

+ Preparing Your Content for Online Delivery

The planning phase is very important in online course development. In an online environment, meaningful and measurable goals and objectives help your students to understand what you expect of them and help them organize their time and efforts so they can meet those expectations. It is also important to know your audience and to evaluate the suitability of your materials for online use.

Identifying Course Goals and Objectives

The key to delivering materials successfully online lies in your course goals and objectives. In an online environment, it is easy to get caught up in using the technology and lose the focus of what you are teaching and what your students need to learn. By clearly defining the goals and objectives of your course, you can stay on track.

Make sure your course goals clearly define what you expect as a learning outcome. For instance:

- Upon completion of this course, students will be able to describe the main differences between mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and birds.

Clear course goals can also help you arrange content and sequence instruction in a logical manner.

Next, decide what your students will achieve or be able to demonstrate as a result of taking your course. In other words, what are the objectives of the course? Objectives are statements of student behavior, not descriptions of what or how students will be taught.

Course objectives serve many purposes. They drive content and activity choice, as well as help to determine the structure, sequencing, and pacing of the course. They also tell students what you expect of them.

Be as specific as possible when writing course objectives. Students need to understand exactly what you expect of them. Use verbs that are active and measurable. For example, you can test whether a student can write a mathematical proof to solve a problem. But you cannot easily test whether

someone fully understands a concept or appreciates a topic. An example of a poorly written objective might be:

- Students will learn how to construct a mathematical proof of Fermat's Last Theorem.

An example of a better objective would be:

- Students will be able to use the Theory of Elliptical Functions to construct a proof of Fermat's Last Theorem.

To help you write effective course objectives, remember the acronym **SMART**:

Specific – define your goal and methods clearly.

Measurable – define your objectives numerically.

Achievable – your objectives must be realistic and attainable with the available resources.

Relevant – your objectives must address the stated need.

Timely – state the start and finish for your objectives.

Effective Design for Online Delivery

Effective content design can create a more compelling and engaging vehicle for your course material. More importantly, well-designed online course materials can increase the ease with which students navigate through your course and learn the material, and increase the amount of satisfaction students get from your course.

Accessibility is an especially important consideration in online course development. Your online course needs to be accessible—be easy to use and easy to understand—for all students. Can your course be used by students with different levels of ability, experience, knowledge, language skills, or concentration level? As an online instructor, keep in mind that students have different backgrounds and diverse needs. Some students may have a physical or learning disability. Some may be using older computer hardware, and others may be accessing your course from a dial-up connection.

Chances are you will have disabled students in an online course. According to the School of Public Health and Health Professions, almost one in five Americans has some type of disability. Below is a list of recognized disabilities:

- Visual: Visual impairments include blindness, low vision, poor eyesight, and color blindness.
- Motor and Mobility: Difficulty or inability to use the hands, including tremors, muscle slowness, loss of fine muscle control due to Parkinson's Disease, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, stroke, arthritis, youth, or age.
- Cognitive and Intellectual: Developmental disabilities, learning disabilities, cognitive disabilities affecting memory and attention.
- Auditory: Includes deafness or hearing impairments.
- Seizures: Photo-epileptic seizures caused by visual strobe or flashing effects.

Students whose first language is not English, and students working with slow Internet connections, older computers, and plug-ins will also be at a disadvantage. An accessible course will provide a better learning experience for them as well.

Complying with Section 508 is another reason to be concerned with accessibility. Section 508 requires that electronic and information technology developed, procured, maintained, or used by the United States Federal government be accessible to people with disabilities.

Creating Effective Online Content

Most well-designed online course materials have five elements in common:

- Text written for the Web
- Simple typography
- Simple, straightforward layout
- Well-chosen color scheme
- Graphics that are worth a 1000 words

When writing text for online materials:

- Write in brief sentences. Studies have shown people rarely read Web pages word by word. Instead, they skim the page, picking out individual words and sentences.
- Write as though you are having a conversation with your students. Keep the writing informal yet informative.

- Avoid jargon and unnecessarily complex or technical language. Do not assume all of your students will understand discipline-specific language.
- Start subheadings, paragraphs, and bullet points with keywords. This will allow students to quickly see these keywords when skimming down the left side of the page. Studies indicate online users read the first two words of a line more often than the third word.
- Write paragraphs that focus on one idea. Keep paragraphs short and simple. Put the most important points in your first paragraph.
- Break down pages into subcategories. Try to avoid forcing students to scroll to see text. For information that is interesting, but not mandatory, provide a link to a separate file in a Further Reading section.
- Put your most important content **above the fold** or in the region of the browser window that loads first. This portion of the Web page is visible without scrolling.
- Avoid using abbreviations or acronyms unless you provide a glossary of terms. Often abbreviations are rendered completely unintelligible when read by speech or Braille output software.
- Keep external links current. Nothing is more frustrating than clicking a link to a page that no longer exists.

Going Further for Accessibility

- To help students with learning disabilities, use graphics to convey textual information. Make sure icons are clear in their meaning. Always include a description of the graphic using the ALT attribute or the long description attribute.
- If additional information is in a new file on the page, warn blind users that a new window will open by adding the words **New window** to the link text.
- Use the Adaptive Release tool in Blackboard Learn to release content gradually and avoid overwhelming students who need more time to process information.