

Online Course Design Best Practices Checklists

What is it?

This checklist provides guidelines to assist with creating high-quality online courses. This checklist can be used when **designing and developing** new online courses, **reviewing** a previously developed online course, or to provide ideas for **revising** an existing online course.

The checklist is divided into two steps: Foundational Best Practices and Advanced Best Practices. Step 1 – “Foundational” contains best practices that are relatively easy to integrate into an online course. Step 2 – “Advanced” contains best practices that are also integral but may take more time to implement.

The items in the checklist coincide with many of the standards in the [Quality Matters \(QM\) rubric](#), which is based on research in online learning and instructional design. The checklist is meant to be a self-check guide for online course design and not meant to be prescriptive.

Why use it?

The checklist provides a convenient way to consider research-based best practices in online learning when designing, reviewing, and revising online courses. This checklist will help in areas such as organization and navigation, online-specific course policies, alignment, presence, accessibility, technology, and more.

How to use it

Use the checkboxes to the left of each statement to identify whether your course contains that particular item. If it does not, or if you would like more information on the item or information on how to include it in your course, visit the Resources page of the Online Teaching website (<https://www.kent.edu/kso/resources>), which will provide added guidance and tutorials. For items contained in the Kent State Online Canvas template, the template is available when creating or copying your course in Canvas and is fully editable and customizable. Visit our Explore the Template webpage (<https://www.kent.edu/kso/explore-template>) for additional help or information on using the Kent State Online Canvas template.

Step 1: Foundational Best Practices

☐ Instructor Introduction and Contact Information¹

What is it? A way to establish teaching presence and preferred methods of contact. At a minimum, include a photo of yourself and contact information, as well as anything you wish to share about your expertise, teaching philosophy, expectations, etc. Ideally, a short video is recommended so that students can see and hear you as well.

Why should I do it? To introduce yourself to your students and let them know how to contact you. This item also addresses QM Standard 1.8, “The self-introduction by the instructor is welcoming and is available in the course site.”

How do I do it? Create a text item on the course homepage or consider creating a short webcam video with Kaltura or another technology. Include your email, phone number, and preferred communication method in the syllabus and in this item. Resources on how to create videos for online learning are available on the [Build](#) page of the Online Teaching website in the document [How to Create an Instructor Introduction Video](#).

☐ Course Overview/Orientation

What is it? Created as a screencast or narrated presentation, this item provides an overview of the course learning objectives and structure that may also highlight student expectations and some larger assignments.

Why should I do it? To provide students with crucial overview information that helps them understand course structure and expectations. This item also addresses QM Standard 1.2, “Learners are introduced to the purpose and structure of the course.”

How do I do it? The course overview can be a screencast navigation walking students through the course, and/or a narrated presentation or text-based narrative. The key aspects to include are clear statements on how to get started, where to find key pieces like the course schedule, exploration of the course organization, etc. Resources regarding how to create videos for online learning are available on the [Build](#) page of the Online Teaching website in the document [How to Create a Course Overview Screencast](#).

☐ “Start Here” Section or Module²

What is it? The “Start Here” section or module gives students sequential steps for what they need to read, watch, or do to begin the course on the first day.

¹ Placeholder for this item is included in the Kent State Online Canvas template.

² Placeholder for this item is included in the Kent State Online Canvas template.

Why should I do it? This course component lets students know how to begin their course when they first log in, and addresses QM Standard 1.1, “Instructions make clear how to get started and where to find various course components.”

How do I do it? You can provide the link to the Kent State University Online Learning webpage called [Getting Started in Your Online Course](#) to minimally meet this best practice. However, consider including this link in a section on the course homepage that also includes items such as the syllabus, the course schedule, and the course overview/orientation.

☐ Syllabus With Information Specific to Online Courses¹

What is it? Online courses have special policies and expectations that the syllabus should outline including attendance, netiquette, communication, where to go for technology help/support, etc.

Why should I do it? Students need to be aware of both course and institutional policies, especially those that are specific to online courses.

How do I do it? Refer to the [Kent State Online Syllabus template](#) for suggested wording and examples of what to include in your online course syllabus.

☐ Technology: Skills, Access, and Help²

What is it? Online students need to know what technology they’ll need to know/use, how they can access/download any required technology for the course, and how they can get help or support when they have a technology problem.

