

creating online  
courses



vermont  
tech: a guide to best  
practices for  
teaching online

the syllabus

course layout

teaching tips

intro: Teaching online courses can be a daunting thought for many instructors, especially those who have never used the online forum for student learning. This guide is meant to provide best practices in online pedagogy and examples of what is needed to get an online course ready for students. With a bit of effort and creativity, you can create a successful online learning experience for students that achieves your desired course outcomes.

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# *creating an effective syllabus:* **the more, the better**

**I**f you have created syllabi for face-to-face courses, then you know that this document serves as the “contract” between you and your students. You wouldn’t want to enter into an agreement that is vague and lacking specifics, right? The same goes for your students; they need to know the details of your course so there is no confusion regarding any aspect, from grading to deadlines to expectations. Remember, online students don’t have the opportunity to receive in-person clarification that often occurs during that first meeting of face-to-face courses. For many, this may be their first online course, so creating an overly-detailed syllabus is one way to ease any anxiety related to a new learning forum. Repetition and redundancy is good.

The syllabus, while providing necessary grading and assignment information, should also be considered the “road map” for the course. Students will, at first, be unfamiliar with the layout of the online classroom;

provide them guidance in finding the different components of the course. If you will have lectures in one section, and tests in another, explain this, and how the two relate. If using a web site outside of Moodle, direct them to it in the syllabus.

Take a close look at your face-to-face syllabi and consider any language that may be misinterpreted. For instance, the term “participation” can be vague. What is “participation” when it comes to an online course? If it’s a certain number of posts, what constitutes an acceptable post - word count? Content? Being conscious of questions that arise regarding the syllabus in face-to-face courses can help you craft a better document for your online students.

The syllabus will be the one document most used by students; be thorough. If you can anticipate and answer many common questions via the syllabus, students are likely to begin the course feeling confident and prepared.

“...online students don’t have the opportunity to receive in-person clarification that often occurs during that first meeting of face-to-face courses...”

# online syllabus checklist

**When creating your online course syllabus, we recommend the following format:**

- Course title and Number
  - Credit hours
  - Term
  - Vermont Technical College Online
- Instructor's contact information
  - Name
  - Email
  - Office location
  - Phone
  - Virtual office hours (online availability for live help)
- Course Description
  - Should be more detailed than the course catalogue
- Course Objectives/Learning Outcomes
  - Focus on skills, abilities, application of materials
- Course Activities
  - A delineation of the types of learning activities included in the course, such as:
    - Readings
    - Presentations
    - Quizzes
    - Exams
    - Discussions
    - Research Paper/Projects
    - Homework Assignments
    - Etc.
- Required Texts/Resources/Software
  - Suggestions for where to purchase can be helpful

# online syllabus checklist

- Technical Requirements

- Hardware

- Software

- Skill prerequisites

- Link to IT support page

- Grading

- Explain all assessment types used and include percentages/points/weight

- How to submit an assignment (Moodle, email, etc.)

- Scales used (A=, B=, etc.)

- Expected feedback response time from instructor

- Make-up and Late work policy

- Vermont Tech Academic Honesty Policy

- Participation and Attendance Standard

- Student log in expectations

- Define quality participation

- Postings per week

- Classroom Conduct

- Define your “netiquette” standards

- Harassment Policy

- Course Navigation and Sequence

- Course layout and time line

- Weekly structure: assignment sequence, what constitutes a week, etc.

- When assignments are to be completed

- Where to post materials

- Where to find resources, etc.

# online syllabus checklist

- Weekly/Topic Schedule
  - Topic/Learning Objective covered
  - Readings
  - Lecture Materials
  - Discussion Questions
  - Assignments/Assessments (give specific due dates)
  - Additional Resources
- Learning Support Services
  - Library
  - Center for Student Success
- Other Resources and College Policies
  - Dropping the course
  - Incompletes
  - Academic Honesty
  - ADA Statement
  - Accessibility Policy



Remember that while you may provide specific directions and dates for assignments or required course components within Moodle, it's important to ensure your syllabus is up to date. Because this is the one document that will be most accessible, it's possible students will rely on this for due dates and specifics.

