MASON ONLINE
George Mason University

Online Course Design Checklist
Mason Online | Office of Digital Learning

Overview

Our Online Course Design Checklist is intentionally designed to be a practical tool to demonstrate minimum expectations for online asynchronous and synchronous course design. The checklist outlines fundamental quality indicators across three domains: Course Design, Learning Outcomes and Assessments, and Course Tools.

Within each domain, essential components are outlined, along with additional ways in which faculty might further enhance their course design. This checklist can be used for:

- Formal course reviews as part of Mason Online's course review process;
- Programmatic quality assurance for ongoing faculty and course development;
- Self-assessment for instructors aiming to refine their courses.

Scoring

The checklist is used to evaluate how well an online course meets established quality indicators and to identify areas for improvement. Each indicator is measured by five essential components, for a total of 10 possible points within each area. Reviewers assign a rating of 0, 1, or 2 for each component, based on the level of evidence demonstrated.

0 = Absent	1 = Developing	2 = Present
No evidence is observed in the course.	Some evidence is observed in the course.	Strong evidence is observed in the course.

Passing Score: A score of 80 points is needed to demonstrate a minimum level of quality in online course design.

Contact Us

If you have any questions about the Online Course Design Checklist or wish to discuss a formal review, please contact the Quality Assurance team at qateam@gmu.edu.

1.1 Course Structure & Usability			
Quality Indicator	**Indicator Description**	**Why is this Important?**	**Essential Components**
Indicator 1.1 **Course Structure & Usability**	The course demonstrates key dimensions of usability, including unambiguous directions, logical organization, easy access to help materials, and functional links. The course has a distinct structure and organization, including course-level and module-level overviews that make content, activities, assessments, and weekly due dates predictable and easy to navigate.	Creating an online course with a clear structure not only reduces confusion but also demonstrates institutional continuity in course design, allowing students to focus on the content, not the container.	☐ Navigation menus, module structures, and file organization are consistent across the course. ☐ Modules use a clear and consistent naming convention (e.g., "Module 1: Topic"). ☐ Help materials, FAQs, or support contact information are available in the course menu or orientation module. ☐ All links are functional when checked using the Canvas Link Validator. ☐ The course includes a "Start Here" or orientation module with syllabus, technology access instructions, and readiness resources. **Total points: ____ / 10**

Additional ways to take this further:

- Create a welcome video with a course tour.
- Use a custom course banner and/or course-relevant visual elements.
- For external resources, set links to open in a new tab to avoid disrupting the student's progress through the course.

1.2 Syllabus & Course Information			
Quality Indicator	**Indicator Description**	**Why is this Important?**	**Essential Components**
Indicator 1.2 **Syllabus & Course Information**	The course includes up-to-date course information and syllabus, including all necessary information for students to be successful, including links and brief descriptions of university services and policies. The syllabus is compliant with Academic Policy 2.5: Course Syllabi, containing all required elements. See additional syllabi guidance.	The syllabus is a central reference point that helps students navigate expectations, connects assignments to outcomes, and ensures compliance with university and program policy.	☐ The syllabus contains all required University and College/Program elements per Academic Policy 2.5. ☐ The syllabus includes a statement on permitted and prohibited uses of Generative AI. Review George Mason's AI Guidelines for Instructors to learn more. ☐ Syllabus information (policies, dates, grading criteria) matches details in Canvas. ☐ Major assessments listed in the syllabus are aligned with stated course outcomes. ☐ The syllabus is available in at least one accessible format (e.g., tagged PDF, accessible Word). **Total points: ____ / 10**

Additional ways to take this further:

- Use the course summary tool in Canvas so that all assignments are listed in the course summary on the syllabus page.
- Include an initial non-graded or low-stakes activity to ensure that students review the syllabus (*e.g.,* a syllabus quiz or course scavenger discussion).

1.3 Academic Standards			
Quality Indicator	**Indicator Description**	**Why is this Important?**	**Essential Components**
Indicator 1.3 **Academic Standards**	The course provides guidance about academic standards and directs students to the George Mason's Academic Standards Office website in the course syllabus or alongside other relevant course or assignment information. The course outlines and reinforces academic integrity and professional expectations throughout the course.	Clear academic standards reinforce professional conduct, prepare students for real-world expectations, and ensure alignment with the university's academic integrity policies.	☐ The course provides a direct link to the Academic Standards website with program- or department-specific consequences for violations included, if applicable. ☐ The course includes at least one low-stakes or formative activity that allows students to practice academic integrity skills (e.g., citation, paraphrasing, proper use of sources). ☐ The course reinforces academic integrity in at least one place outside the syllabus (e.g., module announcement, assignment instructions). ☐ The course links to at least one resource that supports academic integrity (e.g., library citation guide, writing center, time management support). ☐ The course explains how integrity tools (e.g., Honorlock, Turnitin) are used and how students' work will be monitored. **Total points: ____ / 10**

Additional ways to take this further:

- Provide an interactive module or quiz about academic integrity and ethics to ensure students understand the policies.
- If using Honorlock, provide a low stakes or practice exam to give students an opportunity to become familiar with the testing environment before a major exam.

1.4 Grading Policies & Criteria			
Quality Indicator	**Indicator Description**	**Why is this Important?**	**Essential Components**
Indicator 1.4 **Grading Policies & Criteria**	The course outlines grading policies and criteria, including consequences for late or missing assignments and availability for extra credit. Assignment information includes detailed and transparent expectations. Grading policies follow the GMU university-wide system for grading courses as presented in Academic Policy 3: Grading.	Transparent grading policies build student trust, clarify pathways to success, and ensure that evaluation practices are fair, consistent, and aligned with institutional policy.	☐ Syllabus lists grading-related policies, including late work, extra credit, and grade appeals. ☐ Each assignment includes grading criteria (rubric, checklist, or performance descriptors). ☐ Participation expectations (frequency, length, type of contribution) are described in syllabus or assignment instructions. ☐ Feedback methods and timing are specified (e.g., rubric comments within one week). ☐ Grading criteria and scales are applied consistently across assignments. **Total points: ____ / 10**

Additional ways to take this further:

- Use detailed rubrics that specify expectations and criteria for each assignment, helping students understand how they will be assessed.
- Share examples or models of high-quality work, along with explanations of why these were successful.
- Build-in iterative opportunities for practice (*e.g.,* multiple attempts, drop lowest score, draft feedback, assignment revisions, etc.)

1.5 Accessibility			
Quality Indicator	**Indicator Description**	**Why is this Important?**	**Essential Components**
Indicator 1.5 **Accessibility**	All documents, course materials, media, and instructional tools can be accessed, understood, and used to the greatest extent possible by all students, following Federal section 508 compliance, Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1, and University Policy 1308: Information and Communications Technology Accessibility.	Ensuring accessibility is not only a legal obligation but also an ethical commitment to equity and fairness in learning. Accessible courses improve usability for all students, not only those with documented accommodations.	☐ All course documents, materials, and media are Accessible documents and pass Panorama or other a similar accessibility check. ☐ All non-decorative images include accurate and descriptive alternative text. ☐ All videos include accurate captions. ☐ The course uses an accessible color scheme with sufficient contrast to support readability. ☐ Content pages and documents use proper heading styles to support navigation with assistive technology. **Total points: ____ / 10**

Additional ways to take this further:

- Provide audio descriptions of complex images via lecture narration or separate notes.
- Make video or media transcripts available, in addition to closed captioning.
- Design interactive elements (quizzes, simulations, discussions) to be accessible via screen readers and compatible with voice recognition software.

1.6 Content, Materials & Activities			
Quality Indicator	**Indicator Description**	**Why is this Important?**	**Essential Components**
Indicator 1.6 **Content, Materials & Activities**	The course provides a range of content, materials, and activities that foster student engagement and support learning. Course content is presented in different formats to help convey ideas clearly and effectively. Students are able to engage through varied approaches such as individual tasks, interactive exercises, and collaborative activities.	Providing course materials in multiple formats ensures that all students can access and understand content, while a variety of activities sustains interest and motivation.	☐ Course readings are accessible through embedded files, links, course reserves, or textbooks; instructions for accessing publisher resources are provided when applicable. ☐ Each module includes content in at least two formats (e.g., text and video) to address multiple learning needs and preferences. ☐ Each module includes at least one learning activity (graded or ungraded) that engages students in exploring, applying, or reflecting on the content (e.g., quiz, discussion, case study, reflection). ☐ Content in each module is divided into manageable sections or pages. ☐ Required and supplemental learning materials are appropriately cited within the course. **Total points: ____ / 10**

Additional ways to take this further:

- Use gamification techniques, such as badges, leaderboards, or levels, which reward progress and encourage deeper engagement.
- Include self-reflection activities, such as discussion boards in which students share insights and reflect on their learning experiences.
- Promote motivation and self-regulation through goal setting or milestones to help keep students organized.

2.1 Learning Outcomes & Objectives			
Quality Indicator	**Indicator Description**	**Why is this Important?**	**Essential Components**
Indicator 2.1 **Learning Outcomes & Objectives**	The course includes information about program-level, course-level outcomes, and Mason Core outcomes, as needed. Course-level outcomes and module objectives are clear, measurable, and relevant to the content, level, and discipline of the course.	Clear, measurable outcomes provide students with a roadmap to success, guide faculty in designing aligned assessments and activities, and demonstrate accountability to program and accreditation standards.	☐ Learning outcomes support activities that require students to think critically, apply knowledge, and demonstrate skills (e.g., Bloom's Taxonomy). ☐ Program- and course-level outcomes are published in both the syllabus and the course welcome/start page. ☐ Each module begins with clearly stated learning objectives that connect to course outcomes. ☐ Outcomes and objectives are written in specific, measurable terms that allow for assessment of student achievement. ☐ Outcomes and objectives use language and expectations that reflect the standards and practices of the discipline. **Total points: ____ / 10**

Additional ways to take this further:

- Share with students how course learning outcomes and objectives map to program goals and industry expectations.
- Scaffold the course by providing structured support, such as tutorials, examples, and step-by-step activities to help students develop foundational skills and understand core concepts.
- Design the course to include higher-order thinking activities that foster critical thinking, analysis, evaluation, and creation.

2.2 Assignment Descriptions & Instructions			
Quality Indicator	**Indicator Description**	**Why is this Important?**	**Essential Components**
Indicator 2.2 **Assignment Descriptions & Instructions**	The course includes assignment descriptions and instructions that articulate expectations, criteria for grading, due dates, and instructions for how to submit assignments.	Detailed assignment instructions help students focus on demonstrating knowledge and skills, support equity by clarifying expectations, and ensure that assessments align with disciplinary and institutional standards.	☐ Each assignment includes well-defined instructions that specify the task, expectations, due date, and grading criteria. ☐ Instructions are formatted for readability, using headings, bullet points, and/or step-by-step directions. ☐ Assignments specify discipline-appropriate formatting (e.g., APA, MLA), expected length (word/page count), and submission method or file type. ☐ Expectations regarding original work, use of sources, citation practices, and permitted collaboration are explicitly stated. ☐ Each assignment links to at least one relevant support resource (e.g., writing center, citation guides, sample/model work) that help students complete the task successfully. **Total points: ____ / 10**

Additional ways to take this further:

- Use student-friendly language by avoiding jargon and writing directions in a clear, conversational tone that students can easily follow.
- Model the task with examples by including a short, annotated sample (e.g., a paragraph, outline, or visual) that illustrates what successful work looks like.

