



**GUIDE**

**TO STARTING WITH**

**DISTANCE LEARNING**



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If you find yourself having to make a quick shift towards distance learning or virtual learning due to school closings or local quarantines, you may be feeling a bit overwhelmed. BetterLesson coaches have gathered tips and resources in response to the top eight questions you should consider before facilitating online learning. Remember: no two classes are the same, so you have to find what you are comfortable with in regards to tech, time, and tasks!

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Prior to closing, schools should establish systems for students to check out devices (e.g. laptops, WiFi hotspots) for the length of time that schools will be closed.

## 1. What systems and supports do you need to provide to ensure all students have equitable access to learning?

Before diving into any model of distance learning, it is important to consider whether your plan is equitable for all students. Do all of your students have access to the resources (to a computer, reliable internet, etc.) they will need to engage in virtual learning? Can students with disabilities receive the accommodations in their IEP when working remotely? If not, identify what supports you or your school can put in place to ensure all students can engage in the learning.

- Prior to closing, schools should establish systems for students to check out devices (e.g. laptops, WiFi hotspots) for the length of time that schools will be closed. A privately-completed survey or 1:1 conference is a great way to check with individual students and their parents or caregivers to see what support, accommodations, or resources they will need in order to learn remotely. Avoid asking students or caregivers to answer this question publicly, as it can be a sensitive topic.
- If your school is short on technology, [this guide](#) has some helpful resources to help get students connected. Additionally, some local libraries and/or community centers have computers and Wifi hotspots available to check out; partnering with these organizations may be helpful for schools and families.
- If necessary, make a plan to share resources and collect work via alternative means, such as sending hard copies of course materials in the mail to students with limited internet access.
- For students with disabilities, schools must continue to offer educational accommodations in their IEPs. When schools resume, IEP teams should meet to determine if additional services are needed.
- If you are planning to hold students accountable for work they will do remotely, make sure to plan in advance any adjustments or supports you will need to provide for students who do not have reliable access to a computer, internet, webcam, etc. and for students who receive accommodations per their IEP. Students should not be penalized if they are unable to turn in work at the same pace as their peers or if they cannot receive the appropriate accommodations.



There are *a lot* of great tech tools out there, and we've recommended lots of them in this guide. Before you start signing up for all of them, however, take stock of which tech tools you'd like to use and investigate what they are capable of. **Using fewer tools with more users per tool creates less stress for everyone!**

## 2. How will you organize your materials?

**Classwork, reading, assessments, online discussions, feedback, and more—you'll want to figure out a system before you start sending tons of materials to students. You might choose to use just one shared document with lots of links, or to collect everything in an online learning management system. Either way, it's best to get organized before diving in so that students—and you—can keep track of what's happening.**

- A Learning Management System like [Google Classroom](#), [Schoology](#), [Edmodo](#), or [Kiddom](#) can help you share materials, assess student learning, and plan for learning all in one place.
- Sending a weekly email (or real mail, if email access is limited!) guide can give students a pathway or checklist of tasks for the week ahead.
- A Hyperdoc, aka a shared email or document with links to all of the resources students need to access, lets you put lots of different materials and tasks in one central place for students to access. [Here is an example of a Hyperdoc](#) that gives students the ability to choose an appropriate learning activity based on a pre-assessment. For more tips, check out the [Hyperdoc Pathway to Mastery](#) strategy in the BetterLesson lab.
- There are *a lot* of great tech tools out there, and we've recommended lots of them in this guide. Before you start signing up for all of them, however, take stock of which tech tools you'd like to use and investigate what they are capable of. Using fewer tools with more users per tool creates less stress for everyone!



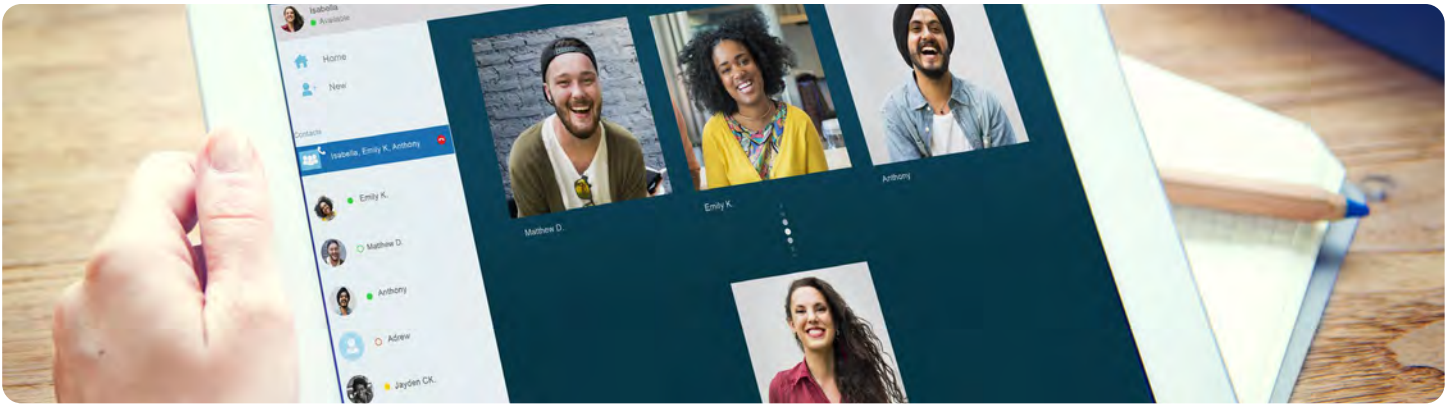
### 3. How will you build and uphold a productive culture for online learning?

