

💡 Tips

50 Instructional Design Tips for Online Courses



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01

CONQUER YOUR SUBJECT



Learn your subject

CONQUER YOUR SUBJECT

01

It may seem obvious, but the best teachers have an in-depth knowledge of their subject, and if that falls below a certain point, it has a "significant impact" on students' learning and enjoyment. The reason is apparent: **You can't teach something if you are not an expert at it.** Study, focus and advance your understanding of particular areas where your knowledge is weak.





Set goals

02



Learning goals are **the heart of course design**. Use learning goals as a roadmap for your course development. Set clear and concise learning objectives.

Learning objectives:

- ◆ direct your selection of instructional activities
- ◆ help learners understand what the instructor expects of them
- ◆ guide your assessment strategies

Writing down your learning objectives keeps you focused and helps you in planning.



Sequence performance objectives

03

What about the sequence of the learning objectives? Identify and apply a sequencing approach that is appropriate for the specific learners and the specific learning content and context. Sequencing can be **Chronological, Topical, Whole-to-part, Part-to-whole, Known-to-unknown, Unknown-to-known, Step-by-step, General-to-specific.**





Create a great e-course title

04



The title happens to be the most crucial element of an online course. It can determine whether a customer (or potential learner) will “click” on the course or not. Craft a catchy title and capture your students’ imagination. Make it short, precise, memorable and SEO-friendly by including strong keywords in it.



Search everything on the topic



You may already be an expert. But there is always something new out there. Search everything everywhere, on Google, Google Images, YouTube, Amazon Books, Blogs, Magazines, Academic Courses, Online Courses, Scientific Libraries, Webinars, Conferences.

Create a Personal Learning Network for being always updated: follow other instructors on Twitter and Instagram, join related Facebook groups and newsletters, subscribe to blog feeds. Keep learning.



Organize your content

CONQUER YOUR SUBJECT

06

You probably have collected a lot of information from different sources. But you can't have an excellent course if your contents are not coherent. Besides, you don't want to be giving out unorganized information that people could get anywhere else for free.

Brainstorm all the subtopics you would like to include in the course. Take a step back and look at the learning material critically. Is there any **classification** possible to make? Should you include all categories in only one course?





Focus on complex issues



Apply the 80/20 rule. The 80/20 rule means that some concepts, say **about 20% of a curriculum, require more effort** and time than roughly 80% of others. So be prepared to carve out time to **understand, elaborate and expand on complex topics.**



02

UNDERSTAND YOUR LEARNERS



Analyze the requested change

Learning involves change, a change in competence, ability, understanding, attitude, belief, or whatever. Before designing your course, answer carefully the following questions:

- ◆ What is the change being requested (including who is being asked to change)?
- ◆ Is a course the most appropriate means for bringing about the desired change?
- ◆ What is currently taking place with the individual or individuals being asked to change?



Assess your learners' goals

UNDERSTAND YOUR LEARNERS



Create questionnaires and send them early on to your students asking them about their learning goals and their motivation:

Experience:

What do you already know about the subject? Do you know the basic principles of the field? Or are you only familiar with detailed facts and rote procedures without understanding the bigger picture?

Motivation for Learning:

Do you want to improve for your current job or for qualifying for a new job?

Learning Context:

Where and when will you learn? How much time do you have available for learning?

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Assess your learners' preferences

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Create questionnaires and send them early on to your students asking them about their learning preferences:

Mental discipline: Are you self-motivated and self-disciplined? Are you easily distracted?

Social Skills: How well do you work with others? Are you open to criticism?

Media preferences: Which learning media do you prefer? Video, graphics, voice, music or text? Which do you perceive as more authoritative?





Design according to students' differences



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According to the students' answers, you must follow different design guidelines. Knowing, for example, that you are dealing with **busy learners**, you need to design **short, self-contained sequences of learning activities**. If they travel a lot, you may allow them to **download learning material** and read it offline and announce deadlines well in advance.