Why should I do it? Making sure that students know what technology skills they must have, what software/hardware they need, and who to go to for help will set them up for success and greatly reduce or eliminate their turning to you for technology support. This item also addresses QM Standards 1.5, 1.7, 6.3, and 7.1.

How do I do it? Refer to the [Kent State Online Syllabus template](#) for suggested wording and examples of what to include. Technology help links are also part of the [Kent State Online Canvas template](#), and information is also listed on the [Getting Started in your Online Course](#) webpage, which is kept updated.

☐ Turnaround Time³

What is it? A way to let students know when they can receive a reply to a question and when they will receive grades/feedback from an assignment.

¹ Placeholder and suggest wording for this item is included in the Kent State Online syllabus template.

² Placeholder and suggested wording for this item is included in the Kent State Online syllabus template. Information and direct links to technology help are also included in the Kent State Online Canvas template.

³ A placeholder for this item is included in the Kent State Online syllabus template.

Why should I do it? Letting students know when they can expect a response to questions will help them plan better and reduce their anxiety. Also, timely assignment feedback ensures that students can use your feedback when working on the next assignment. This item also addresses QM Standard 5.3, “The instructor’s plan for regular interaction with learners in substantive ways during the course is clearly stated.”

How do I do it? Decide when students will receive a reply to a question (for example 24 hours during the week; 48 hours on the weekend), and when they can expect grades/feedback on assignments (consider the duration of the course and when they will need your feedback so they can implement it on the next assignment and/or gauge how they are doing in the course).

☐ Communication Policy/Netiquette¹

What is it? Information to let students know your expectations for communicating professionally in an online environment (commonly referred to as “netiquette”).

Why should I do it? Online students need guidance on how to interact with each other in a virtual classroom, including things such as what is considered an appropriate, substantive contribution to an online discussion. Netiquette is addressed in QM Standard 1.3, “Communication guidelines for the course are clearly stated.”

How do I do it? Include a netiquette policy and additional guidance on how students should contribute quality posts in online discussions, group work, etc.

☐ Course Schedule with Due Dates and Times

What is it? A document or checklist showing due dates (and times!) for activities and assignments. Consider following a consistent pattern of activities and due dates from week to week throughout the course span to help students better plan and manage their time.

Why should I do it? Having a concise list of due dates is essential for online students, who have to self-manage their time more than face-to-face students. As you develop your course schedule, consider that having nights and weekends available to complete schoolwork benefits students with professional and family commitments. This item also addresses QM Standard 1.2, “Learners are introduced to the purpose and structure of the course.”

How do I do it? A course schedule template is available on the [Build](#) page of the Online Teaching website.

¹ Placeholder and suggest wording for this item is included in the Kent State Online syllabus template.

□ Consistent Course Structure and Good Navigation¹

What is it? Course structure refers to the organization of the course content and assessments; consider creating learning modules and having a consistent structure within the modules. Navigation refers to how your course is laid out and whether it is user-friendly for your students.

Why should I do it? Good course structure and navigation can reduce frustration and allow students to focus more on learning rather than finding items. This item also helps to address QM Standard 8.1: "Course navigation facilitates ease of use."

How do I do it? For good navigation and layout, begin with the Kent State Online template. Within your course, the structure should be logical and consistent and organized, rather than just listing items on your course homepage.

□ Measurable Learning Objectives/Outcomes

What is it? Learning objectives/outcomes are measurable, performance-based statements describing what students are expected to be able to do by the end of the course.

Why should I do it? To let students know from the beginning what they will be able to do by the end of the course. This item also addresses QM Standard 2.1, "The course-level learning objectives describe outcomes that are measurable."

How do I do it? Unless your learning objectives/outcomes are mandated and cannot be changed, ensure that your outcomes are measurable, performance-based, and written clearly from the student perspective. For help in developing measurable learning objectives, please visit the [Design Page](#) of the Online Teaching Website.

□ Assignments: Knowledge checks, Assessments, and Alignment

What is it? Assignments are comprised of assessments (larger projects showing evidence that students have achieved course objectives) and practice learning activities (knowledge checks).

Why should I do it? Assignments provide evidence of student learning in a course, and should be sequenced and include different types of activities in order to promote learning achievement and increase engagement, motivation, and self-efficacy. This item also helps to meet QM Standards 3.1 ("The assessments measure the stated learning objectives or competencies") and Standard 3.5 ("The types and timing of assessments provide learners with multiple opportunities to track their learning progress with timely feedback.").

