Communicating Online Exam Information to Students

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The purpose of this resource is to suggest practices for course instructors to reduce student anxiety around exams through communication and pre-exam troubleshooting, and to re-familiarize students with academic integrity. The exam information and pre-exam troubleshooting also relieves stress on the course instructor by identifying and addressing any logistical or technical issues long before the exam begins.

In summary, we present a 2-stage exam process. In Stage 1, students receive information about the exam, practice and troubleshoot technical issues, and reaffirm their commitment to academic integrity. **Stage 1 happens several days before the exam** when students' exam anxiety is lower and they have time to read and respond without sacrificing time to complete the exam. In Stage 2, they complete the exam with their attention and focus on the course's concepts and skills.

> Shaded boxes contain sample text you can copy and paste into your own documents. Edit **[text in brackets]** to fit your exam.

Stage 1: Pre-exam Information or Quiz

At least one day before, and preferably a week prior to the exam, students receive detailed information about the format of the exam. This could come as an Announcement or a document posted in Brightspace. Some instructors then have their students complete a pre-exam quiz which has the advantage of putting a release condition on the exam: students must complete the pre-exam quiz in order to access the exam when it becomes available. This ensures all students get the information, and also does not take away from time allotted to exam completion.

Sample Pre-Exam Quiz

Set up this quiz using the same elements you will have in your exam. For example:

- In the Description, include all relevant exam information (customized from Appendix 1: Exam Information Template)
- If you are using "no-backsies" (students cannot go back to previous questions), you should make this pre-exam quiz also "no-backsies" to familiarize students with the format
- If you are using conditional release so that students must complete the pre-exam quiz in order to access the exam, include that in your description as well
- Include questions requiring students to download/upload files (see examples below) so students can identify and troubleshoot technical issues (Note: Here are lists of supported and unsupported file types.)
- You may want to remind students of Academic Integrity expectations. See Appendix 2: Example Academic Integrity Statements and adapt one for use in your course

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Conditional Release Statement

You must submit this quiz before you can access the exam on **[exam date and time]**.

Download Practice Question

I am able to download and view the PDF.

- ❑ True
- ❑ False

Uploading Images/Scans Practice Question

Please write your signature and student number on a sheet of paper. Take a photo or scan it. Submit the image in **[list of acceptable formats – jpeg, png, PDF etc]** format. Note that the maximum file size is 100MB.

Uploading Documents Practice Question

Open a new **[Word, PowerPoint, Excel]** file. Type your name and student number. Submit the document. Note that the maximum file size is 100MB.

Stage 2: Exam

Create the exam as a Brightspace Quiz or Assignment. If you created a pre-exam quiz in Stage 1 above, you can create a release condition for the exam if you want students to complete the pre-exam quiz in order to see the exam when it becomes available. If you need instructions on how to do this, check out this video tutorial or contact ATS.

Exam Parameters

Description: The information included here is akin to the cover page that might typically be found on an in-person exam and contains all the information students need to know about the exam. You can customize from Appendix 1: Exam Information Template. This information may be repeated from Stage 1 if you used a quiz or announcement to inform students before the actual exam. It can be entered in the "Description" section when creating your Brightspace Quiz or Assignment. If you set the Quiz as 'active', but not yet 'open', students will be able to read the content in the Description section before it's time to write the exam. Including detailed information here helps students strategize and prepare to write the exam, and it can also help reduce exam anxiety. As you can see in Appendix 1, this description should include information about the exam duration, length, format (e.g., use of "no backsies", open/closed book, etc.), and any exam conduct expectations you have of students.

Restrictions: Set release conditions, availability and timing.

Adjustments for Accommodations: You can adjust exam length for accommodations through the Classlist tool in Brightspace.

Appendix 1: Exam Information Template

Below is a template you can use to guide what information to include in your exam description for students. Any part of the content of this template can be adjusted or changed to suit your course and exam. Edit text in **[square brackets]** to fit your exam.

Please read this information carefully!

Exam Duration:
You have **[number of hours/minutes]** to complete this exam once you begin. The exam is available between **[time and date]** and **[time and date]** Atlantic time. You will have **[number]** attempts to complete this exam.

Exam Length and Format:
There are **[number]** total questions on this exam:
- **[number]** multiple choice questions, each worth **[number]** points
- **[number]** short answer questions, each worth **[number]** points OR **[x out of y]** short answer questions, each worth **[number]** points
- **[number]** essay questions, each worth **[number]** points OR **[x out of y]** essay questions, each worth **[number]** points

Questions will be presented **[all at once/one at a time/x per page]**. You **[will/will not ("no backsies")]** be able to navigate back and forth between questions freely. Keep track of how much time you spend on each question to ensure you have enough time to complete the exam.