# course layout and

Creating an online course will require a great deal of planning on your part. Even if you teach the course in a face-to-face setting, making the transition to online delivery isn't as simple as putting all of your materials online. However, if you have a majority of your resources in digital format, you are well on your way.

One of the greatest challenges of teaching online is the lack of synchronous dialogue and personal interaction. As you begin to think about how you will design your course, consider what it is you want your students to gain from the class. Look at your learning objectives - if you have taught this class in a face-to-face setting, consider the activities you use to achieve

these objectives. It's likely that these may not directly translate to an online setting, however, with some creativity, you can create an experience equivalent to that of the classroom.

Before you begin moving all of your power points and lecture notes to Moodle, another consideration is course layout. Keep in mind that your Moodle page is now the "classroom," and should be organized for efficiency, clarity, and consistency.

The focus of any course, be it face-to-face or online, is the student experience. Creating an engaging, student-centered online course isn't easy, but the following steps can help steer you in the right direction.

## [initial steps for designing your course]

### 1. Gather your current materials and resources

Round up all of your materials for the course. This can include your syllabus, learning objectives, class handouts, rubrics, project guidelines, etc. Consider their current use in the course, and whether they would be appropriate for the online forum. Remember, not all activities will translate well into the online classroom. Making an existing face-to-face activity "fit" simply because it's there is often a mistake that first-time online instructors make. Being open to creating new learning experiences tailored to the online classroom is important.

## 2. Analyze

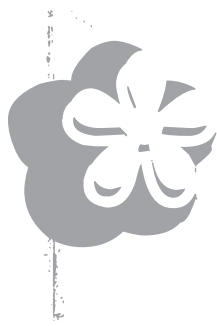
● Consider your target audience for the course. Will you be working with adults who are balancing a career, family, and school? How would this affect your course? Perhaps you are working with students from other states - keep in mind they may be in a different time zone. Next, consider yourself as an instructor - what kind of time are you willing to commit for course creation and instruction? A common misconception is that online courses are less work for both the student and instructor. This is not the case. Remember that there is no face time with these students, so your interaction with them comes in the form of detailed feedback and written communication. This can be time-consuming. Finally, consider the resources available to you. How will you convert any materials for online delivery? How will you gather new materials? What kind of technology is available to you? A careful, multi-faceted analysis can help you determine how prepared you are to move forward with your course.

## 3. Revisit learning objectives and goals

● While you may already have a set of learning objectives, closely consider how they will be addressed within the context of the online classroom. If you have yet to write learning objectives, remember that they are meant to be statements of what students will be able to demonstrate by the end of the course or unit. Don't be too narrow or broad in your statements. Clear objectives will act as the outline for activities and resources as you build the course.

## 4. Match activities to learning objectives

● Once you have your learning objectives finalized, write down corresponding activities, readings, videos, etc. that will be used to help students achieve that objective. If you can't link a resource or activity back to a specific learning objective, you may want to question its relevance to the course. As you make your list, be aware of the varied activities available to you in Moodle. Using the Course Objectives Planning Matrix (see document 1.1) can help you plan your units.



Find helpful planning documents  
at the end of this resource



## 5 Design a Unit of Study Plan

● Once you have mapped out your learning objectives and activities, formalize your units by creating a Unit of Study Plan (see document 1.2). This will help you expound upon your student tasks and assessments while planning your teaching activities. Creating a set of Guiding Essential Questions may also be a great way to generate forum discussion topics. While these differ from your learning objectives, they are questions that students should be able to answer once they have successfully achieved the learning objectives. Although this step may seem much like #4, this is where you become more detailed regarding student tasks and assessments.

## 6 Assess for balance

● Now that you have your units mapped out, your activities linked to the learning objectives, and your student tasks defined, you should assess how balanced your course is. Creating a successful online classroom requires a balance of teacher-centered and student-centered learning activities and assessments. One mistake often made by those new to online instruction is the desire to merely “present” the materials to students. The expectation is that students will learn simply by exposure. Remember, online students don’t have the luxury of getting immediate clarification of ideas and concepts. They need time to work with the material, and the creation of more student-centered learning is essential.