Develop your course with your students



Know that you may not have to create the whole content before delivering your course. Two or three weeks into a course and you can ask students how their course experience is going and what they are expecting from the sections to come. Make sure that you add your learners early in feedback loop. By doing this, you adjust better the next steps of your course to your audience. Just ask a question like: *"What I really need now is...."*



03

ORGANIZE CONTENT



Start mapping out each course section

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Use "Boords" to map out the contents of every single part of your course. As your work progresses, the learning units titles will become even better and precise. Also, new ideas for learning units will come forth. After deciding the content of each section, you will have a clearer picture of your activities. **Are there enough challenging unit blocks students would love?**



1 Why use video

↳ Video Script

↳ Video Watching



2 4 Video Types Necessary for a Course

↳ Thoughts

- ↳ Ebook
- ↳ Welcome Video
- ↳ Video Trigger
- ↳ Core video
- ↳ Conclusion video



3 Explore Video Content Ideas

↳ Thoughts

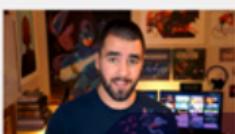
- ↳ Ebook
- ↳ Self Recorded
- ↳ Video Tutorials
- ↳ Screen casting
- ↳ Narrated Slides
- ↳ Workshop
- ↳ Raw Video
- ↳ High-Cost-Quality professional Video
- ↳ Interviews
- ↳ Simulation
- ↳ Animation
- ↳ Audiovisual Tour
- ↳ Procedural Content



4 Things to Consider Before Video Production

↳ Thoughts

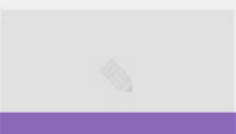
↳ Questions instructors should ask themselves



5 Should use Instructor's Talking Head?



6 How to Draw Attention in Video



7 Quiz



8 Challenge





Review and revise

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Once you've finished drafting your storyboard, layout the frames in order, and try following the story they are telling. Storyboards are rarely perfect after the first attempt. Just keep fine-tuning your storyboard until you are happy. Look at them with a critical eye.

- ◆ Is all information delivered in a logical order?
- ◆ Are your notes clear enough?
- ◆ Have you touched upon all critical areas?
- ◆ Is there a variety of activities that keep students engaged?



Avoid adding unnecessary material

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In spite of our calls for conciseness, you might be tempted to embellish lessons to motivate learners, for example, with **dramatic stories, pictures, or background music**. However, researchers suggest otherwise. Researchers use the term '**weeding**' to refer to the **need** to unroot any words, graphics that do not support your instructional goals.



04

YOUR INSTRUCTIONAL STYLE

Project Planning
Instructional activities. Students work on projects, receive feedback, reflect on previous mistakes, thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Projects can be all types of assignments, such as writing, drawing, painting, or creating a presentation. Projects can be individual or group assignments.

- Assignments, Individual Projects, Group Projects, Self-Selected Projects, Personal Projects, Research Projects, Art Projects, Science Projects, Math Projects, English Projects, History Projects, Geography Projects, Technology Projects, Music Projects, Drama Projects, Visual Arts Projects, Sports Projects, Drama and Sports Projects.



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Be Conversational

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There is empirical evidence that supports the benefits of using a conversational style of writing and presenting. Why is that? Research on discourse shows that **people work harder to understand the material when they feel they are in a conversation with a partner**, rather than merely receiving information.

Conversational style conveys the idea that learners try harder to understand what their partner is saying to them.



Use Humor



Humor and wit make a lasting impression. **It reduces stress and frustration, makes you more likable, it motivates students and gives them a chance to look at their circumstances from another point of view.** If you have interviewed 1000 students about their favorite teacher, we would bet 95% of them were funny.

Bring in humorous content from other sources, a funny meme, or funny character names in assessment questions.