Exam Value:
This exam is worth **[X%]** of your final grade in this course.

Exam Conduct Expectations:
This exam is **[open book/closed book]**.
You are allowed to use the following while completing the exam:
- **[Course textbook**
- **Anything on the course Brightspace page**
- **A calculator**
- **Microsoft Word**
- **etc.]**
You may NOT:
- **[Consult with other students**
- **Search for answers on the internet (Google, Chegg, etc.)**
- **Take screenshots or otherwise make copies of any exam contents**
- **etc.]**

All exam materials to be graded must be submitted by **[the time the exam closes]**. No materials will be accepted after this point, except with permission of the instructor.

Questions During the Exam:
If you have questions during the exam, you can contact me by **[method of contact – see** Appendix 3: Communicating with Students During the Exam **for some examples]**. If you experience technical difficulties, contact **[see** Appendix 4: Resolving Technical Difficulties **for some examples]**.

Academic Integrity Statement: [see Appendix 2: Example Academic Integrity Statements **for some options]**

Appendix 2: Example Academic Integrity Statements

An academic integrity statement re-familiarizes students with Dalhousie's commitment to academic integrity and can be effective in dissuading students from engaging in dishonest practices.

There are two ways to use these statements (examples below show both versions):

1. As quiz questions in the pre-exam quiz, where students agree/affirm by providing an answer
2. As a statement in the exam cover sheet/description that is accessible **before** time starts for the exam

We recommend against having students answer an affirming question at the start of the exam itself because they will be worried about finishing the exam on time and may not read the statement carefully.

The University Academic Honour Statement was developed by the Academic Quality Team (AQT).

University Academic Honour Statement:

Academic integrity is a commitment to the values of learning in an academic environment. These values include honesty, trust, fairness, responsibility, and respect. All members of the Dalhousie community must acknowledge that academic integrity is fundamental to the value and credibility of academic work and inquiry. We must seek to uphold academic integrity through our actions and behaviours in all our learning environments, our research, and our service.

Please indicate that you have read and understand the above.

❑   Yes, I have read and understand

In this example from Mathematics, students select each statement to indicate their agreement. Notice how the statements refer to practices and tools specific to the course. You can adapt it to the practices and tools relevant to your course.

Academic Integrity Question

All members of the Dalhousie University community, which includes students, faculty, and staff, shall treat others with respect and fairness, be responsible and honest, and uphold the highest standards of academic integrity. By agreeing to the below, I absolutely state that all work submitted will be entirely my own and will not violate Dalhousie University's Academic Integrity policy.

- ❑ I understand that this test is open book and I can use my class notes, textbook, and supplementary textbook-like materials (such as Khan Academy) for reference.
- ❑ I understand that I may not consult with another person for help with the test, whether in person, online, or any other means (including posting questions online).
- ❑ I understand that I am allowed the use of an approved scientific calculator but not one that has graphing or other linear algebra capabilities.
- ❑ I understand that I am not allowed to use any resources (websites, computational engines, etc.) that can perform linear algebra operations or have graphing capabilities.
- ❑ I understand that I am not to discuss the test with other students in the course until the 24-hour test period is over.
- ❑ I understand that the work submitted on this test is to be my own.

This example lists what students are allowed to do (and what they're not allowed to do) and students affirm they understand.

Academic Integrity Question

Academic integrity is a commitment to the values of learning in an academic environment. These values include honesty, trust, fairness, responsibility, and respect. All members of the Dalhousie community must acknowledge that academic integrity is fundamental to the value and credibility of academic work and inquiry. We must seek to uphold academic integrity through our actions and behaviours in all our learning environments, our research, and our service.

This is an open book / open course material test. This means
- you may access Brightspace and all the course materials including material you produced as part of this course
- you may not access other content or other websites

No communication with other students while taking the quiz.

Please indicate that you have read and understand the above.

- ❑ Yes, I have read and understand

Appendix 3: Communicating with Students During the Exam

Students always ask questions during in-person exams: they don't understand what a question is asking; they find a typo; they want to confirm their calculator is permitted. Even if they don't ask a question, knowing someone is available reduces their anxiety. Being available during online exams can be difficult depending on the format and timing of the exam.

Here are some strategies according to exam format.

