Utica College Mission Statement
Utica College educates students for rewarding careers, responsible citizenship, enlightened leadership, and fulfilling lives by integrating liberal and professional study, by creating a community of learners with diverse experiences and perspectives, by balancing a commitment to its local heritage with global outreach, by encouraging lifelong learning, and by promoting scholarship in the belief that the discovery and application of knowledge enrich teaching, learning, and society.

The Purpose of this Document
The Utica College Best Practices for Online Education were created to:
• help you design and teach high quality online courses
• help you accomplish effective peer course review and evaluation of online courses, and
• clearly lay out the College’s expectations for online courses.

This document has three parts:
• Parts I and II define the College’s expectations and standards for designing, teaching, and evaluating an online course.
• Part III provides resources, advice, and examples to help you meet those expectations and standards.

Introduction
Utica College defines online or distance education as education where much, if not all, of the traditional classroom experience and face-to-face interaction is replaced by communication through one or more technological means and where the teacher and student are separated by time, distance, or both. An online course is one where 75% or more of the teaching is delivered online. A hybrid course is one where instruction is delivered both in a physical classroom and online and where a substantial portion of the instruction in a course, but less than 75%, is delivered online.

Hybrid courses have different expectations based on the needs of the course and the students and so these best practices may need to be adapted accordingly.
What you absolutely have to know before getting started

Teaching online is not like teaching in a traditional face-to-face classroom. Because students do not meet in a physical classroom, online courses have to be very deliberate in creating ways for students to interact with the course material and with each other.

As a faculty member you will need to re-think how you present material in order to make it engaging and to take advantage of the potential of technology. The way you present material in an online class replaces the charisma of the in-class presentation. In an online course, you will often find yourself taking more of a back seat to your course material. You will also need to ensure that students are engaged in the course and taking advantage of all that the online world offers. Communication becomes something that happens more frequently in smaller doses in the online world when students are not relying on seeing you in class during the week.

For these reasons, the bulk of the work in offering an online course lies in the course design and preparation - as much as 75% of the total work in offering a new online course lies in effective design and preparation prior to the first day of classes. A well-designed course eliminates student confusion and redundant faculty work, is easier to facilitate, and leads to greater success for the student.

Once a course has been offered, is organized the way you like it and works well, the balance of work changes to 75% delivery and 25% redesign and tweaking.

There is now a rapidly growing body of well-established research on online learning and both the College’s expectations for faculty and students and the tips and tricks presented in part three of this document are drawn from this research.

As much as 75% of the total work in offering a new online course lies in effective design and preparation PRIOR to the first day of class.
Part I - Utica College's Expectation for Online Courses

A - Course Design Expectations

Course content takes center stage online – how will you present information?

A1 - Preparation
Teaching an online course is a different kind of teaching from a face-to-face environment. It requires significant preparation and often a rethinking of how course content can best be presented. Therefore:

- Faculty will take and pass the Introduction to Online Teaching at UC course at least 4 weeks prior to offering a first Utica College course.
- Courses will be ready with content added 1 week prior to the first day of classes.

A2 - Content Organization
Courses at UC, regardless of the time over which they are offered, must contain at least 12 ½ hours of active instruction for each credit offered, or 37 ½ hours of active instruction for a 3-credit course. That means that a 6-week or 8-week course must contain the same amount of learning and material as a full-term course. Careful content organization is therefore crucial.

Content should be organized into modules. A module does not have to conform to a weekly structure, but may be longer or shorter as the content dictates. Each module should have the following constituent parts:

- An Objective or Objectives – What students need to be able to do by the end of the module.
- Essential Question – The one overarching question that students should be able to answer after completing the module. Answering the question should require students to absorb and synthesize the material.
- Learning Resources – The activities that students engage in that lead them to being able to answer the essential question.
- Learning Products/Assessments – What students need to produce in order to demonstrate their learning.

