

Canvas Best Practices

In this video you will learn about best practices to use when designing your Canvas course. These include the use of modules, basic wayfinding, and basic accessibility practices. Utilizing these few practices can go a long way toward making your Canvas course intuitive and accessible, which will help your students be successful in your course.

Modules

First, let's talk about modules.

Modular course design is widely used in online education and provides students with a "road map" to help them move through a course deliberately and without having to search around for what to do next. Modules are virtual "containers" that help you group content, activities, and assessments around a specific topic or theme.

There are several advantages that come with modular design.

- Most importantly, courses with modules are more streamlined and easier for students to navigate and conceptualize. They help with time management and organization, which can be one of the greatest challenges for students with many demands on their time.
- Courses that use a modular format are more flexible and are easier to convert for delivery in other formats.
- By breaking a course into modular units, you can easily reorder content and export whole modules for use elsewhere.
- Modifying individual modules is easier and less time consuming than modifying an entire course year to year. You can more easily re-order content, replace individual pieces that are outdated, and add new modules.

Modules can be designed in many ways, but the key elements are often the same: an overview or introduction, learning content or materials, learning activities or engagement, and assessments or evaluations.

While the term "module" can be applied generally to course design, it is also the term Canvas uses for its tool that allows you to organize your course content or create a learning pathway for students. For an overview of Modules and how to build them, check out our other videos and how-to guides at teaching.uoregon.edu/resources.

Wayfinding

Our second topic is wayfinding.

Wayfinding refers to **information systems that guide people through a physical environment** and enhance their understanding and experience of the space. This also applies to digital or virtual spaces. Digital wayfinding is how users find their way through a website or other digital space. Your Canvas site

is your virtual classroom and needs to be tailored so students can easily find their way through. This is especially important as Canvas sites can be set up in very different ways from class to class and the amount of information can be overwhelming if not properly designed.

One purpose of **wayfinding design** in your online course is to reduce the cognitive load on your students. Confusing, complicated, or overwhelming design elements prevent students from focusing on what's important: the learning.

In physical wayfinding design, there are five key principles, which can also help inform digital wayfinding design.

Number 1 - Create well-structured paths

This can be accomplished in a course using modules, but it can also include the use of a home page or landing page with navigational links. If you want students to experience the course content in a certain order, you will need to guide them through it – either with instructions, visual cues, or by using Requirements & Prerequisites in Canvas to lock down modules and content.

Number 2 - Use landmarks for orientation cues

Give students cues, both visual and textual, to orient them. Canvas does this by using specific symbols in modules to indicate the type of item: assignments, discussions, quizzes, pages, and links. These icons are displayed next to an item in a module to indicate type, no matter how the instructor names the module items. You can also do this in your content pages by using icons to indicate the presence of, say, an assignment or discussion on the page. In this example, you can see the instructor has added icons to highlight the presence of an assignment and a discussion.

Number 3 - Create an identity to make content immediately identifiable

Ensuring all the elements of your course have a similar look and feel can help make your course content easily recognizable – especially if your content is downloadable and can be mixed in with content from other courses on a student's computer. Use consistent and descriptive labels for all your content. Don't make students have to decipher your unique naming conventions, abbreviations, and differing labels. Give everything – files, assignments, videos, modules, etc. - descriptive names and use the same convention and structure for everything. Consistency helps reduce the amount of extraneous information students need to sort through.

Number 4 - Create regions of differing visual character

This is another method of using visual cues to separate or spotlight information. Perhaps all buttons pertaining to navigation have a different look than buttons pertaining to content. Or maybe each module or unit uses different identifying features to differentiate it from the previous module. An example from a UO Professor includes the use of color, font, and symbols specific to certain types of content – in this case, an overview and wrap-up of the content that was provided every week. Both the overview and wrap-up were presented in similar ways, so the instructor used visual cues to help students quickly differentiate between them.

Number 5 - Don't give too many navigational choices

Part of wayfinding is also not overloading the user with too many choices. One of the ways you can help students better navigate your Canvas site is to remove extraneous menu items.

Hiding or removing menu items from students in the Course Navigation Menu can help streamline your course and keep students focused on specific content. If you aren't using a specific Canvas tool or link, remove it from the menu.

You can do this by going to Settings, located at the bottom of your Course's Navigation Menu. Then, click the Navigation tab. Canvas displays two groups of menu items. The top group consists of all the menu items currently visible to students. The bottom group displays the items that are hidden from students. You can drag menu items from one group to the other. You can also rearrange the order of your menu items.

Removing unnecessary items results in a cleaner, smaller menu for students.

Basic Accessibility

Our final topic is accessibility.

Just like in a face-to-face classroom, online "classrooms" can present certain challenges for students with any number of disabilities. Students need to be able not only to access the classroom or digital class space, but also be able to engage with the course content, instructor, and other students in equitable ways.

UO Online has an accessibility checklist to get you started.

One of the easiest ways to ensure basic accessibility is to use the PopeTech tool in Canvas. PopeTech is a simple, easy-to-use tool available within the Canvas content creation interface. You will see this tool next to the Save button when you create any new content or edit existing content.

[Demo]

The Accessibility Guide is organized into five sections. Within each of these sections are results for common accessibility errors and guides for improving the accessibility of your content.

- Images and Links
- Text and Contrast
- Headings
- Tables and Lists
- Documents

Results are interactive and clicking on a result icon will jump you to that spot in your content. There are links to additional documentation, examples on how to fix the issues, and the ability to apply changes to your Canvas content from within this guide for many results.

There are two categories of results - Errors and Alerts.

Errors are accessibility issues that need to be fixed.

Alerts are items that should be reviewed for accessibility errors.

The accessibility guide cannot automatically detect all accessibility issues, but it will help you improve the accessibility of your content.

Additional resources are available through the Accessible Education Center at aec.uoregon.edu.

For more information on this or any other Canvas topic, visit teaching.uoregon.edu.