Exam is synchronous (at the same time for everyone – e.g., "Wednesday, April 21 at 9:00 am – 12:00 pm Atlantic")

Start a Collaborate Ultra session or Teams meeting (whichever you and your students are familiar with) 20 – 30 minutes before the beginning of the exam. Students received a link in the pre-exam quiz and the link is included in the exam instructions. Students are invited to join the session/meeting if they have a question. During the exam, you wait patiently in the session/meeting for a student to join. If you have a TA, you could consider having them join you in case you get several questions at once. You might consider sharing a welcome slide with any instructions ("Please wait with your camera and microphone off until I'm available to answer your question.") Keep in mind students will appreciate quick answers if the exam has a "no-backsies" policy.

Exam is fixed-range (e.g., available for 24 hours and students have 3 hours to complete the exam once they start)

This is a more difficult scenario – it's not feasible for you to be available for 24 hours. Let students know when you're available ("9:00 am – 12:00 pm Atlantic, 2:00 pm – 5:00 pm Atlantic, and 7:00 pm – 10:00 pm Atlantic") and encourage them to write the exam during one of those periods. Consider starting a Collaborate Ultra session or Teams meeting (see "Exam at one fixed time" above). If you have a TA, you could consider asking them to host one or two of these sessions to distribute the time commitment and/or provide more times.

Take-home exam where students have 24 hours to complete and submit the exam

Monitor your email and Teams chat. Let students know when you're available to respond ("9:00 am – 2:00 pm Atlantic and 7:00 pm – 9:00 pm Atlantic"). Consider starting a Collaborate Ultra session or Teams meeting (see "Exam at one fixed time" above). If you have a TA, you could consider asking them to host one or two of these sessions to distribute the time commitment and/or provide more times.

Appendix 4: Resolving Technical Difficulties

A common barrier to completing online exams is technical difficulties. It is important to include some guidance for students about how to resolve any technical difficulties they experience so that they take the correct steps. Making this information available to students will reduce instructor workload since fewer students will reach out to the instructor for tech support when they run into trouble.

The standard procedure is for students to contact the Help Desk. You can include the following in your exam description:

> If you experience technical difficulties, contact the Help Desk at https://libraries.dal.ca/help/it-help-desk.html

Depending on the technology students are required to use for your course, or Faculty-specific rules, you may need to include some additional information for students. For example, students may be required to take a screenshot of their technical difficulty and email the picture to you from another device at the time of the difficulty, or they may be required to contact someone other than the Help Desk. Check with your Department Chair or Associate Dean Academic if you are unsure if there are any special procedures you should include.

Appendix 5: Considerations for Online Proctoring

Online proctoring software verifies student's identity and monitors them while they write an online exam. Often, this monitoring includes recording them through their webcam and/or recording the activity on their computer screens.

It may seem that online proctoring software is a dependable way to ensure academic integrity but there are important considerations that should be taken into account before deciding to use this kind of technology. This type of monitoring:

- Causes a great deal of stress for students.
- Can be seen as an invasion of privacy – Online proctoring monitors students in their own workspace. There are valid concerns about disadvantaging students who live with others, have children, or do not have a private, quiet place to complete their exam. These students will unfairly receive flags of academic dishonesty.
- Some online proctoring software uses artificial intelligence to monitor and evaluate student behaviour. That software has been shown to be biased in its accuracy across gender and race.
- The session is recorded. Students have concerns about how long the data is stored, where it is stored, and who can access the recordings.
- Adds another source for technical difficulties for students, including the need for fast, reliable Wi-Fi.
- Is not foolproof – there are still many ways for students to be dishonest that cannot be captured by the software.

If you are required to use online proctoring software (i.e., mandated in an accredited program), it is critical that you inform students about the software:

- Provide information about what data will be recorded and stored
- Ensure all students have a clear understanding of the software's privacy policy
- Conduct a practice quiz before the actual exam to familiarize students with using the software, and address some of the stress, anxiety, and technical requirements known to accompany the use of this kind of software

See below for an example of a statement that could be added to your exam description if you are using online proctoring software:

Online Proctoring

During this exam you will be monitored by **[software name]**, an online proctoring software. **[Software name]** will:
- **[Record you through your webcam and microphone for the entirety of the exam**
- **Record your screen activity**
- **Etc.]**

[Software name] will flag certain behaviours as suspicious, including:
- **[Leaving the room**
- **Looking away from the computer screen**
- **Navigating to a website**
- **Opening up a computer program other than [list of acceptable programs]**
- **Etc.]**

Your data will be saved for **[amount of time]**. You can find more details about the **[software name]** privacy policy here: **[link to privacy policy]**

Feedback and Suggestions

If you have additional suggestions and strategies for improving the exam experience for students and for course instructors, please contact Kate Thompson <thompskm@dal.ca> or Peter Newbury <Peter.Newbury@dal.ca> in the Centre for Learning and Teaching.

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