

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 hundreds 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 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.


2 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.

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.

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 PDF viewer does.

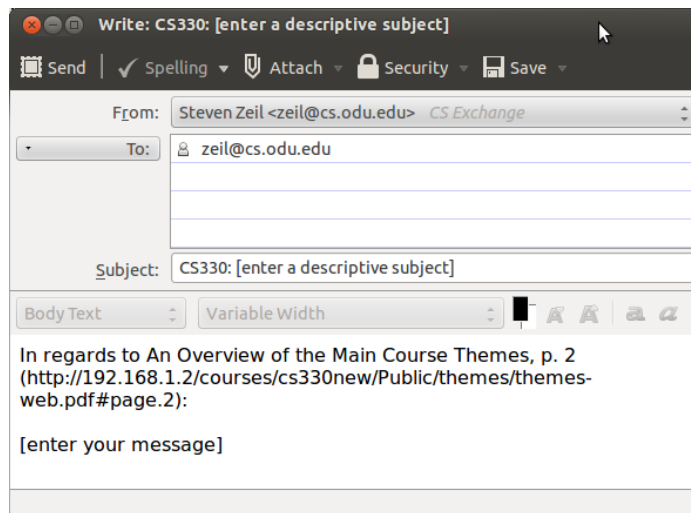


Figure 1: Email pop-up with some content pre-loaded

3 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 Topics 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 Book button (available later in the semester) will take you to a complete collection of all lecture notes in one document.

4 PDF Documents

4.1 Formats

Most of the course content is in PDF. Most of those PDF documents are course lecture notes and slides. PDF offers advantages over HTML of allowing me precise control over the appearance of math, program listings, and other content important to CS courses, and allowing me to know that it will appear the same no matter what system it is viewed on. PDF documents are also more suited to off-line viewing, which may be useful for people with tablets/laptops wandering in and out of wireless coverage areas.

PDF is, however, a page-based format. And, for tablets and other small-screen devices, PDF works best if the page size is matched to the screen size. So, in something of an experiment this semester, when you select a link (e.g., like this one) to one of those documents, you will be taken first to a web page listing the available formats:

slides Mainly for me, in class

web A format chosen for viewing on desktop and larger laptop screens, where you probably don't want to fill the whole screen but want something that can be read without excessive eye & neck movement.

printable Formatted for 8.5 x 11 inch paper, for those who simply *must* have printed copies.¹

tablet formats Formats for 7 and 10 inch screen devices, with aspect ratios of both 4:3 and 16:10.

I'm interested in getting peoples' feedback on these. Do you find them useful or not? Are the fonts too small or too large? Do you actually use them off-line, or is it OK to have links to on-line content (e.g., longer code listings that might be harder to read when split across multiple pages).

5 Content

One thing that you may notice fairly quickly is that, for the lecture notes, most of the available formats have more content than is present in just the slides.

As you may be aware, I offer this course as both a “live”, traditional lecture course and as a webcourse in alternating semesters. The webcourse was created initially by my going through my slides from the live course and adding text that approximated what I would have said when presenting each slide. As semesters have gone by, when I wanted to change something in the lectures, sometimes I would change the liver version's slides first, sometimes I would change the web version's text first. Then I would have to remember (usually during the following semester) to make the corresponding changes to the other version of the course. This was getting to be a pain.

So, now, I have a single source document containing both the slides and my commentary. The “slides” format contains only the slides. The other formats contain both.

¹If you are using printed copies just to scribble notes on, you might be interested to know that there are some very good free PDF annotation programs that allow you to draw on, type in the margins of, or add “sticky notes” to a PDF file that you have downloaded.

5.1 Linking

Within the PDF documents, you will find several kinds of links.

- This is a link to another page within this same document.
- This to an web page outside the course.
- This is a link to another document (the syllabus) within the course.

Links like this will preserve your chosen document format. If you are currently, for example, viewing a format for 10 inch, 4:3 ratio screen, links like the one above will take you to the 10 inch, 4:3 ratio version of the indicated document.

- Sometimes you will see a link that looks [like this ↗](#) (2). This is also a link to another document within the course. The ↗ symbol is a warning that the link is to some specific place inside the document, rather than to the document as a whole.

Not all PDF viewers will open to the indicated page. Some will insist upon opening at the first page.² Or, if you had already opened that document recently, some will always take you to the last page you looked at in that document.

So links like this are accompanied by a page number as part of the visible link. If your browser/PDF viewer don't jump to the desired location, you at least know where you should be paging to.

6 Communications

Other than meeting with me during office hours, your main options for communicating with me are e-mail.

6.1 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.

²Sometimes it's not the PDF viewer that is the problem, but the web browser plug-in used to launch the PDF viewer.

6.1.1 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.

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.

How do you identify an internal document location? One way is by document URL plus page number. 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.

6.1.2 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. 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.³

6.1.3 If I Ask You a Question, Answer It

I often respond to a student’s question with further questions of my own⁴, 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.

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

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, ...

6.2 Netiquette

A few basic rules:

Be civil: Communications via e-mail 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.