

## Sample Introduction Letter for an Online Course

This sample letter is provided courtesy of Instructor Rita Treutel, UAB Department of English.

### Dear Students:

Welcome to EH102. This course is a distance learning equivalent to the EH102 sections offered in traditional classrooms. This means that we will never meet face-to-face. Our course will be conducted via the Internet and our communications will be limited to e-mail, bulletin board postings, and chatrooms. We will use a program called Blackboard Vista to run the course. Everything we need — our calendar, bulletin board, chatrooms, e-mail, assignments, grades, etc., will be housed within this one system. Therefore, no outside e-mail address is necessary. One is provided for you in the course itself. All you need is to be able to access the Internet. Blackboard Vista is very easy to operate. If you are not a computer genius, you can still take this course without a problem. Some computer savvy is helpful. You should be familiar with sending e-mail and such, but extensive knowledge is absolutely not necessary. And Blackboard Vista has some very helpful tutorials you can use.

For those of you who have had an online course before, much of this letter will be redundant. However, please read it carefully anyway as many things have changed with the new version of Blackboard Vista we will be using this term and because much of the information is specific to EH102.

Due to the nature of this course, all contact with me needs to be limited to electronic means. I do this to ensure equal access to me from all my students. A student who lives on campus would have little problem stopping by my office. A student in Alaska wouldn't find it so easy. Therefore, I ask that all my distance-learning students restrict contact to electronic means. If absolutely necessary, we can make arrangements for a telephone conversation, but we will exhaust our other options first. Please remember also that contact should take place within the Blackboard Vista course shell unless something is wrong with the Blackboard Vista site. After our course starts, you should not contact me through my e-mail address. If you cannot access through the course, you may use my e-mail address. Otherwise, e-mail me through the e-mail application housed within our course. (This will make more sense once you have accessed the course.)

All this said, there are a few things that need to be clear right from the start:

- This is not an "easy" way out. In a traditionally structured course, you would be in class three hours a week. For every hour you spent in class, you would expect 2-3 hours outside of class to work for the class. (This is a widely accepted estimate.) Therefore, you would spend a minimum of at least 6-9 hours a week preparing for and attending a traditional English Composition course. My students often find that they must devote more time than this to their composition classes. You can expect that you will spend at least this much time on this course and

probably a good bit more. Your assignments include reading the course materials, taking quizzes on the readings, writing and revising your papers, participating in peer reviews, sending e-mail, posting to the bulletin board, and completing mini-projects. Don't think that because you "don't have to come to class" that this format will be easier than a regular composition course. (This doesn't mean it is harder. It just means it is not easier.)

- You should also keep in mind that EH102 is a very difficult course. It has the highest failure rate of any course in the English Department. This is most likely because students are being asked to do something in EH102 that they have seldom had to do before — argue in a very structured manner. You will have to make a statement of opinion and support it with a structured, developed, and researched argument. Therefore, if you know that English is not your forte and you anticipate problems in the class just because it is an English course, you may want to consider if taking on the new format is going to be too much for you to handle. If you think so, be sure to get out of the course before the last day to drop the course so that you will not be billed for the course. And you must initiate the withdrawal. I will not drop anyone from the course.
- This course is not self-paced. You have deadlines that you must meet. And they are firm. I will not accept assignments that come in after the deadlines — not even one minute after the deadline. You will have all of your deadlines from the very beginning of the term, and I expect you to pay attention to them and meet them. Much of your classmates' work will depend on you completing your own assignments on time. I take deadlines very seriously and I expect you to do the same.
- You will be required to participate in synchronous on-line meetings throughout the term. You will be required to meet on-line with me, your peer review groups (prgs), and the class as a whole. We will schedule these meetings based on your schedules. Missing one of these scheduled on-line meetings will count as an absence in the class. You may not make up work that you miss. You will also have asynchronous postings to e-mail and the bulletin board that you have to make each week. If you miss one of these postings, you cannot make it up by doing two the next week.
- One of the wonderful things about distance learning is that the responsibility for learning shifts to the student. I will not lecture and tell you what "I think you should know" from the textbook. You will be responsible for reading the texts, doing the on-line exercises, and using the information you gather to fulfill the assignments. I will be here to answer questions and to provide clarification or examples when they are needed, but I will be much more of a facilitator than a "traditional" instructor. This is very different from the learning environment with which most of you are familiar. It will take a while for you to get comfortable with it. I will not be reminding you three times a week what you need to be completing for the course. You will have to keep up with things on your own. Be prepared for that — especially if you are a procrastinator. Persons prone to procrastination do not always perform well in classes of this format. If you fit this category, you need to be especially conscientious about keeping up with the material in the class, watching your deadlines and making sure that you do not get behind. You may even want to consider if

