

# Online Course Design Essentials

*These research-based standards are used to design online and hybrid courses and assess online course quality at Northern Illinois University. All new and redeveloped courses are expected to meet essential standards and are strongly encouraged to meet exemplary standards. Courses that meet all noted essential standards are recognized as NIU quality essentials courses.*

## Course Overview and Introduction

The overall design of the course is made clear to the learner at the beginning of the course. The course overview and introduction set the tone for the course, let learners know what to expect, and provide other guidance to help learners succeed from the outset.

### Essential

- Instructions make clear how to get started and where to find various course components.
- Learners are introduced to the purpose and structure of the course.
- Course and institutional policies with which the learner is expected to comply are clearly stated within the course, or a link to current policies is provided.
- Minimum technology requirements for the course are clearly stated and instructions on how to obtain the technologies is provided.
- Computer skills and digital information literacy skills expected of the learner are clearly stated.

### Exemplary

- Communication expectations for online discussions, email, and other forms of interaction are clearly stated.
- Expectations for prerequisite knowledge in the discipline and/or any required competencies are clearly stated.
- The self-introduction by the instructor is professional and is available online.
- Learners are asked to introduce themselves to the class.

## Learning Objectives (Competencies)

Learning objectives or competencies describe what learners will be able to do upon completion of the course. The learning objectives or competencies establish a foundation upon which the rest of the course is based.

### Essential

- The course learning objectives, or course/program competencies, describe outcomes that are measurable.

### Exemplary

- The module/unit-level learning objectives or competencies describe outcomes that are measurable and consistent with the course-level objectives or competencies.
- Learning objectives or competencies are stated clearly, written from the learner's perspective, and are prominently located in the course.



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- The relationship between learning objectives or competencies and learning activities is clearly stated.
- The learning objectives or competencies are suited to the level of the course.

## Assessment and Measurement

Assessments are integral to the learning process and are designed to evaluate learner progress in achieving the stated learning objectives or mastering the competencies. Assessment is implemented in a manner that corresponds to the course learning objectives or competencies and not only allows the instructor a broad perspective on the learners' mastery of content, but also allows learners to track their learning progress throughout the course.

### Essential

- The assessments measure the achievement of the stated learning objectives or competencies.
- The course grading policy is stated clearly at the beginning of the course.
- Specific and descriptive criteria are provided for the evaluation of learners' work, and their connection to the course grading policy is clearly explained.
- The course provides learners with multiple opportunities to track their learning progress with timely feedback.

### Exemplary

- The assessments used are sequenced, varied, and suited to the level of the course.

## Instructional Materials

Materials for online and hybrid classes should be created for the audience of online and hybrid students. Online students feel at a disadvantage when they are merely given recording of on-campus activities or lectures. Instructional materials should prepare students for assessments. Research shows that using best practices for presenting instructional materials helps students learn more effectively (for example, using active learning strategies, where students perform meaningful actions involving course content and then reflect on learning).

### Essential

- The instructional materials contribute to the achievement of the stated learning objectives or competencies.
- The course models the academic integrity expected of learners by providing both source references and permissions for use of instructional materials.
- A variety of instructional materials is used in the course.

### Exemplary

- The relationship between the use of instructional materials in the course and completing learning activities is clearly explained.
- The instructional materials represent up-to-date theory and practice in the discipline.



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## Course Activities and Learner Interaction

Learning activities facilitate and support learner interaction and engagement. Course components that promote active learning contribute to the learning process and to learner persistence.

### Essential

- The learning activities promote the achievement of the stated learning objectives or competencies.
- The instructor's plan for interacting with learners during the course is clearly stated.
- The requirements for learner interaction are clearly stated.

### Exemplary

- Learning activities provide opportunities for interaction that support active learning.

## Course Technology

Course technologies support learners' achievement of course objectives or competencies. The technologies enabling the various tools used in the course facilitate rather than impede the learning process.

### Essential

- The tools used in the course support the learning objectives and competencies.

### Exemplary

- Course tools promote learner engagement and active learning.
- A variety of technology is used in the course.
- The course provides learners with information on protecting their data and privacy.

## Learner Support

The course facilitates learner access to institutional support services essential to learner success.

### Essential

- The course instructions articulate or link to a clear description of the technical support offered and how to obtain it.
- Course instructions articulate or link to the institution's accessibility policies and services.
- Course instructions articulate or link to the institution's academic support services and resources that can help learners succeed in the course. [NIU [student life](#) site and [student success tips and tools](#)].



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## Accessibility and Usability

The course design reflects a commitment to accessibility and usability for all learners. The course design utilizes the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and reflects a commitment to accessibility, ensuring all learners can access all course content and activities, and to usability, ensuring all learners can easily navigate and interact with course components.

### Essential

- Course navigation facilitates ease of use.
- The course provides alternative means of access to multimedia content in formats that meet the needs of diverse learners.

### Exemplary

- The course design facilitates readability.
- The course provides accessible text and images in files, documents, LMS pages, and web pages to meet the needs of diverse learners.
- Course multimedia facilitate ease of use.
- Vendor accessibility statements are provided for all technologies required in the course.



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