



## Maximizing the Usefulness of the Beginning-of-Semester Student Questionnaire

A routine part of beginning a course in the new semester is asking students to fill out a student questionnaire. This is often simply a formality to obtain students' contact information and the answers to a few general questions. Student questionnaires can be more effectively designed than this, however. Carefully thought-out questions provide a wealth of information that the instructor can use to build rapport with students and shape the teaching and content of the course.

### Creating a Thoughtful Student Questionnaire

#### 1. Reflect on what you want to know that would help you teach better

Consider what you want to know about your students that would improve how you teach your course. This first step is critical for designing a student questionnaire that can be genuinely helpful in structuring your course interactions and teaching. Sensitive topics obviously need to be avoided, but a wide range of questions can nonetheless be asked. I provide examples of the types of questions I ask in section 3 below.

#### 2. Familiarize yourself with Moodle Surveys

I suggest using a Moodle Survey to create student questionnaires rather than giving students a handout to fill in. The survey conveniently stores the collected information in a digital form that is easy to reference, and the analysis section provides a summary of the data collected to help you detect patterns.

Using a Moodle Survey also makes the student questionnaire more manageable for you to read and analyze in larger classes. I assign a student questionnaire in all of my courses, including Gen Eds that have over 70 students.

If you are not familiar with Moodle surveys, an e-LIS instructional designer (ID) would be happy to help. For one-on-one assistance, [schedule an appointment](#).

**Pro tip!** When you create your Moodle survey, under “Questions and Submission Settings,” select “User’s name will be logged and shown with answers”; otherwise,

participation will be anonymous. Also select “No” for “Show analysis page” to ensure that survey results are visible only to you rather than to survey participants as well.

### 3. Create your questions

The following are examples of the types of questions I ask in student questionnaires in my in-person and online courses. These questions are useful in both lower and upper division courses and in Gen Eds and courses for majors.

- **Naming preferences:** The student questionnaire is a good place to track students’ naming preferences. If a student has a nickname or a preferred name or wants to specify their pronouns, they can do so in the questionnaire.
- **Hometown:** As a linguist, I want to know what dialect area students come from. When discussing dialect differences in class, I find it helpful to know where in Michigan students are from or what other state or country they are from. In my in-person courses, I also meet with students individually for a [Chat with Your Professor](#). Prior to the meeting, I look up the student’s hometown online and read a few facts about it as background information for our Chat.
- **Relevant prior courses:** Asking about prior related courses is especially useful when I teach courses for majors. Answers to this question help me determine students’ level of familiarity with the field. I can modify course lectures based on this information and anticipate which students may need additional assistance during the course.
- **How the student selected the course:** I like to ask how students chose my course. Patterns in student responses to this question are critical for finding effective strategies to [promote your courses](#).
- **Course modality in future semesters:** Sometimes I consider teaching an in-person course online or vice versa in upcoming semesters. Surveying students about this option helps me determine whether I should consider teaching the course in another modality in a future semester. (Note that current courses must be taught in the modality specified at registration.)
- **Major and future direction:** I ask students for their major, whether they plan to pursue a career in that area, and what they plan to do. This information helps me link course contents to areas that are relevant for students’ future careers.
- **Where the student is based (asked in fully online courses):** Some students take my fully online courses while residing in another state or country. I want to be aware of such cases, and I send course reminders if necessary to ensure the student stays engaged and meets course deadlines.
- **Whether the student is familiar with Moodle:** I ask this question in both in-person and online courses. Since I use Moodle actively in all my courses, students need to be familiar with it to do well. I direct students who are new to Moodle to the e-LIS [Student Help Library](#).
- **Whether the student is required to earn a certain minimum final grade:** I emphasize to students that if they are required to earn a certain minimum final

grade, it is their responsibility to earn it. They need to monitor their current grade in the Moodle grade book and achieve the final grade they want through consistent effort on the coursework. Stating this requirement clearly in the student questionnaire, on the syllabus, and elsewhere allows me to avoid negotiations regarding final grades at the end of the semester.

- **Something unique about oneself:** I ask students to write a paragraph that describes something unique about themselves, such as their interests, talents, and experiences. Answers to this question vary widely and are always interesting to read! Some students describe a serious difficulty or illness they had in the past or are currently experiencing. Being informed about the issue lets me interact with the student appropriately.
- **Wildcard question:** Quite a few students take more than one of my courses, and I like to pose a different fun question in each course as a follow-up to the earlier “something unique about yourself” question. I have posed questions such as “describe a secret skill you have,” “describe something you really want to learn and why,” “describe an example of something you love and provide a link to illustrate it,” and so on. Students are asked to elaborate in at least one paragraph, and I also provide my own answer to the question at the end of the student questionnaire. Student responses are particularly relevant during each student’s Chat, and they also influence the types of examples I give in class to illustrate course concepts.
- **Reminder to post a photo or image in the student’s Moodle profile:** As a further effort to learn more about each student, I ask students to post a photo or some other image in their Moodle profile. Those who post a photo of themselves often include their pet or an important person in their life that they discuss during our Chat. This gives me more insights about the student’s interests and helps me link course themes to issues students care about.

## Conclusion

Creating a carefully planned beginning-of-the semester student questionnaire can benefit your teaching. It’s a great chance to ask questions that will help you get to know your students and that can inform your lectures and other course activities to improve student engagement and success. Administering your student questionnaire as a Moodle Survey will allow you to collect information easily and aggregate it where relevant to help improve your course planning and delivery.

## Related Teaching Tips

- [Knowing “Who’s In Class” Supports Inclusive Teaching](#) discusses an optional, anonymous survey with various Yes/No questions and some open response questions. My Moodle questionnaire is shorter, not anonymous, and allows students to share more information about their unique selves.

## CETL Weekly Teaching Tips Series

- [Beginning-of-Semester Moodle Productivity Tips](#) describes additional steps faculty can take to start their courses effectively each semester.
- [Clarity and Transparency with the Moodle Grade Book](#) talks about how I structure my Moodle grade book and also discusses my expectation that students monitor the grade book regularly to know their current grade.

### *About the Author*

*Helena Riha, Ph.D. teaches Linguistics and International Studies. She has taught over 3,500 students in 17 different courses. Helena won the OU Online Teaching Excellence Award and the Excellence in Teaching Award. This is her sixteenth teaching tip. Outside of class, Helena enjoys supporting her middle schooler in [Scouts BSA](#) activities.*

*Helena Riha is the current guest editor for the Grizz Tips for Teaching Effectiveness series on the CETL Teaching Blog at Oakland University. [Contribute to the Teaching Blog as a guest editor \(OU community only\)](#).*

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