There are further details and copious examples for each of these module elements in Part III of this document.
A3 - Content Presentation

The presentation of course content is both constrained and enhanced by the online environment. There are some things that are more easily done in an online course than in a face-to-face course (and vice versa). The course shell is the student’s primary method for interacting with the course material and with one another and needs to be organized in such a way as to present an efficient, user-friendly, and effective environment. Therefore:

- It must be easy for students to find the information they need.
- Links and navigation must have been tested and work properly.
- Because not all students in an online course share the same abilities course design should take the differing abilities of students into consideration. For further guidance see "Accessibility Design For Online Content" in section II of this document.
- Content presentation will take advantage of an appropriate range of media and presentation formats. "Appropriate" means that the methods you use are consistent with, and further, the learning goals of your course and meet the needs of your students. For examples see “Content Presentation: Best Practices in Five Steps” in Part III.
- The course should use design elements such as icons and images to enhance course navigation and strengthen learning objectives.

A4 - Universal Design

Not all students in an online course share the same abilities – some may have trouble distinguishing certain colors, reading certain fonts, manipulating a mouse, hearing a podcast, viewing a flash video or otherwise taking full advantage of the online world. Therefore:

- Course design should take the differing abilities of students into consideration and conform to the guidelines laid out in "Accessibility Design For Online Content" in Part II.

A5 - Communication

Effective and frequent communication is essential to the success of an online course. Because students are not in a physical classroom, an online class must contain a variety of communication strategies that allow for both student-student and student-faculty interaction. Therefore:

- Courses will include an appropriate range of communication options such as discussion forums, chat sessions, email, course announcements, video- and audio-conferencing, blogs, and wikis. "Appropriate" means that the methods you use are consistent with, and further, the learning goals of your course and meet the needs of your students.
• Courses will set clear expectations for both faculty and students about the nature and timing of communications. (See Part I, B2 – Communications.)

A6 - Assessment and Feedback
Students in an online course rely heavily on feedback and recognition. Therefore:
• Courses will include a variety of assessment and feedback methods
• Courses will make clear the assessment and feedback expectations for both faculty and students. (See Part I, B3 – Assessment and Feedback.)
B - Course Teaching Expectations

New York State’s Dept. of Education requires that a course offer at least 12 ½ hours of active instruction for each credit.

B1 - Faculty Engagement

Faculty engagement in a course is one of the most significant components of a successful course. In addition, the Federal Department of Education and the New York State Department of Education require that a course offer at least 12 ½ hours of active instruction for each credit offered, or 37 ½ hours of active instruction for a 3-credit course. Therefore:

- Faculty will provide at least 12 ½ hours of active class instruction for each credit hour for the course. Active instruction in an online course is defined as dynamic interaction with students through the course shell as well as other technologies. Media within the course shell include posted video lectures, message boards, threaded discussions, course announcements, interactive whiteboards, and chat. External technologies include synchronous video sessions and other interactive web sites.

- Active engagement with the class does not include "sidebar" conversations with individual students whether they are by email, chat, or phone as these activities are equivalent to holding office hours or meeting with students in the coffee shop.

- Faculty will log into a course daily during the week and at least once on weekends. If you have to be absent from the course, you need to alert students to this, telling them how long you will be away. A log in does not necessarily entail active engagement in the course, but it is appropriate to check on how things are going and make sure there is nothing that needs taking care of promptly.

- Faculty will be actively engaged throughout the course, participating in threaded discussions and chat sessions as appropriate, reacting to student feedback and generally being an integral and positive part of the student learning process.
B2 - Communications
Because students are not in a physical classroom, effective and frequent communication is essential to the success of an online course. Therefore faculty will:
• Utilize the full range of communication options designed into the course.
• Post weekly course announcements. Announcements can include reminders about assignments, course etiquette guidelines, responses to frequently asked questions, or links to relevant current events.
• Communicate with students within twenty-four (24) hours of the start of a course with introductions, course expectations, and guidelines.
• Provide a twenty-four (24) to forty-eight (48) hour response time to all course-related communications from students.
• If you have to be absent from the course, alert students to this, telling them how long you will be away.

