

# Navigating the Course Web Pages

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# 1 Overview

This course website is quite large. By the end of the semester, there will be thousands of pages of material. It can be a bit daunting when you are starting out. This document explains the basic organization of the site.

The course website is split over two different web servers.

- The ODU Blackboard system is used for announcements, the course Forum, exams, and calendar. All of these things are presumed to be of interest only to students actually registered for the course this semester. You will need to log in using your ODU Midas account info to access this material.
- The CS Dept.'s secure web server is used for slides & lecture notes, and policy documents like this one - this is material that I leave open for anyone to read, and requires no login.

It will also house assignments & solutions to assignments. You will need to log in with your CS Dept. network account info to access this material.

- Grade reports will be hosted on the CS Dept server as well. These will include detailed grade reports on all assignments and, following each of the exams, an overall summary of your performance.

# 2 On Blackboard

When you enter the course from [Blackboard](#), you will start at the Announcements page.

From there, your main options are:

**Policies, Outline, Library, Grades, FAQ** These take you to the respective pages on the CS server, which are described in more detail later.

**Forum** The course Forum is for open discussion and commentary related to the course. The course communications policies are described [in a later section](#).

At the start of the semester, there will be only a single Forum for general discussion of course matters, open to all students. Later in the semester, when we start on team projects, I may create separate Forums for each team, readable only by the team members.

**Calendar** Access to a calendar listing significant upcoming events.

**Exams** Access to course exams – this will not be visible until shortly before the midterm exam is posted.

## 3 On the CS Server

You'll probably spend most of your time with the various documents on this server.

The documents here are a mixture of HTML pages and PDF documents. The HTML is designed to be basic enough that it should be viewable on almost any browser.

### 3.1 Common Elements

At the bottom of almost every page (HTML or PDF) you will see the following symbols:



- Clicking this takes you to the home (Topics) page for the course.



- Clicking this opens up a new email message to me, pre-loaded with the title and URL of the document on which you clicked in the message body and the name of the course in the subject line. (See figure 1 for an example.)

I **strongly** encourage you to use this method for asking questions that aren't going into the Forum. In particular, questions about difficulties you are having solving an assignment should never be put into the Forum (because it is open to all students) but should be asked via email.

Using this symbol/link guarantees that you are going to be sending to the correct email address, and that I will know what course you are asking about and what document you were looking at when you came up with your question.

**Please** take the time to ask from the most appropriate page. If you have a question about an assignment, for example,



go to the assignment page and use the there. Don't ask your question from the Topics page. You won't receive a meaningful response as quickly if my first reply to you is simply asking what you are talking about.



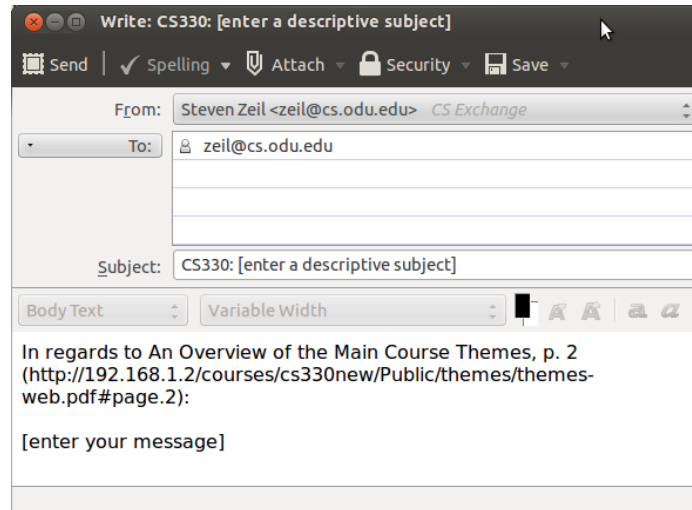


Figure 1: Email pop-up with some content pre-loaded

Although the HTML pages are simple enough to be handled properly by almost any browsers, these common symbols on the PDF pages are a little trickier. A few PDF viewers don't handle links to web URLs at all. Some will handle simple links (e.g., the



symbol) but won't handle mail to: links (the



symbol) at all or will ignore the portion of the link that pre-loads the subject line and message body.