¹ Good navigation, based on standards of usability, is already reflected in the Kent State Online Canvas template.

How do I do it? Ensure your online assignments are aligned with course objectives/outcomes, and that students have low-stakes ways to check their knowledge with quizzes, short essays, reflective journals, etc. For help in developing online assignments, visit the [Design](#) page of the Online Teaching website.

☐ Narrated Presentations/Lectures

What is it? A narrated PowerPoint or other type of visual presentation that presents course information and concepts and is created as a video file that is ten minutes or less. Text-heavy presentations and “talking head” videos without visuals should be avoided, and larger topics can be “chunked up” for ease of viewing and cognitive processing.

Why should I do it? Narrated presentations are a primary way to add your expertise and guidance. They are the “lectures” of an online course.

How do I do it? Resources regarding how to create illustrated, narrated presentations for online learning are available on the [Build](#) page of the Online Teaching website.

☐ Student Interaction

What is it? In an online class, students have a variety of ways to interact, such as: discussions, blog comments, wikis and other group/collaborative work, and peer feedback.

Why should I do it? Student-student interaction can serve to increase social presence, promote engagement, reduce transactional distance, and contribute to the formation of an online learning community.

How do I do it? Interaction opportunities must be designed and built into your online course. Provide opportunities for students to engage with each other through collaborative assignments including group/class discussions, small-group projects, problem-solving assignments, and/or peer critiques. Resources related to interaction opportunities are available on the [Resources](#) page of the Online Teaching website.

Step 2: Advanced Best Practices

☐ Alignment

What is it? Alignment refers to all course components working together to ensure students meet the desired outcomes. Stated simply, the materials in your online course should directly support students in completing your assignments, which should provide evidence to you that they have achieved your course learning outcomes/objectives.

Why should I do it? Alignment ensures that there are no gaps or redundancies in your course, that students are only doing the work that is connected to your course objectives, and that only the most relevant content is included.

How do I do it? For step-by-step self-help with alignment, please visit the [Design Page](#) of the Online Teaching website.

☐ Accessibility

What is it? In online learning specifically, accessibility refers to the extent to which an online course, including materials, the LMS (Learning Management System), etc., is accessible for learners with disabilities.

Why should I do it? University policy 3342-3-01.3 requires that students with disabilities be provided reasonable accommodations to ensure their equal access to course content. An important consideration of accessibility is that it must be provided to students with a documented need, and legal liability and financial penalties can be applied if it is not.

How do I do it? Examples of reasonable accommodation and accessibility of course learning materials includes text transcripts for audio files and narrated presentations, closed-captioned videos, ALT tag descriptions for images, and tables and use of styles in MS Word documents. **For questions or support**, please contact [Student Accessibility Services](#) for assistance. You can also find more information on accessibility on the [Build](#) page of the Online Teaching website.

☐ Provide Context for Content/Materials

What is it? All items within your course should have a short description to provide students with an explanation of why the item is included and how it supports the outcomes/objectives (what they'll use the information for).

Why should I do it? To help your students know what to read/listen for when interacting with course content, and help them focus on how they will use this information on course assignments. This item also meets QM Standard 4.2, "The relationship between the use of instructional materials in the course and completion of learning activities and assessments is clearly explained."

How do I do it? Add a 1-3 sentence description for each content item that identifies: what it is, how students will access it, and how they should use it (e.g., “This is a scholarly article on [topic], and is a downloadable pdf that will open in a new tab. When you read it, pay particular attention to [these topics]. You will use information from this article to complete [name of assignment].)

Copyright

What is it? Quotes, videos, articles, images, and any other content that you include in your course, should be available for use in the manner you have applied it, be properly cited, and/or you should have clearance to include it in your course.

Why should I do it? Copyrighted materials may require a Fair Use / Copyright assessment to meet the university’s legal obligations.

How do I do it? Consider using [Creative Commons](#), [Wikimedia Commons](#), or other websites for Public Domain content to be certain that you are not infringing on anyone else’s intellectual property. For more information, visit [Copyright Services](#) through Kent State University Library. The university allocates up to \$500 per course for copyright clearance. Requests for copyright clearance must be submitted to: Cindy Kristof, Head, Copyright and Document Services, ckristof@kent.edu.