

# Online Course Quality Checklist

Mason Online | Digital Learning | Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning

## INTRODUCTION

The Office of Digital Learning at the Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning (Mason Online) is committed to supporting faculty in creating online courses that are engaging and effective, by leveraging the latest research and industry best practices. Embarking on the journey of online education can be an exhilarating yet challenging process, especially for those navigating the array of resources, guidelines, technologies, and regulations for the first time. The need for effective online education is now more visible than ever. Quality education doesn't just happen; its effort transcends the confines of traditional classrooms. In today's interconnected world, the role faculty play in shaping the future of learning has never been more important.

This checklist is more than just a list of tasks – it's a roadmap for successful online teaching, highlighting key elements of course design and teaching practices that stimulate active learning and student engagement, reflecting Mason's value of putting our students first. We understand that teaching online can seem daunting if you're new to it. That's why we've distilled key standards from leading online learning organizations like the Online Learning Consortium and Quality Matters into a practical checklist. This tool will give you clear guidance on creating courses that meet and even exceed recognized quality standards when designing and teaching online courses.

We recognize that George Mason's faculty are devoted to being effective educators and mentors, always aspiring to offer the best learning experiences for our students. This commitment to transformational learning experiences is the lifeblood of our university. Transferring this dedication to the online environment necessitates mindful consideration of many factors— from course materials and engaging activities to assessments and teaching styles. Each choice you make shapes the learning journey, honoring our values of innovation and freedom of thought and expression. With this checklist, we aim to support you in this endeavor, ensuring that together, we thrive in this evolving academic landscape.

Use this checklist as your guide, not just for building your course, but also for reflecting on your teaching practices. Consider questions like:

- How can I allow students to demonstrate their learning in different ways?
- How can I foster a sense of community and collaboration among students in the online classroom?
- How can I use technology to create a more inclusive and accessible learning environment?
- How can I adapt my current course or teaching practices to better align with online learning best practices?

Remember, every journey starts with a single step. Let this checklist be your first step towards creating impactful online courses that foster successful learning outcomes. We're here to support you every step of the way.

## USING THE CHECKLIST

Our Online Quality Checklist was intentionally designed to be a practical tool for ensuring your online course meets the highest standards. It outlines quality indicators for each focus area, along with real-world examples for context. While using the checklist, look for evidence of these indicators in your course. Remember, the examples are not exhaustive nor obligatory—they're there to inspire and guide you. The Checklist is intuitively structured, with columns for tracking evidence and jotting down comments, plans, or ideas. It is designed to support you at every stage of the online teaching journey:

- **Pre-launch:** Use the Checklist to gauge your course's readiness before it goes live.
- **In progress:** Conduct self-reviews to catch any potential issues early.
- **Post-course:** Collaborate with colleagues to review completed courses, identifying areas for improvement.

If you're designing or redesigning a course, focus on the sections concerning Design & Accessibility, Outcomes & Assessments, and Tools & Technologies. These areas contain standards for online course design. If you're teaching a course — whether it is your own design or provided by your department — refer to the sections concerning the Instructor's Role, Community & Engagement, and Continuous Improvement. These will guide you in facilitating your course effectively online. You can also use the Checklist to review and improve previously taught online courses. Commitment to a reflective practice of continuous improvement works to ensure courses remain relevant for our students.

---

## Section 1: DESIGNING AND REDESIGNING AN ONLINE COURSE

**1. Course Design and Accessibility:** Course design and accessibility indicators stress clarity, inclusivity, and access. Courses should be organized and straightforward for students to navigate, with all essential information easily accessible. Content and activities should also reflect the diversity of our students at George Mason, prioritizing accessibility to ensure all students can engage fully within the course. These standards also demonstrate a respect for copyright laws and appropriate citations, promoting ethical learning environments. (6 quality indicators)

**2. Course Outcomes and Assessments:** Course outcomes and assessment indicators emphasize clarity, real-world application, and integrity. Stressing the importance of clear, measurable learning outcomes that align with the course content, assignments and assessments should be designed with explicit descriptions and varied formats, routinely offering opportunities for students to understand their progress. These guidelines promote academic integrity and universal design, ensuring an ethical and accessible learning environment that respects the needs of all students. (7 quality indicators)