You might want to try those symbols out, at the bottom of this page, right now to check and see what your browser and/or PDF viewer does.

## 3.2 The Directory Pages

The documents on the CS server are organized via a collection of several *directory pages*, easily recognized by the row of buttons down the left side. The *directory pages*, which can be recognized by the row of buttons down the left side, serve as gateways to main content of the web site.

- The Outline page presents the outline of the course subject matter together with textbook readings, assignments, lecture notes or slides, etc.

Each link is accompanied by an icon identifying what kind of document it takes you to: lectures, labs, assignments, etc. There is a key at the the bottom of the page explaining the icons.

- The Policies page presents the course syllabus and other documents relating to course policies and procedures and on how to get started working in the course. At the start of the semester, you should make a point of getting familiar with everything on this page.
- The Library page contains links to a variety of reference materials and software packages that may prove useful to you in this course.
- The Blackboard button takes you to the Announcements page on Blackboard.
- The Forum button takes you to the main course Forum on Blackboard.
- The FAQ page contains a list of frequently asked questions about the course policies and content, the C++ and Java programming languages, etc.



## 4 Communications

Other than meeting with me during [office hours](#), your main options for communicating with me are e-mail and the Forum.

### 4.1 Forum vs. E-Mail

Questions about how to solve a graded assignment or questions about solutions to exam questions should be sent by e-mail. They should not be put into the Forum.

Questions about course policies, about the subject matter of the lectures and readings, or about wording/interpretation of the assignments may be asked via e-mail or posted in the Forum.

If you aren't sure whether a question qualifies for the Forum or not, ask it via e-mail. If I receive an e-mailed question that I think may be of general interest, I may copy it to the Forum and answer it there.

### 4.2 Asking Good Questions


A question is the beginning of a dialog. A well-prepared question will get you an informative answer quickly. A poorly-prepared one may get you irrelevant answers or may require several rounds of back-and-forth dialog, delaying your eventual answer by many hours or even days. So it's in *your own self-interest* to ask your question in a way that gets you the answer you need as quickly as possible.

#### 4.2.1 Identification

**Who are you?** If you are sending me email, make sure your course login name or your real name appears somewhere in the message. I hate getting mail from partyAnimal@hotmail.com saying "Why did I get such a low grade on question 5?" when I have no idea who this person is!

**What course is this?** Again, if you are sending me a question via email, please remember to state which course you are asking about. I teach multiple courses most semesters, and having to go look up your name to see which of my courses you are talking about is annoying. In fact, it's a good idea to make the course number part of the subject line.



It helps if you are using the  links at the bottom of the course pages, because that automatically puts the course name into the subject line.

Which brings us to the next item...


**Use a clear and precise subject header.** In e-mail, A good subject header helps me find your message later if we need to do 2 or more rounds of back-and-forth responses. It's quite annoying when someone writes "*As I mentioned in my last message, ...*", and I then discover that the subject header is empty or contains only the course number, making it one of hundreds with the same subject tag! Empty or ambiguous email headers also increase your chances of being flagged by my spam filters.

In the Forum, a clear subject line not only helps me know what you are talking about, but it is a basic courtesy to your classmates, letting them know whether they should bother reading the thread.

A good subject line distinguishes your topic from other messages that your classmates might send. "Question" or "Assignment 3" are *not* good subject lines.

**What are You Talking About?** If your question is related to some document (a set of lecture notes, an assignment), tell me what document and, for multi-page document, what part of the document you are asking about.




Again, for e-mail it's easiest if you use the  links because they fill that information in to your message. For a Forum post, you will have to supply that information yourself.<sup>1</sup>

How do you identify an internal document location? One way is by document URL (plus page number if the document is PDF). Alternatively, you can give the document title and describe the location (section & subsection numbers, quote a bit of distinctive text, etc.).