One important step in implementing distance learning is proactively creating an online “culture” for students that includes clear norms and expectations.

- Consider how you will communicate and uphold norms and expectations in a virtual learning space. Romain Bertrand, BetterLesson’s Senior Manager of Solution Design, wrote a helpful blog: [Eight Ways To Build Blended Learning Class Culture](#).
- Students need to feel really quickly in a virtual learning environment that their participation is valued and necessary for the success of the lesson. Set some norms for students during synchronous learning time around their cameras needing to be on, and the fact that you will ask questions with multiple ways to respond. This will keep students on their toes and away from the temptation of multitasking (TikTok, we are coming for you! ;)
- Teach students explicitly what it means to be active and effective when working online: Model what they should be doing when engaging in an online activity (watching a video, for example), and find ways for students to share evidence with you that they are working this way at home.
- Emphasize goal setting and reflection. It is one thing to have a playlist of work ready for students; it is another to support them in maximizing the opportunity. Create opportunities for students to set goals prior to starting an online task and to reflect after having completed the task. Check out the [Goal Setting and Reflection](#) strategy in the BetterLesson lab for a collection of goal-setting protocols.
- This might sound silly, but you would never start a class without connecting with your students on a personal level, be that greeting them at the door or asking them questions before the lesson to ensure they know their well-being is as important to you as their learning. In the virtual space, build in time to “greet” students before getting started. Consider using an ice breaker to get students talking and sharing right away. How about spinning this [wheel of emojis](#)? For more ideas, check out the [Thresholding to Greet Students at the Door](#) strategy in the BetterLesson lab.



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## 4. How will you communicate with students?

When students are at home, you'll need an easy way to connect with them to let them know what they're working on, to ensure they can access the material, and to give them a way to ask questions. We have split our tips into advice for *asynchronous* communication, which students can engage with on their own schedule, and *synchronous* communication, which you can use at times when you're working with students in a live setting.



Create opportunities for small group discussions; these dramatically increase student engagement during virtual lessons while promoting collaboration at a time when students might feel isolated.

### ASYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION:

- Sending emails or text messages to students, possibly with a tool like [Remind](#) or [ClassDojo](#), can help you connect and share updates.
- If you choose to use a Learning Management System (see above), many of these allow you to message students directly within the online classroom and for students to have written discussions on the message boards.
- Chat apps like [Zoom](#), [WhatsApp](#), or [Slack](#) allow for asynchronous/backchannel messaging with and between students, both 1:1 and in groups. For tips on how to successfully implement a digital backchannel discussion with students, check out the [Backchannel](#) strategy in the BetterLesson lab.
- When students are at home, parents and caregivers are particularly eager for updates on their students' learning. They are also key partners in helping students navigate the new approach to learning! Check out the [Creating and Implementing a Family Partnership Plan](#) in the BetterLesson lab for tips about how to partner with parents when engaging in distance learning.

### SYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION:

- Create opportunities for small group discussions; these dramatically increase student engagement during virtual lessons while promoting collaboration at a time when students might feel isolated. [Google Hangouts](#) and [Zoom](#) allow you to video conference with students both in groups and 1:1, and you can even split students up into breakout groups for synchronous small-group discussion.



Want students to read independently at home, with embedded comprehension questions? You'll find subject-specific texts about almost anything from [Newsela](#) or [CommonLit](#).

## 5. How will you introduce new content to students?

Generally, you'll introduce content to remote students via one of four delivery mechanisms: videos you create, interactive presentations, texts students will read on their own, or resources from existing online content databases.

- If you're using video to introduce content to students, check out the [Using Video for Flipped Learning Environments](#) strategy in the BetterLesson lab. It's filled with great tips for how to ensure instructional videos are engaging and impactful.
- To give students more autonomy in their learning and increase engagement, consider using a Choice Board to give students a say in what they learn and how they interact with the content. Check out the [Choice Boards for Student Agency](#) strategy in the BetterLesson lab for details and examples.