B3 - Assessment and Feedback
Students in an online course rely heavily on feedback and recognition. Therefore faculty will:
• Grade and return all student work within one week after assignment and exam submission due dates.
• Inform students in advance, when possible, if you will be away or unavailable for any period of time.
• Ensure that you make a back-up of your course and save important course data at least weekly. For information on how to backup a course contact the Center for Innovative Learning.

Log into your course daily during the week and at least once on weekends.
C - Course Review
Peer course review is an important element in both maintaining the quality of Utica College’s academic program and helping faculty members improve their teaching. Peer review is a voluntary system and faculty members are encouraged to seek out a peer reviewer. If you don't know whom to approach, the Center for Innovative Learning can provide you with a list. Because peer evaluations are an integral component of hiring, renewal, tenure, and promotion decisions, it is important that peer evaluation be both thorough and consistent.
Therefore:
• Peer reviews of online courses should be recorded using the Format for Peer Course Review of Online Courses (See Part II A– Peer Review Form.)
Part II – Related Documents
A - Peer Review Form

Format for Peer Course Review of Online Courses

Please provide a narrative response to the following questions using examples as appropriate.

1. Is the course design consistent with the requirements in Utica College’s Best practices for Online Learning?

2. Is the course rigorous where rigor is defined as (a) the course is offered at an appropriate level and depth, (b) the course content is responsive to current research in the field, and (c) the course goals are consistent with the curricular goals of the program?

3. Is the way in which the course is taught consistent with the course teaching requirements in Utica College’s Best practices for Online Learning?

4. Are the students learning at an appropriate rate and level?

5. Is the faculty member an integral and positive part of the student learning process?
B - Sample Behavior Policy

1. Students may not engage in practices that threaten the integrity of the College network, or any electronic network that the College uses (e.g. knowingly downloading or uploading files that contain a virus).

2. Students may not use any College resource for any illegal activities, including the violation of copyright law and/or theft of software.

3. Students may not access anyone else’s account, nor may they share their account passwords with others.

4. Students may not write, use, send, post, download or display deliberately hostile and insulting (inflammatory), obscene, threatening, harassing or otherwise offensive messages, postings, pictures or other forms of communication.

5. Students may not discuss private issues via the discussions and other communication tools. If students have issues and/or concerns about the course content, amount of work, or grades given, contact the online instructor directly and privately.

6. Students may not post negative comments about course expectations, such as the amount of time spent on assignments, on threaded discussions. This invites others to join in and complain which is not a professional use of class discussions. Feedback is welcome and should be submitted to the instructor, or through the course evaluation.

7. Students will conduct themselves in a manner that facilitates learning.
C - Online Students Rights and Responsibilities

As an online student at Utica College you have certain rights and corresponding responsibilities.

**Rights**
You have the right to:

1. A course that is ready for you on the first day of classes
2. A course structure and syllabus that are clear and comprehensible and which lay out the requirements and expectations for the course
3. Regular feedback on your progress
4. Responses to your questions and emails within a 24 – 48 hour period
5. A course environment that is both civil and productive
6. An engaged faculty member

**Responsibilities**
Your responsibilities are to:

1. Be ready for the course by the first day of classes
2. Read and understand the syllabus
3. Participate regularly, at least as much as is required by the syllabus and preferably more
4. Do the work
5. Be civil and productive in your interactions with other students and with the faculty member
6. Check your Canvas/Engage email at least weekly and your UC email regularly
7. Ask questions if you don't understand

*If you have questions about these rights and responsibilities, contact the Office of Academic Affairs by phone at (315) 792-3122 or by email at vacaddean@utica.edu.*
D - Pre-Launch Checklist

This is a startup checklist to assist you in getting your online course ready for your students. This checklist includes some common items to help students get started in an online course. If you would like or need additional assistance, please email us at coursedesign@utica.edu.

