# Mastering Online Learning

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For both instructors and students, understanding the design elements used and the reasoning behind the particular course structure chosen is crucial for becoming well-versed in online learning. Whether you are a novice to the online environment or someone who has worked with some of the more complex features within Penn's Canvas learning management system (LMS), here are some online learning best practices:

## Introduction to the Course

### Instructors

As an instructor, developing a quick introductory course video makes the class more inviting. Students are often reluctant to speak out online as it can seem a bit abnormal, but introducing the course creatively in the role of instructor can positively affect the class dynamic.

To do this, schedule a recording session with Erin Marshall, ITS's Online Learning and Instructional Design Manager.

### Students

As a student, getting familiar with the course format before class even begins will allow for a smooth transition into the online environment. Students should always check what they currently have access to in the course, such as modules, pages, and discussion boards.

Since each course design is unique to the instructor's needs, students should be aware of the differences in Canvas sites across all courses—whether traditional, hybrid, or entirely online.

## Design Aesthetics




If the course material is broken into sections and edited often to remove any redundancies, course quality will improve, and students will be more likely to utilize everything the course has to offer.
For example, vamping up the course content with media elements and other unique features increases student motivation and attention. Depending on the topic, visuals are a great way to convey information.




Although students are not able to edit specific design elements within their courses, they can edit their profile to include a biography and personalized links. In Settings, they can add a profile picture that will appear on every post and help the professor to put a face to the name.

## Overall Organization




When organizing your course in Canvas, keep the module formatting consistent. For example, say a module for one week contains three pages:
1. Work that should be completed before class
2. Content that was discussed during class
3. Work that should be completed after class
If the other course modules follow this same page format, students will likely feel more at ease.




Students also have the ability to stay organized in Canvas, particularly within their files. This is where images such as the profile picture are stored. There is also a folder for additional images, conversation attachments, submissions, and unfiled items.
For best practice, students should create folders for any items that are stored within the files section. Another way for students to stay organized in Canvas is to only show active courses in which they are currently enrolled on the dashboard.

## Discussion






Keep the conversation going using discussion boards and synchronous course sessions where students can lead class conversation. Especially if the course is entirely online, communication should be open and ongoing. As an instructor, it is important to make students feel comfortable reaching out with questions.

As a student, make discussion happen. Whether or not an instructor provides an ongoing discussion board, when a question arises, send out a message to others in the class either through Canvas or another form of communication.

If one person has the question, chances are others are wondering something similar, and this could help to break the communication barrier that often exists between the instructor and students. Similarly, instructors should work to provide consistent feedback to students in a way that furthers their growth in the course.

## Get Creative

Most importantly--use the technology! A big part of mastering online learning is using all Canvas has to offer. Sending out periodic announcements, organizing your course content into modules, starting class discussions, and thinking of creative ideas that work to explain the content effectively while also bringing the students together can take an online course to the next level.