Use Icebreakers

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Adults need to feel accepted, respected, and supported within an atmosphere which is friendly and informal. An icebreaker sets the tone for such a learning environment. **Icebreakers are person-focused, induce synchronous or asynchronous discussions at the beginning of a course.** An icebreaker should not require anything more than the ability to express knowledge of self. It relates more to the personal life than the academic life of the learner. You might think of an icebreaker as representing the first few minutes you spend with a new acquaintance in a social setting.



Remind Students of What's Next

YOUR INSTRUCTIONAL STYLE



Provide a to-do list, hints, suggestions, and reminders for making clear the priorities each time. Put such notifications and guidelines in a prominent place in the course, and make references to them in other places. It could be a good idea to reference these elements even in your videos. These lists keep your learners connected with the main tasks, the key activities, the objectives of the course.



Have Bob Pike's 90-20-8 rule in mind

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Don't make your lesson longer than 90 minutes, change the pace every 20 minutes, and involve the learner every eight minutes. If your course however lasts more than 90 minutes, make sure that, every 60 minutes you announce a short break. Put a slide in your deck that shows people standing and stretching. At a minimum, involve learners every eight minutes to act on something (e.g. video questions, assignments, polls, a discussion activity).



Design a distraction-free template

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Design is not all about decoration. Effective design is the one that encourages learners to focus on the content rather than the decoration. According to the noted graphic designer and writer Nancy Duarte, 90% of what an online instructor creates is distracting. One needs to **carefully remove all the unnecessary elements**. It is always wise to stick to the essentials of the course design when creating a template and **avoid the unnecessary distractions** that can always cloud your learners' minds.



Use meaningful images

Images usually function as complementary learning material, as supportive learning representations which may also have an emotional impact. According to research, **the right image can help learners retain information six times more than usual.**

YOUR INSTRUCTIONAL STYLE



Useful tips:

- ◆ Instead of using bullet points, you can use a series of images with text over them.
- ◆ Instead of using clip art, prefer **photos** that give a more professional look and feel.
- ◆ Instead of using random images, select powerful images that evoke the necessary emotions; mainly positive ones.



Use free stock images

YOUR INSTRUCTIONAL STYLE

There is a range of websites that offer free stock photos. You can copy them, modify, distribute them, or use them for commercial or personal purposes without the need to ask for permission. However, it's always useful and advisable to check whether any image requires attribution before using it.

The following websites are excellent resources to bookmark for free image searches:

- ◆ Unsplash
- ◆ Picography
- ◆ PicJumbo
- ◆ Pexels
- ◆ FreeStoks
- ◆ Pixabay



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Use colors intelligently

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Color is an essential element of visual design; it can evoke the appropriate reactions from the target audience. It is always recommended to use **soft and subdued backgrounds** for your course, and dark colors for the text. **It is never wise to add many different colors; three are more than enough** to maintain simplicity and yet make your course appealing to the learners. The web offers plenty of resources to create the appropriate color palette for your course.



Use a color palette consistently



Don't create courses with mismatched color themes or patterns. Changing the theme every few learning units, makes it difficult for learners to adjust themselves, and they end up losing focus. Consistency is the key; **Use a single color palette and guide learners towards the focal points of the course** without distracting them with inconsistent design elements. The entire look and feel of the course need to be captivating enough to motivate the learners to take the course.



Ask about the course experience in the end

YOUR INSTRUCTIONAL STYLE

Make sure that at the end of your course you ask for feedback from your students. That's the only way to improve continuously and deliver a high value course.

You can ask questions like:

- ◆ What was the most useful resource or assignment for the course, and why?
- ◆ What problems, if any, did they have with the use of the online learning tools?
- ◆ What did they notice about the course that you think might be changed in some way?
- ◆ Were they ready for the course content? What might have helped if they were not?



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Use student feedback

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Did you know that your student feedback can work as a reliable source of information to potential customers? Testimonials help you build on the essential factors of **credibility and trust** so that you steadily spread out the good news about your services.

In order to use a product review as an online testimonial, first check with your students whether they agree to share their opinion.