Announcement welcoming students to the course
Instructor profile, biography, and contact information
Course number, title, and description
Course objectives
Course schedule showing what topics will be dealt with when, and when graded assignments will be due
Grading information including what percent of the final grade is derived from each component of the course, and a translation table between letter grades and number grades
Discussion forum for introductions
Discussion forum for a student lounge
Statement about academic honesty including course security for graded assignments
The course conforms to the design guidelines for accessibility. See "Accessibility Design for Online Content"
Information about accommodations for learning disabilities and differences, the use of UC email and ANGEL mail, the Instructor’s role in the Course, what to do in the case of technical difficulties, and the availability of Smarthinking. For sample statements on these subjects see Part II F - "Sample Statements."

For each week/module:
  o Overview of the week/module to include objectives
  o Delivery of Content
  o Deliverables (assignments/assessments)
  o Discussion Forum(s)(content related)
  o Deliverables (assignments-dropbox/assessments)
  o Ask the Professor Discussion Forum

Other items to think about if you are teaching a course you have taught in the past.

  Revise your syllabus/course schedule to reflect the correct semester/term.
  Set or change all release dates to your learning activities.
  Check any links you have in your course to be sure they are working.
  Be sure all your deliverables are linked to your grade book.
E – Accessibility Design For Online Content – Tips for Making Your Course More Accessible.

Not all students in an online course share the same abilities. For example, some may have trouble distinguishing certain colors, reading certain fonts, manipulating a mouse, hearing a podcast, viewing a flash video or otherwise taking full advantage of the online world.

1. Be sure to include a statement about how to request accommodations in a prominent location in the syllabus or on the Canvas/Engage Homepage.

2. If you become aware that a student in your class has a need of accommodations due to a documented disability, contact Learning Services in the Academic Support Services Center (phone: 315-792-3032) in order to determine how to meet those needs.

3. Students who are deaf or significantly hearing impaired will not be able to use video and content that does not have a text equivalent provided, so caption video content and provide transcripts for audio content. Please contact the Media Center, if you have any questions about captioned material.

4. Use caution when including documents as course materials. If the document is in PDF format, be sure the PDF is minimally accessible, i.e. the document contains real text (it can be highlighted and copied) rather than a scanned image of a document. For detailed information on how to create accessible PDF documents, see techniques for creating accessible MS Word documents and “Converting documents to PDF” at WebAIM.org (http://webaim.org/techniques/acrobat/converting).

5. Break up large blocks of text with descriptive headings or other graphic elements such as lines or boxes. Students who struggle with reading are more likely to read and comprehend smaller chunks of content that is organized with headings and presented in a concise format.

6. Avoid requiring significant use of inaccessible features for online content such as synchronous discussions, instant messaging, and chat rooms. These and similar features do not give students who struggle with reading time to read, comprehend, and respond before others participating in the discussion have moved on to other topics. They also do not give students who physically struggle with typing or who use assistive technology time to
respond. As best practices all chat sessions should be archived for all students in a course.

7. Be familiar with the process for allocating extra time to complete exams and quizzes in Canvas/Engage for students with this accommodation.

8. Label or otherwise describe all graphic content. If the document is in MS Word format, describe all graphic images using captions. If the document or content is in HTML format, use “alt” tags. Describing a graphic image such as a chart or graph will enhance the understanding of all students.

9. Make sure all graphic images are still understandable when shown in black and white. People with certain types of color blindness will not be able to distinguish colors in graphs, charts and maps. Instead use textured shading or some other means for conveying information.

10. When requiring students to link to information on other websites or online resources, be sure those sites are accessible. Many online resources that are interactive are not accessible. If necessary, call or contact the webmaster of the site to see if the site is Section 508 compliant. For steps on how to test a site for accessibility, see wave.webaim.org.