**3. Course Tools and Technologies:** Course tools and technologies indicators stress integration, accessibility, and clarity, ensuring that course tools and publisher resources are seamlessly incorporated into our Learning Management System (LMS), and students are supported in developing the necessary technical skills for successful participation. These guidelines prioritize the privacy of our students, providing clear guidance on George Mason's FERPA policy and other privacy concerns. Course materials, including media and technical components, should be clear, working, and easily accessible for students, along with resources for technical assistance, as needed. (5 quality indicators)

---

## **Section 2: TEACHING AND FACILITATING AN ONLINE COURSE**

**4. Instructor Role:** The Instructor Role indicators emphasize the importance of presence and engagement, as well as the recognition and accommodation of diverse student needs. Instructors should be actively involved with their online students, offering timely feedback and engagement with students on a predictable schedule. The management of the course should reflect a high level of organization and responsiveness to student concerns and emerging issues. Flexibility, responsiveness, and technology-competency are key traits for instructors, especially when catering to diverse student abilities and needs. Grading policies should be clearly defined and communicated, with explicit criteria for assignments. (9 quality indicators)

**5. Community and Engagement:** Community and Engagement indicators focus on fostering student engagement and constructive collaboration, with clear expectations set for participation in various activities such as discussion forums and group work. The instructor is expected to create an inclusive, supportive, and engaging climate, actively promoting respectful interaction and inclusivity for all students. Appropriate online behavior and netiquette are clearly defined, modelled, and reinforced. The instructor should be approachable, encouraging students to seek help and support when needed, and should provide accessible resources for online learning. Feedback should be specific, timely, actionable, and frequent, employing various tools and strategies to achieve this. (5 quality indicators)

**6. Continuous Course Improvement:** Continuous course improvement indicators emphasize the importance of feedback, both from students and through self-evaluation. Instructors should provide multiple opportunities for students to give descriptive feedback on various aspects of the course, including design, content, and their overall experience with the online technology used. Additionally, instructors should regularly review and evaluate the design, effectiveness, and content of their own online courses, making necessary adjustments to ensure optimal learning experiences. (2 quality indicators)

---

## QUALITY INDICATORS FOR RSI AND SAS

In our comprehensive Quality Checklist, key indicators are tagged to highlight elements for **Regular and Substantive Interaction (#RSI)** and **Supporting All Students (#SAS)**. These indicators assist faculty, instructional designers, and administrators in documenting and improving how online course design and instruction align with RSI regulations and Student Support initiatives.

**RSI**, a foundation for effective online teaching and learning, encapsulates regular, frequent and predictable academic interactions initiated by the instructor to foster student engagement and support. Although RSI is a federal requirement for online courses utilizing Title IV funds, it transcends compliance and significantly contributes to the quality of online instruction. It is manifested in both the design and teaching of online courses, with the course design standards setting the framework to enable RSI. (Learn more: [U.S. Department of Education Issues Final Rules on Distance Education and Innovation, 2020](#))

**SAS** is about creating a supportive, respectful, and engaging learning environment for every student. It underscores the importance of supporting *all* students to learn, grow, and succeed. SAS is a crucial consideration when selecting course content, learning activities and assessments. It involves a conscious effort to design and teach courses in a way that fosters an effective, equitable, and inclusive learning environment for all. (Learn more about [Access to Research and Inclusive Excellence Framework, George Mason University](#)).

Our Quality Checklist is a guide for facilitating transformational learning experiences that align with George Mason's mission and values, contributing to the well-being and success of every member of our academic community. By focusing on these specific indicators for quality, faculty can make meaningful strides in improving RSI and SAS in their online courses and teaching practices.

## ESSENTIAL CHECKLIST INDICATORS

If you need to quickly check your online course and online teaching for the *must-have essentials* for quality, please see the tagged “essential” quality indicators (**#ESSENTIAL**) in our Checklist. By making sure you include (at least) these essential elements, you can proceed to get the most out of your online course with respect to quality teaching and learning!

**The 10 Quality Essentials for Course Design include:** 1.1 Course Navigation; 1.2 Syllabus and Course Information; 1.5 Accessibility; 2.1 Learning Outcomes; 2.2 Assignment Descriptions; 2.3 Assessments; 2.5 Track Progress & Learning; 2.6 Academic Integrity; 3.1 Course Tools; 3.6 Course Media.

**The 10 Quality Essentials for Teaching and Facilitation include:** 4.1 Presence and Engagement; 4.2 Student Needs; 4.3 Course Management; 4.4 Instructor Page; 4.6 Available, Flexible & Responsive; 4.9 Effective Feedback; 5.1 Student Engagement; 5.3 Inclusive Classroom Climate; 5.5 Help and Support; 6.2 Reflective Practice.

