Does this course make my content look big? The skinny on chunking content.

Have you ever started to read an article, book, or instructional material that seemed to go on forever? You get to the end of the page and realize that you have no idea what the author just talked about, and then have to start reading from the beginning! By chunking your course material, you are able to captivate your students from beginning to end.

A short, squat history of chunking
Chunking (yes, that is the actual, educational term) starts with human memory. George Miller from Harvard University in 1956 found that when looking at unrelated items on a list, we can remember five to nine of those items. Fast forward forty years and Garrison, Anderson, and Archer discovered that by chunking information, exhaustion and feeling overwhelmed decreased, and students were better able to understand the material (Smith, 2009). Through organization, emphasis on important information, and no “walls of text”, we are more effective in helping our students learn.

So what IS chunking?
“Chunking is grouping pieces of information into meaningful segments. If your content is chunked, it is divided into short segments of passive learning, followed by an opportunity for active learning on those same concepts to reinforce the principle just introduced” (Smith, 2009).

Let’s try that again.

“How chunking is chunking is grouping pieces of information into meaningful segments. If your content is chunked, it is divided into short segments of passive learning, followed by an opportunity for active learning on those same concepts to reinforce the principle just introduced.”

By physically pulling out and emphasizing the important parts of that quote through the use of font adjustments, I’m indicating to you, the reader, what is important.

I like big chunks and I cannot lie
There are many benefits of chunking for both students and instructors. For students, chunking material means that they don’t need a large block of time and are able to make better use of that time. Subsequently, students are engaging in their classes and course material more frequently and stay better connected. Additionally, a course that is chunked provides better organization for students and increases their confidence while decreasing confusion (Smith, 2009).
Instructors also benefit from chunking. Chunking on the file level provides a logical way to organize the content that makes it easy to find and easy to use. Chunking lesson content increases material retention and comprehension from your students and you are able to cover more material with less time spent reviewing old material (Smith, 2009).

How else do you see instructors benefiting from chunking?

**How do I chunk thee? Let me count the ways**

To chunk your total course, think about how you order your material and assignments. Is it by week? Chapter? Topic? Competency? Whatever you choose each of those chunks (chapter 1 or week 1) becomes its own chunk. As you progress through the course, you open up a new chunk to the students so they aren’t overwhelmed on the first week of class with everything they are expected to learn and complete throughout the semester.

What chunking scheme do you use?

**Course Chunk Smash!**

Chunking can be applied across all course facets: course organization, module structure, and lesson dissemination. Throughout the course we want students to feel comfortable and sure of what they are doing; decrease navigation and course access time and increase learning time! We just counted (some of) the ways courses can be organized, so let’s dive into modules and lessons.

First, why should you use modules instead of folders? A folder consists of a collection of items and often doesn’t provide any direction. Students open it up and don’t know where to go. There is the argument that it can group all of the homework lessons or exams together, but even then, students need to jump around between folders to get everything they need. A module is a one stop shop that has a natural progression for the learner. Students start at the top and work their way down, rarely needing to leave the module in order to complete it.
Each module should be presented in the same way to provide consistency and clear expectations for students. When a student enters a new module, he or she should be able to identify where the lesson is, where the activities will be, and how to progress through the module. This is best achieved through the use of headings in a table of contents. These headings provide direction and chunk out material by category. This module structure also directs learners to engage in the passive learning (LESSON) followed by active learning (EXAM #2).

Finally, and most importantly, you should chunk your lesson content. This can be as subtle or dramatic as you like, but should always contain segments as well as passive learning followed by active learning. Physical emphasis and separation can come from headings and images (as used here) and active learning can take the form of self-check questions and activities.

Through chunking materials in your overall course, in modules, and especially in your lesson content, students will have better retention, comprehension, and more engagement in your course. Using modules, headers, images, and of course, active learning, instructors can build an environment that will best enable students to learn.

**Exercising the chunk: A hands-on workout**

Up until now, everything we have presented has been passive learning on the part of the reader. With the information above, you should be able to describe or define chunking, list the reasons we chunk, and have a chunking scheme in mind. Now what we want to do, and what you should do with your students, is combine this passive learning with active learning. This is the part where we actually put the ideas into practice and organize course content, design modules, chunk a lesson, and finish up by giving you a chunk of change.
Chunk the front door!
As we’ve talked about before, we want the chunking to start right when the students log into the class. What does your homepage look like? What are some of the ways you can make it engaging? Start with some multimedia: YouTube, Captivate, Screenr. While I know we all hate seeing ourselves on YouTube, doing a simple welcome video can provide the same welcoming information in a much more student-friendly way without (too much) pain on our part. If you really are video-phobic, try a screenr video that shows students how to navigate the class and put up your favorite picture of yourself. This will add personality as well as break up the standard orientation information.

Speaking of orientation information, it is a must! An Orientation Module will include all of the information that is relevant to the course, instructor, and student, but isn’t course-topic content. This module is always available and contains all relevant syllabus content as well as navigation directions and any getting-to-know-you activities.

What is important to you in a good orientation?
Chunking utensils
This section will focus on the utensils, or tools, used to chunk a course. Of course, any Learning Management System is essential in building a well-chunked course. This will most likely apply to your overall course layout as well as your module layout. As discussed, helpful headers will denote sections that have the actual content and links. In those content sections, mix multimedia with text-based deliveries. YouTube, screen-capture videos, and interactive self-checks break up sections and also lesson material.

For actual lesson material, consider using an outside source such as narrated PowerPoints, SoftChalk, Lectora, or even aesthetically pleasing HTML pages. Break up the “wall of text” with headings, images, questions, interactive self-check questions, multimedia, etc. By breaking up the passive learning and interspersing active learning, you’re increasing retention, keeping students interested, and letting them practice with informal assessment before the formal assessment.

Of course we all know that there are endless tools out there for organizing and creating content, so feel free to use the ones you are most comfortable with. How you incorporate these tools is what will produce the chunking effect.

Where are you most likely to include self-checks?

How I keep chunk in my trunk
- Apply it to my course as a whole, modules, and lesson content
- Never have a “wall of text”
- Minimize scrolling
- Alternate passive and active learning
- Use my favorite tools
- Keep multimedia under 5 minutes
- Use scripts for videos
- YouTube for introductions and answering questions
- Provide VERY COMPLETE instructions on assignments and in modules