

# OWL Best Practices, Tips & Tricks

1. Encourage students to watch our new video called **How to Purchase, Register and Log In to OWL** (4:20) at [www.cengage.com/owl/videos/gettingstarted/](http://www.cengage.com/owl/videos/gettingstarted/). Direct students to the **For Students | Getting Started** page on the OWL Portal at [www.cengage.com/owl](http://www.cengage.com/owl) for more resources.
  - **Result:** Fewer technical questions at the start of the semester for you
2. **Make Introductory Assignments required at the start of each semester.** These assignments teach students the basics of using OWL and help students set up their browsers correctly.
  - **Result:** Fewer technical questions at the start of the semester for you and fewer complaints as the semester continues.
  - **Bonus:** Having an assignment due during the first week of classes will motivate students to register so any access issues can be solved before a student misses too much homework.
3. **Set the attempts limit for all assignments to 5 or more tries.\*** As with all online homework systems, OWL does occasionally experience technical difficulties. Students also can find the answer formatting to be less forgiving than paper grading.
  - **Result:** Fewer questions about wrong answers in OWL and grading disputes. Fewer complaints about technical problems. If the browser closes or the power goes out, the students simply try again.
  - **Bonus:** OWL's parameterized questions mean that the values in the questions change each time the student attempts the same question. Students will continue working until they get full credit on assignments and learn the material in the process.

\*The exception is multiple choice end-of-chapter sets, where limited attempts are appropriate.
4. **Make OWL homework worth 10%-20% of the overall grade for the course.**
  - Most instructors find that making OWL homework worth more than 20% of the final course grade emphasizes homework too much and puts a lot of pressure on students to complete all OWL work perfectly instead of using it as a practice learning tool. Making OWL less than 10% of the final grade encourages some students to not do their homework because its value for the course is so low.

5. **Make OWL homework due at the same time and day each week, either once or twice a week.** For example, set homework to be due every Monday and Friday at 9:00 AM.
  - **Result:** Less confusion for the students and fewer requests to you for due date extensions.
  - **Bonus:** If a student knows OWL is always due at the same time, they can schedule their time more easily.

**HINT:** Always choose a due time of 11:59 PM/AM instead of 12:00 so students are not confused about the difference between midnight and noon.
  
6. **Set a tone with students so they know OWL is there for their success.** At the start of the semester, spend a few minutes in class explaining why OWL is important. Students will follow your attitude example so set a positive tone!
  - OWL helps students practice material in a guided environment that is not possible with paper homework, because OWL's parameterized questions mean that the values in the questions change each time the student attempts the same question.
  - OWL provides instant feedback, which may not be possible with paper homework.
  - Explain that you chose OWL because you believe it will enhance their learning experience.
  - Mention that you realize online systems can occasionally be frustrating for them, but overall is a modern and effective way to do homework that will benefit them in this course, as well as in their future careers.
  - **Result:** Students are more likely to focus on the learning aspects of OWL rather than the occasional frustration that online systems present.
  
7. **Drop the lowest OWL homework grades.**
  - Reduces excuses and complaints about technical problems.
  
8. **Use a screen capture program to make exam questions from OWL questions.**
  - If you like certain OWL questions and want to use them on paper exams, use a screen capture program to copy the question/s and include them on your exam document.
  - Tell students that they will see a certain number of questions on the exam from OWL to emphasize the importance of homework.

9. **Use OWL to teach the “easier” topics such as those below.** This strategy frees more lecture time for weightier topics that require lecture explanations.

- Nomenclature
- Significant figures and math review
- Basic gas laws
- Basic chemical equation balancing (stoichiometry)

**Bonus:** Your office hour time will be more efficient because OWL can tutor most students through the basics, freeing more of your time to help students with other issues.

10. **Use OWL to assess your class’s level before the first lecture.**

- Make a “pre-test” for your students in your existing course. Use course reports to evaluate the pre-test and see how well your students performed to get a benchmark skill level for your incoming class. Alternately, ask your sales rep about OWL’s Quick Prep short courses for General or Organic Chemistry that help students review essential skills they’ll need for a successful semester.

11. **Keep course statistics of OWL grades vs. course grade from semester to semester and show the graph at the start of classes.**

- Emphasizes the importance of homework.
- Explain the points on your graph that are outliers for students who do well in OWL but fail the course. Learning is reduced if a student relies too heavily on feedback and other online resources instead of thinking through problems.

**HINT:** Periodically require supplementary paper hand-in homework to help students who may be using the online homework as a crutch to get correct answers.

12. **Use the announcements feature to respond to issues quickly.** As soon as you notice lots of student emails coming in about a particular assignment or other issue, use this feature to address it quickly for the entire class. Students will receive the announcement by email and they will also see the announcement next time they log in to OWL. Click **edit** in the Announcements box on the Course Home page to post or change an announcement.

- **Result:** You can reach all your students quickly at one time saving you from having to address each question individually.
- **Bonus:** Use the announcements feature to remind students about upcoming exams, quizzes and other important dates. You can also use announcements to get information to students about labs.

13. **Help your students start your course with the essential skills they need.**
  - Assign the review assignments in the **Math** folder. When students come from a variety of backgrounds, the Math review assignments are a great way to give students a refresher on the essential math skills they will need to succeed in your chemistry course.
  - Another great option is OWL's **Quick Prep** course for General or Organic Chemistry. These online short courses have proven to be effective at helping students review key chemistry concepts before the start of the semester. In a few hours students can review and practice essential skills they need for your course. Talk to your sales rep for more information.
14. **Pre-assign Visuals, Tutors, and Simulations before lecture for extra credit. Assign the Mastery assignments after lecture for required credit.**
  - **Result:** Students come to class prepared with questions and lectures are more meaningful and contextual for students.
15. **Use the first lab class of your course to get students started in OWL.**
  - Have students register, log in, and run through the introductory assignments with instructor or Teaching Assistant help available.
16. **Use the End-of-Chapter Assignments as a summary quiz for students after they have completed the MAS type assignments.**
  - Turn off the hints and feedback so students can self-assess their grasp of the material.
  - Try giving students the later end-of-chapter questions in each chapter for an extra challenge. Usually the hardest questions appear at the end.
17. **Encourage group work in OWL.**
  - Students can easily work together on their OWL assignments. Because OWL questions are parameterized—where the numbers, chemistry and sometimes the wording changes each time a student attempts the same question—cheating is not a concern during group work. In group work, students learn the material as they teach it to each other. Plus, group work fosters teamwork and can make homework more fun for students.
18. **Run weekly or biweekly student risk reports to encourage students.**
  - Use the Student Risk Report to identify students who have completed less than 50% of assigned homework and use the tool that accompanies that report to email them with a reminder to keep up with their homework. This lets students know you are monitoring their progress and it can motivate them to complete their homework or get help. You can also catch students who are at risk of failing early in the semester and take steps to help them.

Revised 8/4/2011