In November 2015, the English Department nominated me for the Filippelli Institute Award for Excellence in Online Teaching. For my dossier, The College of the Liberal Arts requested I include a "best practices statement." What follows is the statement I submitted (with a few minor edits). ~pmk

Typically, best practices statements consist of principles and dictates intended for the reader to put into practice. By necessity, these documents tend to be overly broad to account for manifold diverse contingencies and to prepare readers to respond accordingly. In actuality, the far-reaching nature of these documents makes them less-than-ideal manuals in complex situations. In teaching, one size does not fit all. Over the years, I've developed a series of idiosyncratic guidelines, standards to which I can hold myself accountable. I don't claim that these protocols will work for everyone, just as I may not subscribe to all the schema my colleagues adhere to. I'm merely saying that these practices work for me.

1. **Be human.** My prime directive for online teaching is: *never let students forget their class is being taught by a human being rather than an algorithm*. It's easy to hide behind technology, but technology doesn't teach the classes. Teachers do. Students respond better if they recognize a person behind the zeroes and ones. As such, I try to let my personality seep through in all my correspondence.
2. **Don't be too human.** Despite technological advances, students in my online classes will never know me as well as the students who endure three hours in my physical classroom each week. Above all, traditional students recognize my propensity for interjecting playful retorts into the discussion. Thus, when I insert facetious comments in the margins of their papers, they accept the commentary in the spirit it was given. With online students, such recognition isn't a given. For them, I tone down the frivolity to circumvent misunderstanding.
3. **Be present.** It's important to initiate communication early and often. Not only does this inform students, but it opens up lines of communication for students to respond to me. I prefer email to announcements. I use announcements only for messages of more permanence, items students may wish to consult regularly.
4. **Don't be too present.** As one who suffers from email overload, I'm cognizant not to inflict this burden on my class. If I send too many emails, students stop reading them. I try to limit class emails to two or three a week. Most weeks, one email is sufficient.
5. **Be present on discussion forums.** My presence on discussion forums varies from week to week. Most weeks, the lessons require me to make specific points. I look for opportunities to make these points in response to student posts. Even when not interjecting new ideas, it's necessary to let students know that I'm reading their posts. As the semester progresses, I learn which students I can push and how far I can push them.
6. **Don't be too present on discussion forums.** Discussion forums work best when students interact with one another without instructor interference. Few things makes me happier than when I check in and note that students have made the observations I intended to make. This doesn't give me license to disappear; it just allows me to step back a bit (before trying to raise the discussion to a higher level).
7. **Be responsive.** My policy is to respond to email within twenty-four hours. I rarely wait that long, usually responding in a fraction of the time. While I instruct students to correspond with me through Angel mail, my Angel mail gets forwarded to my Penn State email and my iPhone. If it's important, I will respond immediately.
8. **Don't be too responsive.** I need to force myself not to respond immediately to every email. It isn't easy, but responding immediately is sometimes counterproductive. First, it pulls me away from what I'm doing. Second, most students aren't as obsessive about email as I am, so they may not receive my response for hours. Third, given time, students can often resolve issues without my input.

9. **Take advantage of technology.** What's the point of teaching an online class if you're stuck in the nineteenth or twentieth century? I welcome technologies that make me more productive.
10. **Don't be a slave to technology.** Just because a technology exists, it doesn't mean I'm required to use it. The skills I teach don't differ much from when they were achieved with a pencil and paper.
11. **Turn to tech support when you need them.** Penn State has amazing technical specialists on staff. They have gotten me out of more jams than I care to count, because they know the systems inside and out. They can't resolve every issue, but it rarely hurts to reach out to check.
12. **Don't turn to tech support for every little thing.** These specialists lead busy lives. There's no need to bother them for issues I can resolve on my own.
13. **Get to know students as people.** Many of the writing exercises I assign ask students to draw upon personal experience. Writing about what they know and care about allows students to put principle into practice more efficiently. It also allows me to gain insight into each individual student so I can counsel him or her more effectively.
14. **Don't get to know students too well.** While it's important to know students as individuals, never lose sight of the teacher-student dynamic. I'm here to teach, not to make a lot of friends.
15. **Be a mensch.** No deadline is more important than a student's well-being. No learning outcome takes precedence over a student's family (or mine, for that matter). When teaching adult learners, it's vital to recognize that real life sometimes gets in the way of schoolwork. I always try to build enough flexibility into my lessons so I can accommodate students facing emergencies (be they large or small).
16. **Don't be a sucker.** Despite my inclination to see the best in people, I recognize that some students will try to take advantage of my generosity. The joke, of course, is on them. They're the ones paying tuition. If they choose to cut corners, they're unlikely to get the full value of the course.
17. **Keep a pool of outside reading to offer students who need extra help or wish to delve deeper into a topic.** Part of being a professional is keeping abreast of developments in the field. If I know of a text that might interest a student or the class, I will usually suggest they read it.
18. **Don't overload students with extra reading.** As difficult as it is to admit, I know that every student won't be as enthused about the subject as I am. I offer extra readings to help students, but extra reading is always optional.
19. **Make it real.** Since the course I teach concerns nonfiction, students write about subjects that reside in a fact-based world. Major assignments ask students to write about people and events in their community. Following the example of the writers we study, I advise students that they often find the best stories in their own back yard (be it a figurative or literal yard).
20. **Don't worry about making it too real.** Students write best about matters important to them. If the writer cares, the reader will also care. Thus, it is vital for students to find their passion. Such passion is contagious.