05

CONTENT IDEAS



Tell learners what they will learn

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At the beginning of your course, include a section where you describe the learning objectives. When you **communicate expectations** to your learners, you help them **evaluate themselves** and interconnect micro-goals through your courses. Objectives tell the learners what they will learn, what they will be able to do after the course, giving more purpose to learning.



Analyze your Key Ideas



Produce a special section where you analyze the core concept of your course, what the key ideas are, or what inspired you to create this course in the first place. **Share a personal story** and explain how you are connected to the subject. **How did your life change while studying the subject?** What do you want to teach to the rest of the world?





Use Stories

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Storytelling, by itself, is seldom sufficient to accomplish an ambitious learning objective. **The stories remind learners of the practical application and value of the theoretical information.**

You can use several stories in your course. The storyteller can be you or any expert, authority, or pundit with a valuable story to share. The storyteller can even be another learner.

Use an **inciting incident in the beginning of your story to hook the listener**. Present a problem that encourages you learners to keep following you.



Give worked out examples

There is consistent evidence that **providing explanations to support worked out steps aids learning.**

- ◆ Provide detailed explanations of worked examples for novice learners.
- ◆ As the lesson progresses, make explanations shorter and available on-demand or in response to an error to a self-explanation question.
- ◆ Write explanations that make the connection between the steps and underlying principles clear.

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Use what if scenarios

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What-if scenarios generally pose a question inquiring about possible ripple effects if a significant event had either not happened or happened differently. **What-if scenarios engage students on both a cognitive and emotional level.** These activities require higher cognitive effort as students are asked to research, evaluate and analyze results, and then make decisions dealing with the consequences of earlier decisions.





Demonstrate



Are you teaching specific procedures? A demonstration is the best way to teach. Create videos that demonstrate methods. In your presentation, **offer practical advice** and give an example of their application.



Show contradictory situations

Draw examples from real-life in a way that provokes **a cognitive conflict or a dilemma**.

This way, not only will you engage your learners but also give out the most in-depth understanding of the message(s) you want to convey.

An example of conflict is this:

"I know it is wrong to steal, but then why was Robin Hood a hero?"

CONTENT IDEAS

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Use Story-Sharing



There are two types of storytelling activities. One involves stories told by the teacher, and the other includes stories told by the learner. You can often combine stories with **an invitation for learners to share similar stories (e.g. in a discussion forum)**. This combined activity is called **story-sharing**. When learners tell a story, they build better connections between them.





Promote Practice

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It is essential for learners to apply what they have learned. Learners assimilate knowledge to a new level only when they practice. Why is that?

- ◆ When learners can demonstrate improvement in a skill, they are motivated to perform better.
- ◆ When learners have to apply knowledge, they have to take care of all the details.
- ◆ When learners apply knowledge, this becomes a reflective practice of the newly-acquired knowledge.





Pitch an influencer to do an interview with you



Sometimes it may prove important to provide an interview with an expert. As soon as you've narrowed down the list of interviewees, email them to set up the discussion. **Get to know your debater very well. Keep things short, simple, and to-the-point.** If you have data that proves how an interview could benefit your interviewee's audience, it can be helpful to include them. Just don't get too pitchy!



Use Case Studies

CONTENT IDEAS



Case studies are basically stories with events or problems, complexities and ambiguities that help students deepen their knowledge. They are designed to develop critical analysis and decision-making skills. **A case study has a specific time frame, specific sequence of events, and a specific plot.** It is an excellent opportunity to apply knowledge to specific circumstances, decide what should be done, and develop a plan of action. Case studies usually require students to answer open-ended questions about possible solutions to a problem.

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Provide a reflective diary

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Provide a learning diary, where students can record their reflections about their own experiences, opinions, attitudes, knowledge and feelings.

To guide this self-assessment provide personal questions that are suitable for each learning section:

In which degree have I realized...?

At what moment did I feel most engaged?

Which information did I find most affirming and helpful?