---

## QUESTIONS?

For any questions regarding Online Quality Checklist, Quality Assurance, and Online Quality Course Reviews, please contact Mason Online | Stearns Center Digital Learning Quality Assurance Team at [gateam@gmu.edu](mailto:gateam@gmu.edu).

## CHECKLIST INDICATORS

### DESIGNING AND REDESIGNING AN ONLINE COURSE

1. COURSE DESIGN AND ACCESSIBILITY (6 QUALITY INDICATORS)		
Quality Indicator	Evidence?	Comments
<b>1.1 Course Navigation:</b> The course has a clear structure and organization, including course-level and module-level overviews that makes content, activities, assessments, and weekly due dates predictable and easy to navigate. <b>#RSI</b> <b>#ESSENTIAL</b>		
<b>1.2 Syllabus and Course Information:</b> Course information and syllabus are clearly stated, easily located, and include all necessary information for students to be successful, including links and brief descriptions of university services and policies. <b>#RSI</b> <b>#ESSENTIAL</b>		
<b>1.3 Getting Started Information:</b> The course provides clear instructions to students about how to get started and where to find important information and content. <b>#SAS</b>		
<b>1.4 Diverse Materials:</b> The course includes instructional materials and learning activities that are applicable, relevant, and reflective of diverse viewpoints and perspectives. <b>#SAS</b>		
<b>1.5 Accessibility:</b> All documents, course materials, media, and tools meet <a href="#">federal 508 compliance</a> guidelines and can be accessed, understood, and used to the greatest extent possible by all students. <b>#SAS</b> <b>#ESSENTIAL</b>		
<b>1.6 Copyright:</b> Course materials and resources include required copyright and licensing status, including discipline-appropriate citations, where necessary.		

## 2. COURSE OUTCOMES AND ASSESSMENT (7 QUALITY INDICATORS)

Quality Indicator	Evidence?	Comments
<b>2.1 Learning Outcomes:</b> Course outcomes, Mason Core outcomes, and program outcomes are clearly written, measurable, and relevant to the content, level, and expectations of the course. Learning activities, assessments, supported by carefully selected technology, are in alignment with the course outcomes. <b>#ESSENTIAL</b>		
<b>2.2 Assignment Descriptions:</b> Assignment descriptions include requirements and expectations, criteria for grading/rubrics, due dates, and instructions for how to submit assignments. <b>#SAS</b> <b>  #ESSENTIAL</b>		
<b>2.3 Assessments:</b> Assessments are varied, sequenced, and paced throughout the course; they build upon the objectives of previous assignments, and measure students' achievement of learning outcomes. <b>#RSI</b> <b>  #ESSENTIAL</b>		
<b>2.4 Real World Application:</b> The course provides activities that emulate real world applications in the discipline, such as experiential learning, case studies, and problem-based activities. The course challenges students to apply their own experiences and prior knowledge to solve real-world problems. <b>#SAS</b>		
<b>2.5 Track Learning and Progress:</b> The course provides opportunities for students to review their performance and assess their own learning throughout the course (via pre-tests, self-tests with feedback, reflective assignments, peer assessment, etc.). <b>RSI</b> <b>  #ESSENTIAL</b>		
<b>2.6 Academic Integrity:</b> The course provides guidance to students for academic integrity, including links to <a href="#">George Mason Academic Standards and Academic Standards Office</a> . Requirements for proctored assessments are clearly outlined in the syllabus. <b>#ESSENTIAL</b>		
<b>2.7 Universal Design:</b> The course includes Universal Design strategies to ensure access to learning environments for all students. This is done by presenting information in various formats, providing choice or flexibility in how students demonstrate their learning, and utilizing multiple activities for student engagement. <b>#SAS</b>		