A balanced course also consists of varied assessment strategies. Providing ample opportunities for formative and self-assessment will greatly encourage your students and help them (and you) gauge their level of understanding. While summative assessments are often still needed, frequent checks for understanding will provide good direction for students.

## 7 Begin building your course in Moodle

● Now that you are comfortable with the plan for your course, begin building the activities and resources in Moodle. As you work on your course, reference the Quality Matters Rubric Standards (see document 1.3). This rubric provides a comprehensive approach to developing and assessing a quality course. It may be useful to ask a colleague to assess your course using the rubric to help identify areas for improvement.

# [suggestions for course layout]

When students enter the online classroom, they expect to easily navigate the course and find materials with little effort. If you have created a comprehensive syllabus, planned your units, and matched your activities to learning objectives, the material in the course will flow well. But, there are a few other things you can do to make viewing and accessing content a bit easier for your students. Remember, the screen is their window into the classroom, so anything you can do to keep it “clean” will help alleviate confusion and will increase efficiency.

## •Be Consistent•

First and foremost, be consistent in your course layout. Regardless of how you choose to order your materials, creating a predictable and replicable pattern of weekly/topic layout is important. Students become frustrated when they have to spend time trying to navigate materials that aren’t ordered in a coherent manner. Be consistent in your placement of recurring activities; use the same font size and color for labels. Students also experience anxiety at the start of a new course when they have to spend time re-learning the course layout of a new instructor. When possible, be consistent in your layout across all courses taught. Conferring with colleagues regarding their course layout structure is also a great idea. The goal is to create a consistent visual and navigational experience for students in all courses and programs.

## •Use “Week 0” Wisely•

The very top section in your Moodle course is referred to as “Week 0.” This section is always displayed at the top level, and should be used for essential course information such as: contact information, course syllabus, important course documents, etc. Place any documents or information that a student will regularly access in this section. You should also make use of the “News forum” for course announcements.

“...the screen is their window into the classroom...keep it “clean”...”

## •Use Labels•

Instructors often “dump” many files into a week and assume that students will know what to do with them. Think of any verbal directions you would give in class regarding a particular resource - these should translate into written directions for your online students. The “label” resource in Moodle is the best way to add text or images to the front page of your course. With labels, you can alter text size, color, and font, thus allowing for greater clarity around particular parts of the course. The below image shows labels (bold text) and how they can help provide direction and structure.


### Week 1: The Short Story

 Short Story Unit Learning Objectives

 Short Stories to be read

**What makes a short story tick? Together, we'll be looking at the basic elements of a short story. You will: see a PowerPoint that defines the elements of any short story, read and apply these terms, and be quizzed on your knowledge of them. Be prepared to discuss our readings in the short story forum as well.**

 Introductory Video

 Short Story PowerPoint

 Short Story Quiz - take after viewing and studying the PowerPoint- Requires Respondus LockDown Browser

**After reading the provided short stories, begin to think about which you'd like to analyze. You'll be asked to write an essay that includes identifying the short story elements as well as commentary on the author's theme. See the paper guidelines listed below for detailed directions as well as the grading rubric for this paper. This paper is Due Monday. Use the Paper #1 upload link to submit your paper.**

 Paper #1 Guidelines

 Paper #1 Grading Rubric



For a growing library of Moodle resources and tutorials, please visit the VTC support site:

support.vtc.edu

## •“Chunk” Information•

Breaking your resources and activities into “chunks” or groups makes content more visually logical. If you have several readings for a topic, group them. If you have an assignment consisting of several files/resources, group them. You can then create separation by using labels. When grouping, be consistent in your approach and placement - if you put a forum at the bottom of week 1, place the week 2 forum in the same location. The image below shows a unit broken into the following “chunks:” Unit objectives + readings, lecture materials + quiz, unit assignment, and unit forum.