Be aware that you *can't* get by with the combination of document title and page number. That's because I'm providing these documents in multiple formats, and the same text is likely to be on very different pages in each format.



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<sup>1</sup>You might find it convenient to use the  link and copy-and-pasting the document info from the message body into your post.

### 4.2.2 Thou Shalt Not Paraphrase

There's nothing more frustrating than getting a question like

*"When I try to compile my solution to the first assignment, I get an error message. What's wrong?"*

Grrr. What was the (exact) text of the error message? Was this on a Linux or Windows machine? What compiler were you using? What compiler options did you set? What did the code look like that was flagged by the message?

No, I'm not kidding. I get messages like this all the time. And it wastes my time as a question answerer to have to prompt for all the necessary information. It also means a significant delay to the student in getting an answer, because we have to go through multiple exchanges of messages before I even understand the question.

The single most important thing you can do to speed answers to your questions is to be specific. I'm not psychic. I can only respond to the information you provide to me.

- *Never, ever paraphrase an error message* ("I got a message that said something about a bad type."),
- *Never, ever paraphrase a command that you typed in that gave unexpected results* ("I tried lots of different compilation options but none of them worked.")
- *Never, ever paraphrase your source code* ("I tried adding a loop, but it didn't help.")
- *Never, ever paraphrase your test data* ("My program works perfectly when I run it.")

All of the above are real quotes. And they are not at all rare.

The problem with all of these is that they omit the details that would let me diagnose the problem.

And it's not all that hard to provide that info. Error messages can be copied and pasted into your e-mail or Forum posting. The commands you typed and the responses you received can be copied-and-pasted from your ssh/xterm session into your email or posting. Your source code can be copied-and-pasted or attached to e-mail and posts.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Note that this information is almost always plain text. Unless you *really* need to show me graphics, please avoid screen shots. They are often hard to read and often do not allow me to make the fine distinctions I need to tell what is going on. Keep in mind that raster graphics formats (gif, jpg, png, etc.) often look very different when rendered on screens with different resolutions.



### 4.2.3 If I Ask You a Question, Answer It

I often respond to a student's question with further questions of my own<sup>3</sup>, sometimes to get more info I need, sometimes to guide the student towards an answer I think they should be able to find for themselves.

It's surprising how often students ignore my questions and either never respond at all, respond as if my questions were rhetorical, or, if I have asked 2 or 3 questions, pick the one that's easiest to answer and ignore the rest.

This pretty much guarantees that the dialog will grind to a halt as I wind up repeating myself, asking the same questions as before, and some students go right on ignoring my questions, ...

## 4.3 Netiquette

A few basic rules for both e-mail and the Forum:

**Be civil:** Communications via e-mail and the Forum are expected to conform to the norms for civility and respect for ones' classmates and instructors that are common to all on-campus speech and writing.

**Be tolerant:** Short typed messages are not very good ways to convey emotional content. Many people tend to read insults and slights where none are intended.

A short, terse response probably does not mean that someone is disrespecting you or is unwilling to give your post due consideration. It's more likely to mean that someone was trying hard to quickly get some sort of useful response back to you rather than forcing you to wait until they had time for a lengthier one.

I often respond with links to relevant readings. Please don't get all huffy because you've already read it. Unless you *told me* in your earlier posts that you had read it, I can't assume that. Students often miss things in the readings. And sometimes pointing out that a specific page **is** relevant can make all the difference in people's understanding.

**Stay relevant:** If you see an existing discussion thread about an assignment or lesson for which you have a very different question, don't just jump in with a reply in that thread. *Hijacking* someone else's thread is considered rude, and it leads to confusion because it can become unclear whether subsequent replies are addressing your new issue or the one that the thread was originally discussing. Start your own thread instead.

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<sup>3</sup> Teachers since Socrates have always done this, and students have always been annoyed at it. But who are we to argue with history?