

Best Practices in Instructional Design for Online Learning

These tips offer a framework for determining what a quality online course might contain. Items listed below can provide a road map for developing a new course or for modifying an existing course. Not all points need to be addressed, but care should be taken to address many of them to ensure quality.

Category 1 – Learner Support and Resources

a. Information About Being an Online Learner

This information is accessed via the Online Student Resources tool in all Sakai classes.

b. Resources Supporting Course Content

- Links to websites with supporting information relevant to course content
- Links to websites of organizations or associations related to course content
- Always list software required for course other than Microsoft Word or Adobe Acrobat
- Information/tutorials on how to use software required by class assignments
- Links to definitions of new vocabulary or glossary of terms
- Links for instructions for how to conduct online research
- Links for instructions on how to write a research paper
- Link to netiquette rules and regulations

Category 2 – Online Organization and Design

a. Syllabus and/or Welcome Letter Includes

- Syllabus is easily located under the “Syllabus” tool
- Contact information for the instructor
- Faculty member’s introductory information
- Pre-requisites of course check for 508 compliance
- Course objectives
- Course completion requirements
- Expectations of students’ participation, honesty, etc.
- Timeline for student participation is clear
- Estimated amount of time needed for completing course requirements
- Expectations of availability of, and turnaround time for contact with, instructor
- Course schedule is summarized in more than one place
- Office hours and preferred contact method
- Instructional design is made clear (e.g., is self-paced, or group-paced)
- Expectations for synchronous vs. asynchronous activities are clearly spelled out
- Acceptable methods for completing assignments are identified (group work, open book, etc.)
- Consequences of cheating and plagiarism are clearly defined
- A clear criterion is established for grading policy and grading scale

b. Course Navigation and Organization

- Course is hosted online and ready on or before the first day of class
- Course navigation procedures are clear, simple, and user-friendly
- Required instruction materials are easily located
- Course content is segmented for more manageable learning (e.g., in learning modules)
- Course content is organized in a logical format: topics and subtopics are clearly identified
- Course schedule is available in a printer-friendly format
- Resources are separated into “required” and “optional” categories
- Links to other parts of the course or external sources are accurate and up-to-date

c. Aesthetic Design and ADA Compliance

- Typeface is easy to read (e.g., Arial or Times New Roman)
- Sufficient contrast between text and background makes information easy to read, especially does not disadvantage those with color blindness
- Appropriate images supporting course content add visual interest
- Universal accessibility concerns are addressed throughout the course, including captions of any non-text objects
- Images are optimized for speedy display and include alternative text
- Alternative formats of materials provided, when possible (e.g., optional print packet of extensive reading materials, CD of audio clips used in course, media captions, etc.)

d. Consistency in Course

- Spelling and grammar are consistent and accurate
- Written material is concise
- Language of written material is friendly and supportive
- Clear directions are given for each task or assignment
- Sentences and paragraphs are brief

Category 3 – Instructional Design and Delivery

a. Promote Interaction and Communication

- Instructor introduces himself/herself to model interaction
- Students introduce themselves
- Students are encouraged to respond to classmate introductions
- "Ice-breaker" activity to get acquainted
- Opinions are respected
- Student participation is tracked and each student is drawn into the discussions
- Students may be assigned to facilitate discussion

b. Appropriate Tools to Facilitate Communication

- Discussion boards
- Synchronous chat
- Email, messaging, announcements
- Videoconferencing
- Group discussion areas, when appropriate for group activities
- Office hours when instructor is available to talk with students through a variety of methods, e.g.: chat, video conferencing, or telephone.

c. Learning Objectives and Activities are Integrated

- Activities to learn desired concepts are consistent with student abilities and course unit load
- Tasks and activities are designated as synchronous or asynchronous, sequential or may be completed in any order
- Instructional material may be viewed repeatedly (built-in redundancy)
- Summary and review activities are provided frequently, particularly at the end of topics, to reinforce learning

d. Activities to Develop Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving Skills

May include but are not limited to:

- Discussion questions designed to prompt communication and interaction
- Address multiple learning styles
- Enhance recall and application
- Linked to conceptual frameworks
- Compare-and-contrast exercises
- Case studies
- Critiques of classmates' assignments
- Collaborative exercises
- Portfolios to share/peer review

Category 4 – Assessment and Evaluation of Student Learning

a. Assessment Activities and Feedback

- Course assessments are aligned to learning objectives
- Course assignments have detailed instructions and established due dates (built-in redundancy)
- Activities are designed to determine students' current understanding
- Multiple assessment methods are used in the course
- Clear criteria are used to assess student work
- Students receive frequent, specific, and timely feedback on coursework
- Clear criterion is established and communicated in advance of assessments

Modified from *Instructional Design Tips for Online Learning* developed by Joan Van Duzer of Humboldt State University and *Rubric for Online Instruction* developed by California State University, Chico, 2002.