### 3. COURSE TOOLS AND TECHNOLOGIES (5 QUALITY INDICATORS)

Quality Indicator	Evidence?	Comments
<b>3.1 Course Tools:</b> Course tools are used intentionally and promote student interaction, engagement, and active learning regularly and predictably. Tools may include LMS functions and/or other 3 <sup>rd</sup> -party tools integrated into LMS (e.g., Zoom, Honorlock, TurnItIn, etc.). Technical support resources are available. <b>#RSI</b> <b>  #ESSENTIAL</b>		
<b>3.2 Technical Skills:</b> Technical skills necessary for participating in learning activities are gradually developed over time. This process starts with an introduction to these skills, followed by opportunities for practice, and eventually, application in the appropriate contexts. <b>#SAS</b>		
<b>3.3 Privacy Policies:</b> The course includes information or links to George Mason's FERPA (Federal Educational Rights & Privacy Act) Policy and only leverages tools <a href="#">approved by George Mason University</a> to ensure student privacy is protected.		
<b>3.4 Course Media and Links:</b> Course media and other technical components are working, legible, clear, and audible. The course contains organized and working links to recorded lectures/presentations and other necessary media. <b>#RSI   #ESSENTIAL</b>		
<b>3.5 Course Media and Videos:</b> Course media and other videos are intentionally sequenced, focused, and best kept to 15 minutes or less (each) in length. <b>#RSI   #SAS</b>		

## CHECKLIST INDICATORS

### TEACHING AND FACILITATING AN ONLINE COURSE

4. INSTRUCTOR ROLE (9 QUALITY INDICATORS)		
Quality Indicator	Evidence?	Comments
<b>4.1 Presence and Engagement:</b> The instructor regularly participates in the course, provides timely feedback, and engages with students on a routine and predictable schedule. <b>#RSI</b> <b>  #ESSENTIAL</b>		
<b>4.2 Student Needs:</b> The instructor works to recognize & address the range of student needs, <i>e.g.</i> , accommodations for students with disabilities, the need for flexibility to combine study with multiple other commitments and obligations. <b>#SAS</b>   <b>#ESSENTIAL</b>		
<b>4.3 Course Management:</b> The instructor creates course structures, patterns and interactions that are organized to improve understanding; resolves course-related issues in a timely manner; proactively addresses problems as they emerge; and is responsive to student concerns. <b>#RSI</b>   <b>#ESSENTIAL</b>		
<b>4.4 Instructor Page:</b> The instructor's background information, photo, contact information, communication expectations, and office hours are provided in a way that establishes a welcoming environment and emphasizes key course information. <b>#SAS</b>   <b>#ESSENTIAL</b>		
<b>4.5 Communicating Expectations:</b> The instructor's plan for interacting with students during the course is clearly stated, including what students may expect from instructor in terms of regular communication, receiving responses to questions, and grading.		
<b>4.6 Available, Flexible and Responsive:</b> The Instructor is available, flexible, and responsive to students. The instructor is regularly available for virtual office hours and consultations, using a variety of communication tools. The instructor notes how office hours can be used and why these are important for students to take advantage of. <b>#RSI</b>   <b>#SAS</b>   <b>#ESSENTIAL</b>		
<b>4.7 Technology Competency:</b> The instructor demonstrates technological competency in using the University's LMS, and other tools to facilitate the learning experience.		
<b>4.8 Grading Policies and Criteria:</b> The instructor provides information on grading policies, including consequences of late submissions, in the syllabus or in assignment descriptions. The instructor clearly articulates the criteria for grading assignments. <b>#RSI</b>		

Quality Indicator	Evidence?	Comments
<b>4.9 Effective Feedback:</b> The instructor provides effective and timely feedback to students. Feedback promotes a growth mind-set, and is specific, transparent, actionable, and frequent. <b>#RSI</b>   <b>#ESSENTIAL</b>		

## 5. COMMUNITY AND ENGAGEMENT (5 QUALITY INDICATORS)

Quality Indicator	Evidence?	Comments
<b>5.1 Student Engagement and Expectations:</b> The instructor offers collaborative opportunities for student engagement and clearly states expectations for participation in discussion forums, group work and other course activities. <b>#RSI</b>   <b>#ESSENTIAL</b>		
<b>5.2 Inclusive Classroom Climate:</b> The instructor creates an inclusive, supportive, and engaging climate. The instructor facilitates positive communication with students, creates and promotes respectful interaction, with specific efforts made to include students with disabilities and students from other marginalized groups. <b>#RSI</b>   <b>#SAS</b>   <b>#ESSENTIAL</b>		
<b>5.3 Professionalism:</b> The instructor clearly states and reinforces appropriate academic and professional behaviors for online students throughout the course, including netiquette guidelines.		
<b>5.4 Help and Support:</b> The instructor encourages students to contact them when questions arise. The instructor provides an information list and/or links for online learning resources (tutorials, models, examples, on-campus resources or offices) to students in the online classroom. <b>#RSI</b>   <b>#SAS</b>   <b>#ESSENTIAL</b>		
<b>5.5 Community:</b> The instructor creates informal opportunities for students to build rapport with each other and with instructor throughout the course. Community-building activities might include icebreakers, introductions forum, water cooler forum, etc. <b>#SAS</b>		

6. CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT (2 QUALITY INDICATORS)		
Quality Indicator	Evidence?	Comments
<b>6.1 Course Feedback:</b> The instructor provides students with multiple opportunities to provide descriptive feedback on course design, course content, course experience, and ease of online technology. The instructor acts on this feedback.		
<b>6.2 Reflective Practice:</b> The instructor frequently reviews the course design and evaluates the effectiveness and content & teaching of their online course, implementing changes. Intentionally integrating feedback to improve the overall learning environment. <b>#ESSENTIAL</b>		

## GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ONLINE QUALITY

- **Overall flow and course organization:** A good online course should always tell a story--from the beginning to the end. Do remember to include a course overview, overall course objectives, and course learning outcomes. Within this “long story” (the entire course), there will be “mini stories” (*i.e.*, individual lessons or modules). These three components (overview, objectives and outcomes) must be incorporated throughout all levels of the course design and course organization. Course modules should include: (i) Module Overview, (ii) Module Objectives, and (iii) Module Learning Outcomes. Clear course and module organization with overviews, objectives, and outcomes will help student better understand the flow and story of the course. See Stearns Center website for guidance about [student learning outcomes and objectives](#).
- **Syllabus:** Please use department-specific syllabus template for your syllabus. In this way, you can be sure that all departmental policies and procedures are included in the syllabus, ensuring accuracy and transparency across courses and multiple sections. The Stearns Center has posted [syllabus guidance for Fall 2024](#); please make sure that you include all required syllabus elements.
- **Course Template:** Please make sure that Canvas course template is used while designing the course, one that has a standard navigation and includes university specific policies etc. This will make the learning environment more familiar to students, increasing their ability to quickly engage with relevant content. The Stearns Center provides a sample course template to use as a starting point.
- **Videos:** Please make sure that course videos are short; if necessary, you may create a series of shorter videos to cover longer course topics. Shorter videos capture students' attention more effectively, and also students can keep track of their progress more easily. It also will be easier for you (in the future) to edit or update any segment of shorter videos. In terms of [videos](#), shorter videos are preferable to keep learner's attention, however longer videos (up to 10-15 minutes) may be needed in some disciplines or to cover topics. Please also take care not to include long videos which consist of narration; include opportunities for students to interact with the information. It is required that all course videos **must be accessible**, with closed captioning and transcripts. Please contact [Assistive Technology Initiative](#) for assistance to ensure accessibility of your videos.
- **Formative assessments:** Please ensure the online course provides students with varied assessments. Consider including multiple opportunities for students to check their learning during the course through formative assessments. Formative assessments include low-stakes activities (such as quizzes, brief written assignments, self-evaluations, peer evaluations) which help students (and you as instructor) to check how they are doing as they develop, practice, and learn during the course.

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES FOR ENSURING ONLINE QUALITY

To ensure online course quality moving forward, please use the following resources from Mason Online|Stearns Center Digital Learning and from our partner units at George Mason University:

- Review Stearns Center [Online Course Quality web page](#) for resources, including the Quality Checklist, Course Readiness Checklist for Canvas, and Essential Elements Infographic.
- See [George Mason University Canvas LMS Transition website](#) for training information and links to resources.
- See [Stearns Center ID Village resource site](#), available in your Canvas dashboard when you log into Canvas.
- Use the [Canvas Help resources](#) (webinars & on-demand videos and information), available in your Canvas menu when you log into Canvas.
- Check out the ID Village posted in your George Mason Canvas account.
- [Review Mason CARES guide](#) about online course accessibility posted to George Mason University Assistive Technology Initiative (ATI) website.
- [Review](#) resources about Canvas posted to George Mason University Information Technology Services (ITS) website.
- [Contact](#) Mason Online|Stearns Center Digital Learning for consultation requests.
- [Contact Quality Assurance Team](#) with your questions or comments about this Quality Review of your Online Course.



This work is licensed by Mason Online|Stearns Center Digital Learning under a Creative Commons Attribution- NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.