2.3 Assessment Types			
Quality Indicator	**Indicator Description**	**Why is this Important?**	**Essential Components**
Indicator 2.3 **Assessment Types**	The course includes assessments designed to evaluate how well students have achieved the specified learning outcomes. The course includes assessments that are varied, sequenced, and paced throughout the course to provide multiple opportunities for feedback. The course may include activities that emulate real world applications in the discipline, such as experiential learning, case studies, and problem-based activities.	Regular, varied and paced assessments give students insights into their learning progress and how they are meeting course outcomes. They also provide instructors with timely feedback to adjust teaching, while aligning student performance with course and program-level outcomes.	☐ Each course learning outcome is measured by at least one assessment to demonstrate alignment between objectives and evaluation. ☐ The course includes more than one type of assessment (e.g., quizzes, projects, essays, presentations, discussions). ☐ Assessments are sequenced and distributed across the course to create a steady pace and balanced workload. ☐ The course provides multiple low-stakes or formative assessments that allow students to monitor their progress toward mastery. ☐ Assessments are designed to encourage original work (e.g., randomized questions, authentic tasks, or application-based prompts). **Total points: ____ / 10**

Additional ways to take this further:

- Focus assessments on mastery, with students demonstrating competency through real-world tasks, such as case studies, simulations, service learning, or problem-solving relevant to the field.
- Design assessments to include repeated feedback opportunities through peer review, self-reflection, and instructor guidance to promote deeper understanding and continuous improvement.
- Make use of simulations, interactive quizzes, or collaborative docs to enhance student engagement and feedback.

3.1 Instructional Tools			
Quality Indicator	**Indicator Description**	**Why is this Important?**	**Essential Components**
Indicator 3.1 **Instructional Tools**	Course tools include Canvas features, live web-conferencing (e.g., Zoom), and other third-party tools approved by the Architectural Standards and Review Board to ensure accessibility, security, and student privacy. See the list of reviewed tools. The course includes media that is easy to navigate, with intuitive controls for play, pause, rewind, and captions. Instructor-created or instructor-selected media and tools support direct instruction and opportunities for regular and substantive interaction, as outlined by University Policy 3014: Distance Education.	Instructional tools, when used strategically, enhance interaction and engagement, support compliance with federal distance education requirements, and create consistent experiences across synchronous and asynchronous contexts.	☐ Instructional tools clearly connect to learning outcomes and objectives, ensuring that their use is purposeful and supports measurable outcomes. ☐ Instructional tools are implemented in ways that minimize distraction and extraneous complexity. ☐ Instructional tools are integrated into the course flow, whether embedded in modules/assignments (asynchronous) or structured into live sessions (synchronous). ☐ Instructional Tools are stable across devices and browsers, with clear instructions provided for troubleshooting common issues. ☐ Instructional tools are applied in a predictable and consistent manner (i.e., same video style, similar quiz format, same location in modules). **Total points: ____ / 10**

Additional ways to take this further:

- Include just-in-time support, such as micro-tutorials, and peer-guided walkthroughs.
- Use shorter videos, ideally under 15 minutes, to promote student engagement and learning in online courses.
- In synchronous courses, consider breakout rooms, polls, and collaborative whiteboards. For asynchronous courses, consider multimedia discussions, peer-review tools, and annotation platforms.

Final Considerations

This checklist is designed to provide a foundation for quality online course design. We encourage faculty to reflect on their teaching practices, seek feedback from students, and explore opportunities for continuous improvement. Online learning is dynamic, and ongoing engagement helps ensure that our courses remain accessible, meaningful, and student-centered.

Faculty may also consider how institutionally approved AI tools can assist with course design tasks. PatriotAI, George Mason's AI platform, includes SyllaBright, a course design assistant that can support the development and refinement of syllabi, learning objectives, assessment planning, and adaptation of materials for multilingual learners. These tools are intended to supplement, not replace, faculty expertise and should always be used in ways consistent with University policy and best practices in online learning.

Learn More

For additional information, examples, and support materials related to online course design, please visit our website: Designing for Online Learning

There, you'll find:

- Expanded guidance about online course design and facilitation;
- Faculty resources and best practices in online learning;
- Contact information for consultations and individual support.

If you have questions, suggestions for improvement, or would like to schedule a review, contact the Quality Assurance team at qateam@gmu.edu.

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