

Online Course Design Characteristics

The Online Course Design Characteristics that follow reflect a shared, university-wide commitment to high-quality online education. They articulate both foundational elements, which establish a strong and consistent baseline for all courses, and aspirational elements, which encourage innovation, depth, and continuous improvement. Together, these characteristics provide a common framework for designing and facilitating engaging, inclusive, and effective online learning environments—ensuring that every course is intentionally built to support student success. The Characteristics have been grouped into nine categories.



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*Shared with the Online Teaching Characteristics

1. Course Overview and Policies

This category of online course characteristics outlines the foundational elements that orient students to the course and clearly communicate expectations, policies, and support structures. It emphasizes transparency, learner-centered objectives, access to resources and contacts, responsible technology and AI use, and standards for professional online behavior.

<i>Characteristic</i>	
1	Welcome and overview that introduces students to the course.
2	Faculty introduction.
3	Mandated syllabus elements are within Simple Syllabus.
4	An explanation (e.g., video, text ,etc.) to the course structure (e.g., navigation, modules, a pre-course technology checklist, assignment schedule) is provided.
5	Information about the course (e.g., schedule of assignments, late submission consequences, academic integrity expectations, and faculty response times) is clearly stated.
6	Links to relevant University policies (e.g., Academic Honesty, Artificial Intelligence, computer use, filing grievances, accommodating disabilities, University credit hour requirements) are provided.
7	Course learning objectives/outcomes are prominent in the overview.
8	Contact information for the instructor, program leadership, and department is provided.
9	Technical requirements (e.g., browser version, mobile, publisher resources, secure content, pop-ups, browser issues, microphone, webcam) and requisite skills for technology tools supported with resources, are provided as well as vendor accessibility statements and privacy policies.
10	Rules/standards for appropriate online student behavior are provided.
11	Instructor specific guidelines for the use of Artificial Intelligence are provided.

2. Navigation and Usability

The focus is on creating an intuitive, accessible, and well-organized learning environment that supports ease of use for students. It emphasizes clear navigation, consistent organization, transparent instructions, readily available technology support, and ongoing course review to ensure alignment with learning objectives and usability standards.

Characteristic

1	Navigation is clear, consistent, and logical.
2	Content modules include overviews.
3	Resources, components, and information are consistently organized.
4	An uncluttered layout (e.g., consistent color scheme and icon layout, related content organized together, and self-evident titles) is implemented throughout the course.
5	Instructions clearly state how to get started on an assignment/activity and where to find various components.
6	Frequently used technology tools are easily accessed.
7	Student support resources (e.g., link to IT, how-to videos, vendor documentation) are provided for course technology.
8	Instructional materials and course syllabi are reviewed periodically to ensure they meet course and program learning objectives.

3. Alignment

This set of online course characteristics emphasizes the purposeful alignment of course learning objectives with instructional materials, learning activities, and assessments. It ensures objectives are measurable, appropriately leveled, and consistently aligned with program goals and accreditation standards to support meaningful student learning.

Characteristic

1	The course learning objectives (CLO) are measurable.
2	CLOs are written at the appropriate hierarchical cognitive levels (i.e., Bloom's Taxonomy) for the course level (e.g., undergraduate, first year, graduate).
3	The relationship between CLOs, instructional materials, learning activities, and assessments is clearly articulated.
4	Alignment of the CLOs to program objectives and/or accreditation standard is explicitly documented, if applicable.
5	The instructional materials, including multimedia, contribute to the achievement of the stated learning objectives.

4. Instructional Materials

This set of online course characteristics focuses on the quality, accessibility, and integrity of instructional materials used to support student learning. It emphasizes clear and accessible content, ethical use of sources, effective technology integration, meaningful interaction, and connections between prior knowledge and new learning using high-quality, affordable resources.

Characteristic

1	Materials are free of writing errors (e.g., punctuation, formatting, clarity, grammatical, and spelling).
2	All content (e.g., articles, images, video, activities) is optimized for the use of assistive technology.
3	The sequence of the content is optimized with the appropriate use of headings for accessibility.
4	Instructional materials are easily accessible/usable across operating systems, devices, and applications. (e.g., MacOS, iOS, Windows, Android)
5	Course models academic integrity and by honoring copyright and licensing (avoiding scanned materials) and citing sources and permissions for use.
6	Facilitates the presentation of and interaction with content and peers.
7	Supports regular and substantive interaction (e.g., announcements, discussions, synchronous sessions) between the instructor and students.
8	Course connects prior knowledge to new learning.
9	University library materials, open educational resources and/or low-cost materials are used when available.

5. Learning Activities and Interaction

This set of online course characteristics emphasizes engaging, learner-centered activities and structured interaction that intentionally support the achievement of course objectives. It highlights active, real-world learning for adult learners, clear expectations for communication and participation, and regular, meaningful interaction supported by clear instructions and multiple communication channels.

