

## Resource Guide

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### Creating Accessible Online Learning Environments

A key challenge for online instructors is designing courses that are both engaging and interactive, while also remaining accessible to students. An accessible online course is one that allows all students to interact with course materials as intended and demonstrate their learning without facing obstacles that preclude them from doing so. Instead of viewing accessibility through a “one student, one solution, one time” approach, being proactive and making accessibility front-and-center in your course will improve the learning experience for all students. Consider the following strategies for creating accessible online learning environments:

- **Get in the habit of designing content with accessibility in mind.** [Adding alternative text to graphics](#), [formatting course links through descriptive text](#), [inserting captions in recorded lectures](#), or [using PDFs that have real text](#) are simple, yet effective ways to immediately improve the accessibility of your course learning experience. These accessibility features are essential for students with visual or auditory differences, and getting in the habit of including these features when recording lectures or sharing course readings will prevent you from scrambling to re-edit videos or find alternative content once a semester begins (Coombs, 2010).
- **Aim for a clear, consistent course design structure.** