the most out of your readings.

Why Keeping up with Your Readings Is Critical (Slide 5)

Under normal circumstances, students tend to rely more on lectures than on readings for their understanding of course material, but in an online learning environment, instructors tend to rely more heavily on assigned readings. These inverse priorities of students and instructors mean that students have to make a special effort to overcome their tendency to neglect readings in favour of lectures.

Staying Ahead of Your Live Lectures (Slide 6)

But whether you're learning online or on campus, keeping up with your readings is the foundation of knowledge-building. Why? In large part because keeping up with your readings helps you to get the most out of your lectures.

Have you ever gone to the movies to see a complex thriller or murder mystery that you knew nothing about in advance? If you have, then you probably felt a little lost and had to work very hard in the first half-hour or so to get the various characters straight in your head, along with their relationship to the plot. A lecture you haven't prepared for can be a similar experience. Not only will you have a hard time recognizing and understanding the individual concepts coming at you, but without the "big picture" you'll likely find it even more difficult to grasp how those concepts relate to each other.

Adding to your cognitive burden is the fact that you'll be struggling to write down everything you hear. Unfortunately, writing just to get things down tends to interfere with a more discriminating

or selective form of listening. Reading in advance will give you the freedom to write down from the lecture only those ideas or clarifications of ideas that you didn't get from your reading.

When Your Lectures Are Recorded (Slide 7)

A potential drawback of recorded lectures--common in the online-learning environment--is that they can decrease your sense of urgency and cause you to procrastinate; that is, they can cause you to put off both watching those lectures and reading the associated readings. The longer you put off watching the lectures, the more likely you are to skip the readings entirely as you end up rushing to acquaint yourself with all the course material in the short lead-up to a major exam.

For this reason, it's essential to create a schedule for yourself. An obvious starting point for such a schedule is the course syllabus itself. Allocate at least an hour or two every week for that week's assigned reading (not including time for any related practice problems you need to do).

Sticking to a self-created schedule requires self-discipline, especially in the beginning, but if you make it a regular feature of your week and stick with it for a while, it will become a habit, like brushing your teeth.

However, if you can't seem to motivate yourself to keep to your own schedule, try enlisting the help of family and friends. Share your schedule with them, and ask them to keep you accountable. This will create "external" motivation.

Getting the Most out of Your Readings (Slide 8)

Once you've prioritized your readings so that you can get more from your lectures, created a reading schedule, and found a way to stick to it, you're ready to tackle the readings themselves. So how do you get the most out of your readings?

Well, just as you need to read in order to orient yourself in your lectures, you need to orient yourself in your readings. That means, first of all, asking yourself the very fundamental question: "Why have I been assigned this reading?" One obvious way to answer this question is to look at the weekly topic associated with the reading.

A further step is to try and map it onto one or more course objectives listed in the course outline. Based on its title, will the reading bring you closer to achieving one of those objectives?

If it's a textbook reading, what are the objectives of the chapter in which the reading appears?

Once you know the objectives, you can read in a more directed way by reading for answers to the questions implied or directly asked by those objectives.

The Reading's Relationship to the Weekly Topic (Slide 9)

We can illustrate this strategy by using as an example a reading assigned for Anthropology 309, a University of Calgary course on human evolution.

Since the weekly topic listed on the syllabus is the "Fossil Record. How we know about human evolution," the first question we want to ask about the assigned reading is: What does it say (if anything) about the fossil record? More specifically, what does it say about how the fossil record enables us to know about human evolution?

Excerpt from Assigned Reading (Slide 10)

We don't have to read very far to find at least a partial answer to the question of how the fossil record enables us to know about human evolution. In fact the title of the reading, "Dating Rocks and Fossils Using Geologic Methods" (Peppe & Deino, 2013) gives us our first clue. Just a little further down, in one of the article's opening paragraphs, we read that "by comparing fossils of different primate species [including humans], scientists can examine how features changed and how primates evolved through time" (para. 3). Note, however, the importance attached to dating these fossils, which is the prerequisite for comparing them: "However, the age of each fossil primate needs to be determined so that fossils of the same age found in different parts of the world and fossils of different ages can be compared" (para. 3). As the article's title confirms, this reading will not be focused on methods for comparing fossil features but on methods for dating them. Only these methods will be discussed in detail in the reading.

The Reading's Relationship to Course Objectives (Slide 11)

The second step of our strategy is to ask whether the reading will advance any of the course objectives listed in the course outline.

Sample Course Objectives (Slide 12)

We can select a relevant course objective by noticing the connection between the wording of the weekly topic and the wording of that objective. This isn't to say that the assigned reading can offer nothing related to other course objectives, but that the reading was likely chosen to advance the course objective that I've highlighted here.

Formulating Questions to Guide Your Reading (Slide 13)

From this course objective, we can formulate the following broad questions that can be used to guide our reading: "What are the limitations of the fossil records?"; "What questions are asked and addressed in the fossil record?"; and "How do we know what happened in the past?" (Or, in the more precise terms of the weekly topic, "How do we know about human evolution?") Since the weekly topic already suggested to us this third question as a guide, I won't re-apply it here.

Guiding Question #1 (Slide 14)

Let's take the first question first: "What are the limitations of the fossil records?" We soon come across in the reading the following passage: "by itself a fossil has little meaning unless it is placed within some context. The age of the fossil must be determined so it can be compared to other fossil species from the same time period. Understanding the ages of related fossil species helps scientists piece together the evolutionary history of a group of organisms" (Peppe, Deino, 2013, para. 2). While it's difficult to say what specific kinds of limitations in the fossil record the instructor has in mind (for example, the lack of fossil material from a certain period), the fact that an undated fossil offers no insight into the evolution of the species certainly represents a potential limitation in the fossil record from an evolutionary point of view.

Guiding Question #2 (Slide 15)

Next, we can attempt to find in the reading an answer to the question: "What questions are asked and addressed in the fossil record?"

We are certainly free to note that, according to the first sentence of this paragraph, "[a] fossil can be studied to determine what kind of organism it represents, how the organism lived, and how it was preserved" (Peppe, Deino, 2013, para. 2). These are certainly questions asked and addressed in the fossil record. However, they are not the main questions addressed in the reading. In accordance with the limitation of the fossil record discussed in the previous slide (namely, that an undated fossil can't tell us anything about the evolution of the species), we may observe that the main question asked of the fossil record in this reading, at least, is "How old is the fossil?" It is the answer to this question that makes possible an answer to the broader question "How do related fossil species from the same time period compare?" and the further, even broader, question: "What is the evolutionary history of a group of organisms?"

What Your Reading Notes May Look Like (Slide 16)

After reading through the first couple of pages of the reading, your reading notes may look something like this. Important elements are the date and the lecture heading--here, I've used the topic from the course outline. The relevant course objectives provide the general framework under which we can organize any details from the reading that we choose to record.

What Your Reading Notes May Look Like (Slide 17)

Notice that further detail from the reading--three geologic methods of dating fossils--has been inserted within our general framework of course objectives. This helps to ensure that the reading's place in the "big picture" represented by the course objectives is clear. Of course, the detail included here does not go very deep, and more could be added; however, to keep the big picture clear, I would have to "pull out" this section at some point and expand it on a separate page.

ADS Appointment Info & Thank You (Slide 18)

I hope you've enjoyed this workshop, and that you'll use some or all of these strategies to keep up with your readings. Feel free to watch other segments in this series. If you'd like to book a one-on-one appointment with an Academic Development Specialist to discuss strategies from this workshop or others, go to: www.ucalgary.ca/student-services/student-success.

Thanks for attending!