Characteristic

1	Principles of andragogy are considered in the design of activities and interactions (e.g., learner-instructor, learner-learner, and learner-content)
2	Opportunities for active learning are provided.
3	Learning activities that have real world applications of the content (e.g., experiential learning, case studies, problem-based scenarios, critical reflection and analysis, higher order thinking) are included.
4	A variety of communication channels (e.g., office hours, feedback, announcements) are incorporated into the course design.
5	Requirements and expectations for student interactions (i.e., instructor-student, student-student, and student-content) are clearly stated, easy to find, and modeled.
6	Regular and substantive interaction that is predictable and scheduled is designed into the course.
7	All assignments, activities, and assessments include clear, detailed, and well-written instructions.

6. Assessment and Feedback

This set of online course characteristics emphasizes purposeful assessment design and meaningful feedback to measure and support student learning. It focuses on alignment with course objectives, varied and authentic assessments, transparent grading practices, ongoing faculty and student feedback, organized gradebook use, and clear expectations for academic integrity.

Characteristic

1	Assessments provide evidence of the degree to which students have met or not met the course learning objectives (CLO).
2	The relationship between the assessments, the instructional materials and learning activities, and the CLOs are clearly explained.
3	Multiple types of assessments (e.g., team projects, videos, presentation, papers, quizzes) are included which are suited to the course level.
4	Formative, low-stakes assessments early and throughout the course provide students with frequent feedback.
5	Opportunities to self-assess learning are provided throughout the course (e.g., pre-tests, self-tests with feedback, reflective assignments, peer assessment, etc.).
6	Assessments embody authentic, practical, and real-world applications when possible.
7	Grading criteria are provided to students when the assessment is assigned.
8	Rubrics, if used, are provided to students prior to the submission of assignments/ assessments.
9	Multiple opportunities for educational/informative feedback are provided using available methods (e.g., synchronous conversations, text, rubrics, video)
10	There is an opportunity for students to provide feedback during the course.
11	The gradebook is well organized, easily accessed, and includes all assessments.
12	The assessments provide learner guidance regarding academic integrity.

7. Accessibility

This set of online course characteristics focuses on ensuring all course content and activities are fully accessible, inclusive, and usable for all learners. It emphasizes compliance with accessibility standards through readable text, accessible multimedia and documents, descriptive hyperlinks, well-designed presentations, and support for assistive technologies in alignment with institutional and universal design guidelines.

Characteristic

1	Text content is presented in an easily accessed format (preferably D2L Brightspace text editor) and is readable by assistive technology, including a PDFs.
2	Text is formatted with titles, headings, and other styles to enhance readability and improve the structure of the document.
3	Text should not be flashing, blinking, or a different color for emphasis.
4	There is enough contrast between text and background for the content to be easily viewed.
5	Images and multimedia (e.g., video, audio) are accessible: a text equivalent for every non-text element is provided (alt tags, captions, transcripts, etc.).
6	An audio description is provided for video-only content.
7	Header rows and columns are labeled.
8	A title and summary/caption are included.
9	The use of tables should be reserved for presenting specific elements of the content.
10	Hyperlink text is descriptive (e.g., name of document or website) and makes sense when out of context (avoid using "click here")
11	Any hyperlinks should be set to open in a new tab.
12	Slide decks include a unique title on each slide, alt text for images, appropriate reading order, and non-automatic transitions between slides.
13	Vary and support the methods and/or delivery for response, navigation, and movement (e.g., text to speech).
14	Instructional materials meet the accessibility standards (e.g., WCAG, UDL, etc.) and institutional guidelines.

8. Learning Community

This set of online course characteristics focuses on building an inclusive and supportive learning community that fosters connection, trust, and engagement. It emphasizes opportunities for student interaction, belonging, and open communication, while valuing diverse learner backgrounds and encouraging meaningful learner contributions to course content.

Characteristic

1	Students have an opportunity to introduce themselves.
2	Includes an opportunity for students to ask questions about the course such as an Ask the Instructor discussion forum.
3	Provides activities to build community, foster belonging, support open communication, and establish trust between classmates and the instructor.
4	Instructional materials reflect a variety of learner backgrounds.
5	Includes ways for learners to contribute meaningfully to course content (e.g., share resources and information from a variety sources).

9. Learner Support Resources

This set of online course characteristics focuses on ensuring learners have clear, consistent access to instructional, technological, and institutional support throughout the course. It emphasizes transparent instructor communication, reliable technology and privacy guidance, comprehensive university support services, and clear expectations for academic research and documentation.

Characteristic

1	Office hours, communication preferences, and response times are clearly articulated and easy to locate.
2	Provides learners with information on protecting their data and privacy.
3	Minimum technology requirements and information for obtaining them are provided.
4	Technical support resources (e.g., University webpages and vendor guides and tutorials) are accessible through the course.
5	Information to request assistance is provided.
6	Access is provided to comprehensive learner support services including academic honesty resources, tutoring, library resources/professionals, institutional academic support services, accommodation services, and academic and career counseling.
7	Information about securing materials via university libraries is provided.
8	Required academic documentation style (e.g., APA, MLA, IEEE) is identified.