### Week 1: The Short Story



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Paper #1 Guidelines



Paper #1 Grading Rubric



Paper #1 Upload - Due Monday

**For this week's forum, please discuss the relationship between the 3 short stories assigned, making sure to compare and contrast. This will help you write your paper which is due on Monday. For a refresher on the forum expectations and grading procedure, please refer back to the [Course Outline](#) at the top of the course within the course documents folder.**



Short Story Discussion Forum - Group A (Grouping A)





Short Story Discussion Forum - Group B (Grouping B)

## •Create Order for Materials•

Once you have grouped and labeled your materials, make sure to list them in the order that they should be viewed. With some simple moving (left or right), you can help create a visual “path” for the completion of materials. The following image shows how spacing can create a strong visual sense of order.

 [Introductory Video](#)

 [Short Story PowerPoint](#)

 [Short Story Quiz - take after viewing and studying the PowerPoint- Requires Respondus LockDown Browser](#)

## •Use Folders•

While having many files is not a bad thing, letting them take up precious front page space is. Keep in mind that some students may be accessing the course from a mobile device or slower computer, so keeping your front page as “clean” as possible will help increase load time and will help eliminate excessive scrolling. When possible, add folders to your course, placing related files within it. If you have four pdf articles that can be grouped, place them in a folder. This only takes up one line of space, as opposed to four.

 [Short Story Unit Learning Objectives](#)

 [Short Stories to be read](#)

## •Avoid Distractions•

Because students are literally one click away from exiting your course, the threat of losing their attention to distracting elements is high. Though it may be tempting to add images to the front page of your course for aesthetic purposes, they can actually be distracting, and even off-putting. Large images can slow load time, and increase the size of the page, making for more scrolling when finding materials. Now, you may have images required for learning activities, but those can be added as files or a new page of the course that students click to view.

Online videos are also an integral part of many courses. Sites like YouTube, which are popular resources, can present their own set of distractions: ads, appealing content, etc. When possible, embed these videos in the course, so students aren’t leaving Moodle to watch them. If you simply give a video link, students may get sidetracked by other videos hosted on that site.



# teaching online:



**icebreaker** - begin courses with some form of introductory activity. This is especially important in online courses where there is a lack of face-to-face interaction. You can also use it to introduce any special needs for the course such as schedule, technology, etc. Encourage (but don't require) photos for a more personal atmosphere.

**the lounge** - just as you create forums for announcements and discussions, why not set one up for general conversation? This forum may foster relationship building and can serve as a social "hang out" for your students. It can also help prevent off-topic posts in your academic forums.

**presence** - be regular but personal in your presence in online discussions. Students can tell when an instructor is simply posting to give the appearance of being present. While you can not reply to every post, be thoughtful and personal in your feedback when you do. Address the student by name, and avoid comments that simply affirm their response - encourage critical thinking when possible.

**rubrics** - when possible (and practical), use rubrics for learning activities. It's best practice to provide students the rubrics before beginning the activity. A clear, concise rubric can even make grading faster!

**stay put** - keep as much of your content in Moodle as possible. Having students use too many "pieces" can create disorder and frustration. When students will need to navigate away from the course, have links open in new windows so their Moodle session remains open. Providing a master list of outside resources can also help keep students organized.

**attention!** - keeping your students' attention in an online classroom can be a challenge. Keep your videos, lectures, podcasts, etc. short. Chunking information into 10-15 minute pieces will help keep students from drifting or not finishing altogether. It's also easier for students who access the course for shorter periods of time.

**pdf vs. doc** - when possible, posting documents as pdf files is best. Word documents can lose formatting between systems, be easily altered, and also require the user to have Word installed. Pdf files retain formatting and can't be altered as easily. Pdf files can also be compressed for faster opening time. To convert a word document to a pdf, simply open the file in word, choose save as, and select pdf.

**accessibility** - as you create your materials, keep accessibility in mind. The more you can do up front, the better. Provide captions and descriptions for images, provide written transcripts for voice narrations, etc.

# Course Objectives Planning Matrix

Learning Objective/Unit:	Instructor-Created Materials	Readings, Resources, Links, Etc.	Student Activities	Assessments

# Unit of Study Plan

Unit:

Learning Objectives:

Guiding Essential Questions:

Knowledge Gained:

Skills Gained:

Student Performance Tasks: (products)

Other Assessments:



# Unit of Study Plan

Teaching and Learning Activities:



## Quality Matters™ Rubric Standards 2011 - 2013 edition with Assigned Point Values



### Standards

### Points

<b>Course Overview and Introduction</b>	1.1 Instructions make clear how to get started and where to find various course components.	3
	1.2 Students are introduced to the purpose and structure of the course.	3
	1.3 Etiquette expectations (sometimes called “netiquette”) for online discussions, email, and other forms of communication are stated clearly.	2
	1.4 Course and/or institutional policies with which the student is expected to comply are clearly stated, or a link to current policies is provided.	2
	1.5 Prerequisite knowledge in the discipline and/or any required competencies are clearly stated.	1
	1.6 Minimum technical skills expected of the student are clearly stated.	1
	1.7 The self-introduction by the instructor is appropriate and available online.	1
	1.8 Students are asked to introduce themselves to the class.	1
<b>Learning Objectives (Competencies)</b>	2.1 The course learning objectives describe outcomes that are measurable.	3
	2.2 The module/unit learning objectives describe outcomes that are measurable and consistent with the course-level objectives.	3
	2.3 All learning objectives are stated clearly and written from the students' perspective.	3
	2.4 Instructions to students on how to meet the learning objectives are adequate and stated clearly.	3
	2.5 The learning objectives are appropriately designed for the level of the course.	3
<b>Assessment and Measurement</b>	3.1 The types of assessments selected measure the stated learning objectives and are consistent with course activities and resources.	3
	3.2 The course grading policy is stated clearly.	3
	3.3 Specific and descriptive criteria are provided for the evaluation of students' work and participation and are tied to the course grading policy.	3
	3.4 The assessment instruments selected are sequenced, varied, and appropriate to the student work being assessed.	2
	3.5 Students have multiple opportunities to measure their own learning progress.	2
<b>Instructional Materials</b>	4.1 The instructional materials contribute to the achievement of the stated course and module/unit learning objectives.	3
	4.2 The purpose of instructional materials and how the materials are to be used for learning activities are clearly explained.	3
	4.3 All resources and materials used in the course are appropriately cited.	2
	4.4 The instructional materials are current.	2
	4.5 The instructional materials present a variety of perspectives on the course content.	1
	4.6 The distinction between required and optional materials is clearly explained.	1
<b>Learner Interaction and Engagement</b>	5.1 The learning activities promote the achievement of the stated learning objectives.	3
	5.2 Learning activities provide opportunities for interaction that support active learning.	3
	5.3 The instructor's plan for classroom response time and feedback on assignments is clearly stated.	3
	5.4 The requirements for student interaction are clearly articulated.	2
<b>Course Technology</b>	6.1 The tools and media support the course learning objectives.	3
	6.2 Course tools and media support student engagement and guide the student to become an active learner.	3
	6.3 Navigation throughout the online components of the course is logical, consistent, and efficient.	3
	6.4 Students can readily access the technologies required in the course.	2
	6.5 The course technologies are current.	1
<b>Learner Support</b>	7.1 The course instructions articulate or link to a clear description of the technical support offered and how to access it.	3
	7.2 Course instructions articulate or link to the institution's accessibility policies and services.	3
	7.3 Course instructions articulate or link to an explanation of how the institution's academic support services and resources can help students succeed in the course and how students can access the services.	2
	7.4 Course instructions articulate or link to an explanation of how the institution's student support services can help students succeed and how students can access the services.	1
<b>Accessibility</b>	8.1 The course employs accessible technologies and provides guidance on how to obtain accommodation.	3
	8.2 The course contains equivalent alternatives to auditory and visual content.	2
	8.3 The course design facilitates readability and minimizes distractions.	2
	8.4 The course design accommodates the use of assistive technologies.	2