11. Resources for online teaching:

Professional Development for Online Technology
http://teachingcommons.cdl.edu/access/docs_multi/wordf2f.shtml

Cornell University’s A Web Accessibility Primer: Usability for Everyone
http://www.cit.cornell.edu/policies/accessibility/primer/index.cfm

How-to Guide for Creating Accessible Online Learning Content
http://projectone.cannect.org/

Pearson Guidelines for Accessible Educational Web Media (this guide is also good for web developers)
http://wps.pearsoned.com/accessibility/115/29601/7577872.cw/

(Thank you to Sharon Trerise, Coordinator of Disability Services, Cayuga Community College)
F-Sample Statements

Accommodations For Learning Disabilities And Differences

Any student who has a need of accommodations due to a documented disability should contact Kateri Henkel, Director of Learning Services in the Academic Support Services Center (phone: 315-792-3032; email: khenkel@utica.edu) in order to determine eligibility for services.

The Use Of UC Email And Canvas/Engage Mail

Canvas/Engage has e-mail built into each course and is referred to as course mail. This is my preferred method of email correspondence while enrolled in this course. Canvas/Engage course mail will remain in the Canvas/Engage environment and accessible as long as you have an internet connection. I do provide my Utica College email in this syllabus for times when you may have a technical issue and are unable to access Canvas/Engage.

The Instructor’s Role In The Course

✓ I will respond to your emails or questions in the “Ask the Professor” discussion forum within 24-48 hours.

✓ I will read, grade and respond to your assignments within one week after the due date of each assignment.

✓ I will log in and check our course at least once a day during the week and at least once on weekends.

✓ I will read every discussion board posting.

✓ I will do everything within my power to empower you to be successful in this course.

What To Do In The Case Of Technical Difficulties

Do you have a plan if you have a technical problem? If your computer crashes, or if your internet connection fails – these events do not excuse you from your course responsibilities. You can access this online course from any computer that has an internet connection. I suggest that you make a plan now for events such as these. If you ever have a technical
problem connecting to your course, submitting work to your course, or any other course-related issue, call 24 x 7 help service. If the problem is with the LMS system, you will be granted a time extensions for submitting assignments affected by the problem. However, if you do not report the problem, no time extensions will be granted.

Smarthinking

Smarthinking is an online tutoring service now available to UC students. Smarthinking provides tutoring in a variety of subjects, some of which are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. With Smarthinking Online Tutoring, you can

- Connect With a Tutor and interact live.
- Submit your Writing for any class to our Online Writing Lab.
- Submit a Question and receive a reply from a tutor.

Click on the link below for further information on Smarthinking as well as to request a user ID.

http://www.utica.edu/student/development/smart/index.cfm
Part III – Resources & Examples

1- Preparation

2 – Content Organization

3 - Content Presentation: Best Practices in Five Steps

Designing an online course requires a different set of skills from teaching in the traditional classroom. If you are new to this, don’t worry! It’s a whole new field. Below you’ll find a straight-forward guide of best practices to get you started building an effective online course. The most important thing to remember is that The Center for Innovative Learning is here to help you. ...

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Step 1: Build your informational foundation.

Typically, a newly-created online course will be text-heavy. There is a lot of information to share and first-level course design usually bulks up the learning management system with Word docs, research articles, and lots of lengthy directions. This is not a bad thing; in fact it builds an essential informational foundation. You are the subject-matter expert so this step, while time-consuming, is the most logical way to get started building your course.

The key to course design is that it does not stop here. After you’ve gathered all the content that will make up your course, follow the next four steps to make sure you’re taking full advantage of the online interface.

Step 2: “Chunk” your information.
Once you’ve compiled all the content for your course, you’ll need to separate it into practical units, modules, or “chunks”.

**Objective-based:**
These sections should be organized logically around an obvious topic that is associated with your course objectives. In fact, stating the objective for each unit or module is an excellent way to begin the section.

**Time-sensitive:**
You’ll also want to imagine how much time your students will spend on each section in order to have a balanced flow in your course calendar. Too little in a section may not allow for adequate time-on-task, but too much can mean an overload for your students.

### Step 3: Format content for your audience’s “first view”.

After Step 2, as the course designer you have probably read and re-read your content many times, knowing it well. That means that you know exactly where to find details within it. But keep in mind that your learners will be seeing it for the first time.