- If you're creating your own videos, we recommend [Screencastify](#), [Educreations](#), [Showme](#), or [Loom](#). If you'd like to embed questions within your video, try [EdPuzzle](#).
- Prefer using a Powerpoint-style lesson? [Nearpod](#) and [Peardeck](#) allow you to create interactive, engaging presentations using your slides.
- If you're looking for existing online content databases, we recommend [Khan Academy](#), [BrainPOP](#), or [cK-12](#).
- Want students to read independently at home, with embedded comprehension questions? You'll find subject-specific texts about almost anything from [Newsela](#) or [CommonLit](#). Check out the [100 Newsela BetterLesson Literacy Instructional Strategies](#) for more ideas.

There are lots of creative ways to have students collaborate with one another online, and many tech tools make that collaboration fun and unique.

## 6. How will your students engage in the learning activities?

Once students have learned something new, you'll want them to engage in a learning task or activity to internalize and apply the new content. We encourage you to try some of the more collaborative tools, since being stuck at home can be lonely for students!

- The free suite of [Google apps](#) such as Google Docs, Sheets, Slides, and Forms allow easy and versatile collaboration and feedback loops among students and teachers.
- Portfolio apps like [Seesaw](#) can be a space for 3-way sharing, with places for parents, teachers, and students to capture their learning. Seesaw also allows teachers to easily provide feedback on student work.



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- There are lots of creative ways to have students collaborate with one another online, and many tech tools make that collaboration fun and unique. Try [Padlet](#) to curate a pinboard of resources (links, images, videos, documents) for students to access, or have students work collaboratively to create a pin-board. Prefer video? [Flipgrid](#) allows students to create and reply to each other's videos.
- Want to try game-based engagement? Try [Kahoot!](#) for lots of game-based resources, or [Breakout EDU](#)'s collection of "Fun@Home" games for student learning.





## 7. How can you check that students are actually learning?

When students aren't right in front of you, it can be harder to check their understanding and learning. Make sure to build in opportunities for both formative and summative assessment while students are learning from home!

- [Google Forms](#) are a versatile way to quickly survey student understanding via text-based questions, both open-ended and multiple choice. If you'd like a self-paced option, [Quizizz](#) and [Formative](#) allow you to create your own assessments or pull from a variety of pre-made quizzes made by teachers. For more tips on how to use self-paced assessments, check out the [System of Assessments to Demonstrate Mastery](#) strategy in the BetterLesson lab. We also love [Socrative](#), which has several types of engaging and interactive assessment tools.
- With students working remotely, take advantage of the opportunity to assess their learning in a more hands-on way by creating an actual product. For example, giving students the opportunity to teach what they've learned to a peer via video using the [Students Become Teachers to Demonstrate Mastery](#) strategy in the BetterLesson lab is a fun and easy way to hold students accountable. Or, have students design, create, and share a digital story of information they have learned using the [Digital Storytelling](#) strategy.
- A fun way to have students self-assess and reflect on their learning is via [Digital Journaling](#).
- If students are ready to provide feedback to one another virtually, check out the [Giving and Receiving Peer Feedback](#) strategy in the BetterLesson lab for a collection of protocols to guide students in giving and receiving peer feedback.
- Regardless of what type of data you're collecting, you'll want to make sure to set aside time to review the data, use it to inform your instruction, and share it back with students. Check out the [Building a Data Dive Routine](#) strategy in the BetterLesson lab for tips on analyzing and learning from data collected virtually. It is important for remote students to know that you are looking at their work, so make sure to provide both individual feedback and group feedback. Consider using class-wide messages or videos to celebrate student growth.



Regardless of what type of data you're collecting, you'll want to make sure to set aside time to review the data, use it to inform your instruction, and share it back with students.



## 8. What can you do if some of your students are struggling with this form of learning?

Engaging in distance learning is a **BIG** adjustment for both you and your students. If you need to teach students in a virtual learning environment for more than a few days, you may see some students struggle to be successful with the new format. Luckily, there are plenty of ways to intervene and provide individualized support.



Individual student conferences provide a time for the teacher and student to touch base in a personalized, targeted fashion.

- Don't wait to reach out! If you notice a student falling behind, reach out to them—and, if appropriate, their parent or caregiver. A quick call, email, or text message goes a long way to show that you are invested in their success, and will help you figure out what support the student might need.
- Individual student conferences provide a time for the teacher and student to touch base in a personalized, targeted fashion. The [Student Conferences](#) strategy in the BetterLesson lab provides tips for providing personalized, targeted feedback to students. In a virtual setting, you can conduct conferences via video chat (such as [Zoom](#) or [Google Hangouts](#)) or via a text- or voice-based chat platform (such as [Voxer](#) or [Google Chats](#)).
- Finally, ask students for feedback! Getting started with virtual learning is tough, but if you model a growth mindset for students, they will undoubtedly provide you with helpful suggestions and ideas. Check out the [Seeking Authentic Feedback to Improve Practice](#) strategy in the BetterLesson lab for suggestions of what types of questions to ask, and how to respond to the feedback you receive.



## Interested in additional support?

We hope this guide has provided you with resources and tips that will help smooth your school's transition to distance learning. If you'd like to inquire about additional support, please [reach out](#) or visit our website at [BetterLesson.com](https://www.betterlesson.com).