Giving Tests in Blackboard: Best Practices

If you have decided to use the Blackboard Tests tool, we recommend the following five Best Practices for ensuring that your tests and quizzes run as smoothly as possible.

1. Don’t assume your students are technically savvy.

It is a common assumption that today’s college students are “digital natives,” adept at using computers under a variety of circumstances. In reality, young adults may use computers in a different way than we used them 10 or 20 years ago, but they are not any more savvy about what to do when something goes wrong than anyone else. Any time you use technology in your teaching, it’s important to guide your students in its use.

2. Give your students explicit instructions for how to prevent errors and what to do if something goes wrong.

The most common problems encountered by students taking tests stem from using an unsupported web browser (Internet Explorer, Safari, or any mobile browser), or taking the test on a wireless or mobile internet connection. We recommend putting the following information (or something similar) into your test’s Instructions field:

“It is highly recommended that you take this test using Firefox or Chrome, on a wired internet connection. If you experience an error or unexpected behavior while taking this test, please contact the CSSD Help Desk at 412-624-HELP. If a technology problem prevents you from taking or completing this test, please contact your instructor as soon as possible and provide information about exactly when the error occurred, where you were located, what web browser you were using and what happened.”

Some instructors also tell their students to take a screen-shot (or even a picture of the screen using their mobile phone camera) if there’s an error, and sending that as an email attachment to the instructor

3. Think about how you will handle any problems that might arise.

Many instructors are caught off guard by technical problems arising from giving a test in Blackboard. These errors are not common, but they do crop up and are often due to student error (see above) or a problem originating with Blackboard’s servers. Most often, what you’ll see is that a student has made a test attempt, but either there are no answers recorded, or only part of the test is complete. There are any number of reasons for this—and we’re happy to consult with you about individual cases—but generally these are due to honest mistakes. When such cases arise, we recommend taking the following steps:

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- Check the test access log: Each test attempt includes some information about when and how the test was taken. Sometimes this information makes it clear what went wrong.
- Clear the test attempt: If you have your test set up to accept only a single attempt, a student who needs to re-take a test due to an error will not be able to. You may clear the attempt, which will delete it and allow the student to take the test again.
- Use test availability exceptions: The settings for each test in Blackboard have the ability to be altered for individual students (this is also important for students with disability accommodations). A student who experienced an error while taking the test may need to have exceptions applied to her so that she can re-take it after the availability window has closed, or to allow her multiple test attempts.

4. Understand test option settings to minimize both technical problems and cheating.

Test Option Settings are what you set when you deploy the test (put it some place in your course that is accessible to students). They dictate how students take the test, during what timeframe, and with what test-taking parameters. You can always edit these settings even after you deploy a test. There are a few test option settings you should know more about when deciding how you want to deploy your test for best results:

- **Force Completion**: This is the root cause of a large number of test errors. Force completion means that students must take the test in a single browser session—if they close the window or the tab, they cannot re-enter the test. This sounds like a good way to prevent cheating, but it’s also a good way to introduce errors—both user errors and connectivity errors. There are other ways to minimize cheating that don’t introduce instability into the process.
- **Timer**: Using the timer and setting it to a fairly strict estimate of how long students should need to take the test can be used to deter cheating, because looking up the answers takes extra time.
- **Password**: Some instructors choose to proctor their own Blackboard tests by giving them in class (students are required to bring their own laptop, which may not be appropriate in all courses, so use your judgement) and password-protecting the test. At the beginning of the class, the instructor writes the password on the board, ensuring that no one who isn’t in the room can take the test.
- **Randomize Questions**: All students will receive the same set of questions, but in random order. Paired with a one-question-at-a-time presentation, this reduces the ability of students to do the test together.

5. Using Test Item Pools.

In addition to the Test tool, Blackboard also supports the creation of Test Item Pools. Loading questions into Pools greatly enhances your ability to prevent cheating by giving you the ability to create tests composed entirely of randomly-selected questions from a larger pool, or multiple different pools. Pools can be exported and shared with colleagues, or copied to other courses. We recommend their use, particularly as a long-term project to continually collect and curate a set of high quality test items that can be deployed easily on tests.

Visit teaching.pitt.edu for more information.