When presented with new information, your brain usually seeks visual elements first, scanning information to preview what it’s about to learn. When a learner is given lengthy text documents where everything is presented in black and white with the same font size there is nothing available for this essential component of visual learning. One of the greatest advantages to the online format is that color and space have no limits.

Be sure to review all your content as if you were seeing it for the first time:
- Break lengthy content into smaller sections.
- Create logical titles for those sections and format these titles to appear larger and bolder within the text.
- Within a consistent format, use color to indicate similar information. For example, all learning objectives could be found in a light blue box.
- When you have important pieces of information repeat them. Create boxes or shapes to train your audience’s eyes to pay special attention to this information.
• Give your learners places within lengthy text to stop. You can do this by creating questions for them to reflect on, and formatting those questions so that the reader knows to pause at these points.

**Step 4: Add graphics, images, and icons for visual learning and easier navigation.**

When considering the content presentation of your course, refining text with images not only better engages your modern audience, but also bolsters your learning objectives.

Use graphics and images purposefully. Take time to find images, such as free clipart online, that exemplify your concepts. Consider using graphics as icons and repeating them throughout your pages. This helps your learners locate information quickly and prompts the brain to associate key learning concepts efficiently.

The brain seeks and processes images much more quickly than text. For example, for new course designers to understand the importance of visual learning, an image like the one above can be used (and repeated) throughout an instructional document rather than merely stating with text, “Visual learning is important.”

**Step 5: Use multimedia to enhance the course’s most essential learning points.**

While all your course content is important, inevitably there are essential and more significant points to get across within each topic, section, or unit. These are the areas you might spend more time on in a classroom setting. In the absence of the traditional classroom, though, and the loss of control over how much time your students may spend on a concept, you need an “online” way of highlighting the significance of certain content.

Your audience may not notice the importance of information that remains within a text-based format, but will pay special attention to the purposeful use of multimedia. Multimedia in your course can take many forms: a podcast, a video, animation, or an interactive feature such as click-and-drag, for example.
4 - Communication: Best Practices in Three Steps

There has yet to be an online course complaint where an instructor communicated too much. It is essential that students feel an instructor’s presence as they take an online course. The best practice, then, is to communicate as often as possible.

Step 1: Be present.

Since you’re required to log into your course daily (see Part B – Course Teaching Expectations), use that time to communicate to the group. Create new announcements, respond to emails, provide feedback within discussions. An instructor that just checks in without providing communication will seem absent from the course. Just as students would not sit in an empty classroom, online learners are much more productive in relationship to the instructor’s perceived presence in the course.

Step 2: Design communication to reflect your goals.

We don’t often equate “communication” with “design”, assuming communication will happen naturally. Remember, your students may be just as new to online learning as you are. You’ll need to design the student-to-student and student-to-instructor communication paths deliberately so they reflect your expectations and course goals.

A common concern among course instructors is that the discussion boards do not “take off” with lively and frequent postings from the students. This usually prompts the instructor to create more rigid rules that mandate a certain number of postings. If you’d like your discussion boards to be highly interactive, it starts with how you establish them. For example, if students are expected to post and respond to lengthy research writing, the discussion is then formal and will never be conversational.
Step 3: Promote interactivity through a variety of media.

Remember the telephone? We’ve all got one (or two, or three) and it is a great way to communicate. Don’t feel that all course interactivity is limited to the Learning Management System. You’ll be using discussion boards, email, and course announcements, but supplement your communication with other tools. A phone is great for a productive one-on-one session (and much more time-efficient than numerous emails). A synchronous session creates a classroom setting regardless of distance. And there are lots of great web tools that promote visual discussions and facilitate the use of media.

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5 - Assessment and Feedback: Best Practices in Two Steps

Assessment in the online sphere is entirely different than in a traditional classroom setting. While you can administer tests and quizzes through the Learning Management System, this is generally not the most effective way to formally assess your students online. (Multiple choice tests and quizzes are great self-assessment tools, though, for student practice.) As an online instructor, you’ll need a new variety of assessment approaches and a specific way of grading them.