this is the best format for you. If you get behind in a class of this format, it is difficult to catch up. Also, students taking on-line courses sometimes experience a decline in motivation towards the middle and end of the term. These lapses can be devastating to your grade so prepare yourself now to keep that motivation going throughout the term.

- We will be using two textbooks for the class. If you have problems getting these books, please let me know immediately.

The Aims of Argument, 4th Edition. Timothy W. Crusius and Carolyn E. Channell. Mayfield, 2000.

The Writer's Harbrace Handbook, Brief Edition. John Hodges, Robert Miller, Suzanne Strobeck Webb, and Winifred Bryan Horner. Harcourt Brace, 2001.

(Please note: In the following instructions, the parenthesis are used to set off the words you will be typing or looking for. These symbols will not be part of the phrases.)

- The URL/web address for the course is: **(ADD IN WEB ADDRESS HERE)** Type this in the address line while you are on-line and it will take you to the Blackboard Vista homepage. Here, click on (Log on to MyWebCT). After this, a log on screen will appear and ask for your WebCT ID and password. Your log on ID will be the same as your Blazer ID (same as UAB DPO alias - you can use the phonebook at [www.dpo.uab.edu](http://www.dpo.uab.edu) to check for a BlazerID). IF YOU DO NOT HAVE A BLAZER ID, FOLLOW THE LINKS ON THE PAGE TO GET ONE ASAP. The log on is case-sensitive (which means that the case of the letters you put in has to match the case of the letters the registrar's office puts in) so you have to make sure that you use lowercase letters. Your password was assigned when you applied for your BlazerID. I do not have access to these so if you have misplaced or forgotten it, you will have to follow the links on the page to support services and get a password reassigned. Fill in the spots asking for this info and click on (Log on). This will take you to your MyWebCT entrance page. On this page, all of the online course for which you are registered will be listed. To get to the homepage for your English class, simply click on the course entitled (English Composition — EH102 — Spring 2003). Once you get into our actual course, there are different icons you will click on to get to your assignments, to your e-mail, to the bulletin board, etc. There will be an icon named "Read Me First" on the page. Read it first.
- I will not get a roster for the course until closer to the time for classes to start; therefore, you will not be able to access the course until January 6, 2002. After this date, you may log on to the course and get started with things. Students who have not logged on before midnight January 12, 2002, and who have not contacted me will be blocked from the course. You will no longer be able to access the course. You will not be administratively dropped from the

course, however. It is your responsibility to contact the Registrar's office to officially drop the course. If you do not do this, you will be responsible for any and all fees associated with having registered for the course.

I hope this clarifies things for you. Of course, there will be many questions once you actually access the course and see how things are going to be run. If you are anxious about things and would like to get some ideas about how all this will work, you can go the WebCT homepage at [www.webct.com](http://www.webct.com) and work through one of the tutorials there. This will give you an idea of how easy navigating the course will be.

I have offered English online for three years now, and the student response has been very positive. We have had several technical glitches that we had to work through, and I anticipate that we will have some this term that we will have to work through. However, my students and I were able to overcome the glitches and produce some nice essays in spite of them. We all need to be ready for these problems. One way to do this is to never assume that you will be able to log on at the last minute to get something turned in. Anticipate the problems. If you know eight hours before a deadline that there is a problem with the server, you have time to e-mail me and alert me to this and to cover yourself. However, if you wait until three minutes before the deadline to log on and there is a problem, you are out of luck. (Remember that I don't accept late assignments without prior arrangements.) Be prepared for these problems. We can't avoid them because we don't have control over the server or the phone lines or our hard drives, but if we anticipate them, we can work around them.

Please keep all this in mind as we embark on this cyber adventure together. I am looking forward to the course and appreciate your interest in it. Don't hesitate to e-mail me if you have problems getting into the course. I look forward to working with you. Have a safe and restful holiday.

Sincerely,

**Rita B. Treutel**

**Instructor**

**UAB Department of English**