**Which information did I find most puzzling or confusing,
and do I need to study again?**



Offer a certificate

CONTENT IDEAS

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Certificates can add value to any program, from company training to art training studios. **Certificates improve student engagement, provide verifiable training results, and are useful as job-searching tools.** Certifications can help you charge courses you have already created higher and, also, market your courses more effectively. For example, you can charge a course without certification at \$99, and by adding a certification, you can set the price at \$199.





Create end-of-course experiences

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Learners benefit from end-of-course content experiences. Say at the end, " If you remember nothing else, just remember "THIS" or "THESE". **Help them identify, recall and use the most essential and useful concepts.** For example, you can ask your learners to identify and share one of their most meaningful insights from the course. Have them point out an object that symbolizes one of their meaningful learning experiences they are taking away from the course.



06

BOOST LEARNING PERFORMANCE



Recall prerequisite knowledge

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Talking about pre-existing knowledge is a necessary first step before going for new knowledge. But, do not overdo it with the material. Too much information about obvious things may become annoying. Instead, make a summary of known concepts and link those concepts with the new ones.



Use authentic activities

BOOST LEARNING PERFORMANCE

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To create authentic activities, ask yourself these questions:

- ◆ Does the activity require learners to use their experiences as a starting point?
- ◆ Are learners allowed to learn from their mistakes?
- ◆ Does the activity have value beyond the learning setting?
- ◆ Does the activity build skills that can be used beyond the life of the course?
- ◆ Do learners have a way to implement their outcomes in a meaningful way?





Repeat

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You have probably heard the expression “practice makes perfect” countless times since childhood. It all comes down to the way cells in our brain communicate, and the physical changes that they undergo when they repeatedly communicate as we practice the same action over and over. In your course, **make sure that you repeat important information more than once and also ask for repetitive practice.** However, be very careful not to overdo it. To avoid monotony, provide the same information in different formats (text, video, audio, or images).





Underline progress and encourage learners



At different stages of the course, it is essential to keep in touch and motivate students:

"I am glad that so many of you are participating in the discussion forums. During the next week, I will send your grades in your assignments and comments. You can email me if you have any questions about how I determined your grade."



Give intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to complete the course

BOOST LEARNING PERFORMANCE



Intrinsically motivated learners are interested in the topic for its own sake or have a specific problem they are trying to solve. An outside reward (e.g. a badge, or a certificate) motivates extrinsically motivated learners. Any kind of learning that is "required" is likely to be extrinsically motivated.

An example of extrinsic motivation is this:

"I've done a little programming before, but now my boss wants me to learn Java".

Use both types of motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic, you probably have both types of students in your course. Give approval and positive reinforcement, offer incentives, provide opportunities for more engagement, praise the beauty of knowledge.



Encourage people to write down notes



A recent study found that students who took notes on pen and paper learned more than students who typed notes on their laptops. Over a battery of tests, the pen-and-paper group was more adept at remembering facts, sorting out complex ideas, and synthesizing information. Researchers say the **physical act of touching pen to paper creates a stronger cognitive link to the material than merely typing**. Explain to your students that writing forces them to confront ideas head-on, which leads to sticking with you over time.





Present vocabulary

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If there is any particular language you are using (e.g., scientific terms) provide a section where you **thoroughly explain** each term. Then, create links inside other texts that guide students to this lexicon every time they want to read more about a term.



Urge learners to plan their time



If learners study a little bit every day, they will continually review things in their mind. This helps them understand more. An hour or two a night might be enough to stay on top of things. It helps to have some plans in motion so they can make the most of their study time. **Offer to-do lists that break tasks down into manageable chunks and provoke your students to schedule their study.**



Urge learners to teach other people

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Scientists have dubbed it 'the protégé effect'. **When someone takes something that he has learned and puts it into his own words, he is refining his understanding.**

In the process of distilling information into small pieces that someone can easily digest, the teacher must gain a certain intimacy with the subject matter. Encourage your students to teach other people in their family about what they learn along the way - if it is convenient for them.



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50 Instructional Design Tips for Online Courses



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