Step 1: Think outside the test.

Discussion boards, team projects, research papers, presentations, student-led teaching and more can constitute your grades in an online course. The key is to first establish what learning you need your students to demonstrate; you should find this in your objectives. Then be very specific, ideally through the use of rubrics, in communicating what levels of performance you expect to see in these tasks. You should also communicate clearly what you consider unacceptable.
Step 2: Provide positive feedback as often as possible.

From very early in grade school through high school graduation, we equate “feedback” to the teacher’s red pen – lots of little marks indicating everything we have done wrong. Of course the role of an instructor is to keep your learners on the right path, but a productive learning environment nurtures motivation. Your students deserve to know when they are doing well, so don’t forget to showcase this. Tell them when their work reflects quality, ask if you may share it with others, show the entire class examples of excellence. It will elevate the level of and desire for performance in your online class.

Examples

Content Presentation Step 1: Build your informational foundation.

Here is information as it was originally gathered to create this Resource section. Right now it’s a standard Word Document. All important information has been researched, edited, re-worded, and is complete.

Online Tip: It will be tempting to compile all of your information in a Word doc, but you’ll have a lot more formatting and design options by using an html page through the learning management system.
Content Presentation Step 2: “Chunk” your information.

Here is a portion of the information from above, now “chunked” into logical sections.

From the learner’s perspective:
“\textit{I can scan the headings to quickly find out what topics are covered before reading.}"

\textbf{Online Tip:} Within your online course, don’t just chunk information within a page, but also chunk your units into separate folders or modules. Take advantage of html links, jumps and anchors to help students locate and re-locate information very quickly.
Content Presentation Step 3: Format content for your audience’s “first view”.

Here is an example of formatting to help guide the learner’s “first view”. It is much more obvious with formatting to see that there are steps to follow, and where to look for the most important points.

much can mean an overload for your students.

Step 3: Format content for your audience’s “first view”.

After Step 2, as the course designer you have probably read and re-read your content many times, knowing it well. That means that you know exactly where to find details within it. But keep in mind that your learners will be seeing it for the first time.

When presented with new information, your brain usually seeks elements first, scanning information to preview what it’s about to read. When a learner is given lengthy text documents where everything is presented in black and white with the same font size there is nothing available for this essential component of visual learning. One of the greatest advantages to the online format is that color and space have no limits.

Be sure to review all your content as if you were seeing it for the first time:
- Break lengthy content into smaller sections.
- Create logical titles for those sections and format these titles to appear larger and bolder within the text.
- Within a consistent format, use color to indicate similar information. For example, all learning objectives could be found in a light blue box.
- When you have important pieces of information, repeat them.

Remember to use formatting purposefully. Adding color or changing fonts is not about personal aesthetic, it’s about guiding your audience’s eyes to better ingest the information.

From the learner’s perspective:

“There are steps to follow, and they are easy to find in blue.”

“This must indicate the most important point of the passage.”
Content Presentation Step 4: Add graphics, visuals, and icons for visual learning and easier navigation.

The most important thing to remember when designing in the online space is that it’s a highly visual environment. In order for the reader to retain important concepts, a graphic is added to bolster the instruction (and can be repeated).

From the learner’s perspective: “My attention is immediately drawn to the graphic which connects the significance of the passage.”

When you have an important point and you’ve found a logical coordinating graphic, repeat it - as an icon in a menu, or on an assessment, for example.
Content Presentation Step 5: Use multimedia to enhance the course’s most essential learning points.

The online tip in Step 1 was to create your content using a ‘page’ instead of a Word doc. The pages that you create within the learning management system allow you to take full advantage of the online interface because they are based in HTML – the internet’s design language. By creating your content on ‘pages’ you can easily add enhanced features to your course such as blogs, wikis, video, podcasts, animation, and more that would not be supported in a Word doc. Here are some definitions to give you an idea of what is available:

- Blog – A web log. This is a great tool over which to give your students control. Assign a topic and have them post entries to the blog as if they were teaching others. This is a good place for less formal writing and for the sharing of ideas.

