

Course Design Style Guide for Instructors

Introduction

The Course Design Style Guide is a set of standards for formatting courses in the Canvas Learning Management System (LMS). This guide was developed by the instructional designers in the Office of Learning Technologies (OLT).

Using this design style guide will help instructors ensure formatting, accessibility, and consistency that align with best practices. The goal is to achieve a consistent appearance across all courses for aesthetics, easy navigation, organization, and branding.

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Using and Locating OLT Course Templates

The OLT Instructional Designers use templates as a base for courses in Canvas to promote consistency in navigation within and across courses. OLT provides templates for online and oncampus courses. Some schools/college or departments may have their own Canvas course templates.

Instructors can request to have all or specific components of the OLT template to be placed into their Canvas course or import a course template from Canvas Commons. Follow [instructions to import or request an OLT Canvas course template](#).

Designing Modules

All courses should be organized using a module structure. Each module should contain all instructional materials, activities, and assessments for that module. Modules may be organized by week or by topic (across multiple weeks) depending on the instructor's preference and organization of the content.

- Modules should be named by module number followed by title and date.
 - Ex: Week 1: History of Psychology (August 1-7)
 - Dates for most weeks are Monday to Sunday. However, there are some exceptions. The last date of the last numbered module should end on the last day of class for the semester. The date on the final exam module should end on the last day of final exams. If the last week of class is both the last week of class and final exams (i.e. classes end on Wednesday and final exams are Thursday and Friday), the last module should be a numbered week and end on the date of the last day of final exams. The dates on the homepage should correspond to the dates on the modules.
- Content items should be named by module and item name (ex: Week 1: Instructional Materials, Week 1: Discussion or Module 1: Discussion, Module 1: Quiz). This helps to prevent confusion when seeing the items outside of the module (i.e. in Grades or To Do list).
- Modules may be called units, modules, weeks, etc. at the instructor's discretion. Use a consistent naming convention throughout the course.

Module Content Items

- Modules contain an About Module # page, Instructional Materials or Schedule page, activities and assignments, and a Wrap Up unless the instructor chooses otherwise.
- About Module # pages should contain a short introduction (about 1 paragraph) to the module topic, the module objectives, as well as the alignment chart (if used).
- Week #: Schedule or Instructional Materials pages should contain assigned readings, instructional videos, and optional content. Content should be sequenced to facilitate

learning. Consider number of pages and number of clicks when designing the module layout. Consider the load time of pages if they contain multiple videos. Multiple pages may be needed to separate videos.

- Activities and Assessments should be included in the module in the order students should complete them and to facilitate learning. Below are some options for organizing content.
 - Add all materials to one Schedule or Instructional Materials page. Add the activities and assessments to the module after the Schedule or Instructional Materials page.
 - Use multiple Instructional Materials pages to chunk content according to content. Add the associated activity or assessment in the appropriate order after the Instructional Materials page for each topic.
 - Add one Instructional Materials page with activities and assessments linked in order that students should complete them. Include the activities and assessments in the module as well.
- Wrap Up pages should contain a bulleted list of key takeaways from the module and, if appropriate, a list of items students should have completed before moving to the next module. If providing a list of items to complete, bullet the list and hyperlink the items.

Using the Text Editor

Whether you are editing a content page in a module, an assignment, a quiz, or an announcement, the text editor functions in the same way. Review the best practices below for using the text editor.

White Space

White space should be used to reduce eyestrain, increase readability, and lessen visual load for learners. White space includes aligning text and adding padding around multimedia elements with associated text. Content placed on the page should support the learner in making meaningful connections and in bridging the relationships among content in the module.

Headings

One way to provide structure to a page and reduce visual load for learners is to chunk text into paragraphs or sections. When doing this add a heading for each section. Use the tool in the tool bar to set that text to a heading level. For example, in this guide, the text **Using the Text Editor** is a heading 1 and **Headings** is a heading 2 since **Headings** is a section within the **Using the Text Editor** section. In the [Rich Content Editor Canvas Guide](#), see the Change Text Style section for instructions.

Alt Text

All images that are not decorative in purpose must contain an alternative text tag to describe the image for participants who use screen readers to access content. Follow [best practices for alt text](#). Review the [Canvas Guide for adding alt text](#).

For images that communicate meaning, include descriptive text that is relevant to your class. Consider how you would describe the image to a student who has a visual impairment.

Functional images or linked images (i.e. buttons) should describe what clicking the button will do. For example, the alt text for the home page buttons is "Access Module [x]."

Banners and other decorative images on Canvas pages can be marked as decorative in the image options. The alt text box should be empty with a space added. Do not leave the file name in the alt text box.

Hyperlinks

Hyperlinks should inform learners where the links lead them or what they will download. Do not state, "Click Here." Rather state, "Read more about hyperlinks on the [WebAIM website](#)." Do not start a sentence with a link. For increased accessibility, do not show the full URL:

<https://webaim.org/techniques/hypertext/>

Lists

Lists are also a great way to organize information. In the [Rich Content Editor Canvas Guide](#), there are instructions for adding bulleted and numbered lists.

Numbering vs. Bulleting Lists

Best practices vary on when to use numbers vs. bullets. When you decide the method to use, be consistent with that format. One option is to use bullets when the order is not important and numbers when there is a specific order. For example, when washing a car, you need to complete the following steps in order.

1. Gather supplies (sponge, bucket, soap, etc.)
2. Rinse vehicle
3. Apply soap
4. Rinse soap

Punctuation

Use a colon after the lead-in sentence if the items in a list complete the sentence. Use a period at the end of each item. For example:

Any good office should have:

- free drinks.
- free snacks.
- a napping couch.

Capitalization

Capitalize the first letter of each item in a list (but do not use a period after each item) if the item does not complete the sentence. For example:

Most employees surveyed agreed that any good office has the following elements.

- Free drinks
- Free snacks
- A napping couch