The Elements Online Courses Must Have

1) **An introduction to the course should be online continuously.** People possibly interested in the course should be able to access an overview of it before enrolling and verify its location on the web. It also enables them to communicate with the instructor before enrolling -- about course content, computer skills requirements, prerequisites, etc. A course syllabus should be part of the introduction.

2) **Training in accessing and navigating the course should be available.** Students often put off obtaining e-mail accounts as long as they can, avoid getting basic computer operation help until the class is underway, plan to purchase a computer and then find they cannot afford one when the time comes, or presume they can access the Internet if they simply have access to a computer. Early communication with students is imperative, and pre-course basic training in how to navigate the course, use e-mail, and participate in class discussions is strongly advised.

3) **A course syllabus should be presented no later than at the first class.** Especially for students who have never before taken an online course and for whom the participation and and other requirements may be untypical, they need to know just as early as possible what to expect. The syllabus should show at least the following:

1. number and title of the course,
2. instructor's name and e-mail address,
3. instructor's office and (if available) home page location,
4. instructor's in-person office hours and phone number,
5. course start date, length of the course, and expected time involvement of students,
6. textbook(s) and other materials needed for the course,
7. an outline of the course format and a clear description or exercise in the use of navigational aids used in the course,
8. a concise description of the course content,
9. an evaluation plan and exam and project schedule,
10. an explanation of the forms of student participation and instructor expectations regarding participation, and
11. a list of all students in the class and a description of means for students to communicate online with both the entire class and with individual classmates.

4) **Online material should be attractive.** This is different than simply clear text and well organized material. It should be graphically appealing. Researchers at the University of British Columbia rated 127 online courses according to 43 criteria. They found that how a course looks can be just as important as the lessons themselves.

5) **There should be a wealth of links to other sites on the Internet.** Links should also be provided to anecdotal pages and other parts of the course. The course should be as dynamic as possible (as opposed to strictly linear, or lock step).

6) **Mechanically the course should be fully functional.** All links should work, images should pop in as designed, and classes should appear on line as scheduled. Especially if the course has been offered online previously, the mechanics should be thoroughly checked as each page is reloaded. Links that work, for example, suggest that course material is up-to-date and the instructor has prepared adequately for this class.

7) **Material presented on the web should be compatible with the course type.** If chalkboard work, slides, and other visuals would be important in a classroom version of the course, web materials should include a lot of graphic images. If field trips would be important in a classroom course, online video, required outside video viewing, or individual camcorded field trips should be included. If construction projects would be involved in a classroom, at-home projects should be included. Problem-solving, small group discussion, research, and other common classroom activities all have equivalent or better online counterparts.

8) **Material should be presented in such a way that it is compatible with a number of learning styles.** Visual learners benefit most from charts, maps, filmstrips, notes and flashcards. Auditory learners benefit most from tapes, videos, lectures, notes, and recitation. Tactile learners benefit most from writing repetition, construction and display projects, note taking, analogy, and study sheets. Consider all three styles when designing course material and activities. To learn more about them, see "How People Learn" at [Teaching Tips](https://www.honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/teachtip.htm) in the Faculty Guidebook at this site.

9) **Material should be presented logically, but students should be able to move around in class at ease.** Navigational aids to discussion forums, classmate e-mail links, references, and the instructor should be nearby at all times.

10) **Students should be able to readily and easily communicate with the instructor online.** Some degree of immediacy is required. Students should not need to wait a day or more to have questions answered. An advantage of online instruction is its flexibility. Rather than simply slowing down the question-response process that in a classroom is immediate, it should be possible for students to ask questions and receive responses outside of instructor office hours and as immediately as convenient to everyone involved.

11) **Students should be able to "speak" to the class as a whole** in "threaded discussions" where e-mail messages are organized by topic. Chat sessions might also be used, but they should be used only in addition to threaded discussions. A very important advantage of online instruction is the opportunity it affords students to "attend" classes at times that their different schedules allow. Requiring them to participate at tightly scheduled times eliminates this advantage.

12) **Keep it interesting.** Avoid too much text without a break, vary activities, and keep it light and fun. Incorporate a lot of color (as we tried to do at this Faculty Development site), small animations, video clips, sound, etc. Refer to individual students by name, use more contractions (it's, we'll, they're) than in formal writing, (again) include links to other sites, brief personal experiences, lighthearted comments, and interesting anecdotes. Remember, however, that students cannot see you, so what you think is lighthearted may not seem so online unless you somehow make it clear. Look for and use online substitutes for body language. Involve students in the actual presentation of at least some of the material.

13) **Use good English.** Mistakes in writing are more prominent online than in speaking. Course material should look professional and the instructor should look educated and responsible. The online course should look well planned, and text should look proofread. It should be an example of the quality expected in the students' own work.

14) **Pages should load quickly.** If online text for a class is lengthy, it should be presented on separate pages linked together so that each page loads in a reasonably short time. Graphic images should be kept small in both graphical and file size. Scanned photos can often be cropped to eliminate unimportant backgrounds and peripheral elements. GIF format is preferred over JPG format. Page banners should be kept simple and shallow. When a number of link buttons is given, often a single image with hotspots is best. Animations must be kept very small. Video clips should be linked rather than embedded.

15) **Outside experts should be involved when appropriate.** Trade association representatives, the textbook author(s), local and international writers and critics, government officials, other college and university instructors, and many other outside resource people are often very willing to participate online with students,

16) **Special attention should be given to testing design and procedures.** Without classroom controls that are easy to maintain, tests should be designed specifically to ensure evaluation integrity. Online instructors should realize that giving an online test is equivalent to giving a classroom test where the instructor is not present and where students can use all notes and other materials, consult with each other, and seek help from experts and students who have previously taken the course. Online true-false, multiple choice, simple answer, matching, and other common objective-type tests should not be given online unless they are self-check or practice tests and not graded. Discussion, comparison, interpretation and other types of online tests may be given with great care and short completion time requirements. Proctored exams that account for a major portion of students' grades are preferred. For distant students, tests can usually be sent to instructors or testing center professionals at other colleges located close to the students.

17) **Attention should be paid to when classes go on line and how long they remain there.** An advantage of online courses is the flexibility afforded students to attend at times when their schedules allow. Some students will attend during the daytime, others at night, and still others on weekends. This accommodation should be built into every online course. Some students will also need to spend more time than others "in" class. Some students will go slow and benefit from the online form as a result. Others will speed through classes and benefit from not being hampered by slower-paced students. However, it is probably best to not allow students to proceed at any pace whatsoever, even if the course is competency based. Some students will go slow because they really need to, but others will simply procrastinate, fall far behind, and possibly drop the course because of a lack of adequate discipline in the course. At the same time, the speedier students may be inclined to discuss with the class material that most of the students have not yet gotten to. The best discussions, team work, and involvement occur when the class is roughly together in the course. So the window of opportunity for attending classes should be given serious thought. On average, a two-week window of opportunity might be best. Classes may go on line when scheduled and remain on line for two weeks to accommodate the slower students, those who cannot attend as scheduled, those who are sick or for other reasons must occasionally miss classes at scheduled times, etc., with the speedier students being afforded more in-depth or higher-level material to satisfy their interest or temperament levels.