- Wiki – An open-source document or page. A wiki allows a group of people to all work from one master document or page, so it’s perfect for on-going collaboration.

- Podcast – An audio recording. As mentioned above, online courses in their infancy tend to be text-heavy. Replacing some of the more significant content of a course with audio will give your learners much-needed variety and an easier medium from which to process information.

- Video – There are so many great video clips on the Internet that can be embedded right into your course. Also, it’s easier than ever to record your own
videos. Assign a video to your students instead of another research paper and you’ll have lots of examples to use with future classes.

- Animation – Cartoons are a great way of capturing attention. There are a lot of sites that facilitate custom-animated movies. This is especially useful for that key piece of information that seems to get lost on students when they only read it.

- Games – Play is a powerful and fundamental form of learning - and it’s fun. There are a lot of sites that offer learning games and you can even customize some of them with your own content.

**Communication Step 1: Be present.**

In the physical classroom students and instructors can see each other, and sometimes that is enough to constitute one’s participation in a course. In an online classroom, though, participation becomes much more active. Be sure to show that you are present through your postings.

Notice how the announcement above applies the color and graphics formatting as mentioned in Content Presentation Best Practices. Creating an icon for your posts helps students to easily locate new announcements, increasing your online “presence”.
Communication Step 2: Design communication to reflect your goals.

A common communication goal in any course would be to have lively and frequent discussions. Formal prompts actually may impede “discussion” so craft these assignments and instructions carefully to meet your goals. Do your questions promote actual student-to-student discussion or is the desired outcome more formal writing?

There are a lot of powerful discussion tools online, you are not limited to the discussion board within the Learning Management System. See the example below.

Communication Step 3: Promote interactivity through a variety of media.

As mentioned in the Online Tip above, there are a lot of online tools that foster interpersonal communication in easy and highly-visual ways. Here is an example of a discussion (using Voicethread) that is taking place around a graphic. Participants can post a text response, record their voices, or record a video response.

Consider planning a “synchronous” session which offers all the benefits of a face-to-face class. These sessions can easily be archived for those that cannot attend.
Assessment & Feedback Step 1: Think outside the test.

Tests can be easily created and managed in the Learning Management System, but they may not be the best way to assess student learning online. These traditional assessments can provide great practice for content knowledge, but with the wealth of answers an internet search away, multiple choice questions, for example, may not be the most practical approach to determining what the students know. Aim for authentic assessment, and design it creatively through the use of discussions, team projects, media projects, presentations, or student-led teaching for example.

Discussions: Assign a challenger role as an interesting complement to a traditional discussion.

Team Projects: Use the team format when cooperation and interpersonal skill-building enhance the goal of the learning. Be sure to allow for individual reflection on the work-sharing process.

Media Projects: This is a great way to give students practice building 21st century skills and will build your own library of media at the end of each course. See Content Presentation Step 5 above for examples.

Presentations: Strengthen your students’ presenting skills – do not accept a text-heavy PowerPoint that is then read to its audience. Spend a little time discussing successful presentation techniques.

Student-led discussion: The teacher usually retains the greatest amount of knowledge at the end of a learning experience. Why not put that power on the students?

Assessment and Feedback Step 2: Provide positive feedback as often as possible.

Use your course announcement nugget to provide positive feedback:

Be very specific about how assignments will be graded. Determine what you will accept as well as what will be considered unacceptable and communicate that with your students ahead of time. The use of rubrics offers a visual guide for both the instructor and the student.
The Bottom Line

In learning to create an online course you will see words like “build” and “design” – terms indicating a great deal of planning on the instructor’s part. It is essential to understand the important role of preparation for an effective online learning experience.

These terms also imply a lot of know-how, which can make some people nervous. Please remember that all stakeholders – the institution, the instructor, the students – share a collective goal for quality online education, and we are here to help everyone achieve that goal. The Center for Innovative Learning offers one-on-one consultation as well as group training sessions on all these steps and so much more; please contact us!