

Writing and Structuring Online Learning Materials

A. Special features of online delivery

Where a course either begins with online materials, or is entirely delivered online (as part of distance learning provision), the course materials that the student receives will be both the first thing they look through to get a sense of the course ahead of them; and the solid spine which will carry them through the course. Where there is no face-to-face teaching, much of the introductory, clarifying, or support elements must also be embedded in these materials; they are lectures, seminars, lab sessions and private tutorials combined.

The presentation, structure and content of these materials is therefore of crucial importance; in particular, a student should be able to access their course materials and, within minutes, have a clear idea of what's ahead of them and how they will be studying. Providing advice at the start of course materials on planning a study timetable/calendar (by providing a blank one, or example times per section/activity) can help with this.

B. Before you start writing

The writing and structuring of materials shouldn't start until you have a full picture of the course framework; this will mean that you know your intended audience (and particular needs/features of that audience), the principle learning aims and intended outcomes, subject topics, course structure and assessment plan. All of these have a big effect on the structure and style of the course materials.

- The Leicester Learning Institute can assist you in developing these aspects before you start to write: see [Creating a New Programme](#)

C. Online, Print or Blend?

Decisions should be based on your target audience and the nature of your subject: how/where/when will your students be studying (eg. full-time on campus; part-time distance learning; around or within paid work; in summer holidays; on commutes; in areas where internet access is patchy or unavailable etc.)? Is your subject fast-moving; will materials need updating often? This will lead you to:

- think about access, convenience and the user experience.



Usually these concerns override any cost implications, which when spread across multiple cohorts tend to even out to be similar whether online or print based (for online, the initial development costs are high but the delivery cheap; whereas printed material is cheap to develop but has high recurrent production/delivery costs).

- You can choose any delivery blend from all online to all printed, though this will affect the ease with which you can use certain teaching methods (constructivist approaches work best online; longer readings are more comfortable in print). Some, increasingly outdated, studies report that students like having a ‘backbone’ of printed materials supported by online activity (Burgess et al. 2005; Donnelly & Agius, 2005).
- If using a blend of print/online, produce longer-term materials and texts in print, and any regularly-changing information (including web links) online. Where journals and books are available online, use these native versions rather than reprinting (ideally, reflect the way that students would access any reference material in their future job/activity).

D. Structure

The overall structure of course materials depends on the approach you take:

- In a **detailed course text** (similar to the way you might write a book chapter), the materials will be formed around a long text, and the main issue will be how you split this up and make it manageable/engaging.
- In a **‘wrap around’ commentary**, you will be writing less text, but drawing in a variety of sources and activities which will naturally break up the materials. The main issue here is to ensure you ease the student into this way of working, and maintain a sense of structure and flow.
- In a **problem-based or case-based approach**, there is far less structure, but you need to ensure that students are clear when and how to start and structure their independent or group work, and how to access resources or support when they need it.

In each case, the following issues around structure need to be planned in:

- Break course materials into logical sections, either by topic or in suitable lengths for covering in 1-2 hours (a typical learning ‘block’).





- Give clear descriptive headings to sections, topics and sub-topics. This will help students to plan which sections they will work on in each session, and allows them to skim over topics they already know.
- At the beginning of the materials, and at each new topic or section, set the scene and give an overview of the material to come, including structure, learning outcomes and estimated study time. Optionally, you may want to include a pre-test at the beginning, and a post-test at the end, of each section.

At the end of each topic or section, summaries are important for ensuring that the student has identified the key points of the chapter, as well as being a useful revision tool. Short lists are usually sufficient (or solo/group reflective tasks).

E. Writing style, detail and length

- **Style:** Keep your writing simple, direct and clear; use an informal and accessible style. You are looking to engage and encourage.
- **How much?:** Students can read the following words per hour on average (from Whalley, 1982; Lockwood, Williams & Roberts, 1988):

Easy Read: 6000wph	Fairly straightforward read: 4200wph	Dense/difficult read: 2800wph
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Assuming around 3000wph and text equivalent to around 20 hours of timetabled teaching for 10 credits (which is then augmented by time for activities/assessments, reflection, audio-visual material etc.), word counts for the three structure types should be in the region of:

Detailed course text: 18,000-32,000 (per 10cr)	Wrap-around commentary: 5,000-18,000 (per 10cr)	Problem/case-based: (varies/unimportant)
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Note that we take in 25% less when we read on-line, and so a good rule is to write only 50% online of what you might write in print; furthermore, an increased use of lists, tables, illustrations, links etc. will mean that online word counts are far less than indicated above; and shouldn't be compared.

- Use relevant examples and case studies wherever possible.
- Provide definitions for any new words or terminology used (in-text or in footnotes in printed text; as hyperlinks to definitions in online texts; plus separate glossary for each).



F. Breaking the text; adding variety and interest

- Intersperse blocks of text with other readings, solo/group activities and assessment (formative or summative). This will retain students' interest and encourage regular review, reflection and revision. Use print or online design to introduce these elements visually and break up the text (call-outs, side boxes, icons or colours online etc. - a print or online designer will be able to help with this).
- Build up knowledge and understanding over several sections or exercises; repeat key concepts, ideas and theories several times, and in different ways, if possible (imagine having to describe a concept in a different way to a struggling face-to-face student).
- Use illustrations, tables, summaries to consolidate material for easy revision.
- For online texts specifically, either:
 - use PDF documents for each section, which can then be designed as print
 - or, if putting text directly into Blackboard, break the text into screen-sized chunks, make one point per paragraph, use lists, tables and links where possible and leave plenty of white space.

G. Editing and proofing

Remember that any material which goes out to students is a reflection on the quality of your department and the University.

For distance learning materials, all modules must undergo a quality check before release – see:

[Quality Control for DL](#)

The same reputational issue applies to all courses, however, and so regardless of mode it is recommended that you:

- arrange for critical friends to check first drafts of academic material, and any subsequent revised drafts if there are major changes;
- have an experienced copy-editor check the final versions of all material before production (ie. print proofs, Blackboard site before it goes live);
- have one or more staff go through all of the course materials as if they were a student to check structure, clarity, links, diagrams, readings, etc. (if on



Blackboard, enrol them as students so that they experience the site as a student would).

...and essential that you:

- ensure that all materials (especially third-party images, readings etc.) are within copyright and fair use regulations (contact copyright@le.ac.uk within the Library to check).
- adhere to the University's visual identity:
<http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/marketing/marcomms/creative/identity/visid-guidelines/>

Further Help

The Leicester Learning Institute provide further online resources to support the development of course materials, run workshops on related topics, and are available for consultation in this area.

[Leicester Learning Institute](#)

Sources and further reading

The following sources were used in the preparation of this guide, and may be of further help:

Burgess, G., Holt, A. and Agius, R. (2005) Preference of distance learning methods among post-graduate occupational physicians and hygienists. *Occupational Medicine*, 55, 312–318

Donnelly, A. B. and Agius, R. M. (2005) The distance learning courses in occupational medicine – 20 years and onwards. *Occupational Medicine*, 55, 319–323

Lockwood, F. (1994), ed. *Materials Production in Open and Distance Learning*. London: Paul Chapman Pub.

There are a number of resources available at the COL (Commonwealth of Learning) site:

<http://www.col.org/resources/publications/Pages/listing.aspx?CID=9>

Other useful DL writing guides for print and online materials:

<http://www.ica-sae.org/trainer/english/p11.htm>

http://www.bgsu.edu/departments/english/kblair/728/webb_sav.pdf (reference list)

<http://www.fgcu.edu/onlinedesign/mediadev.html>

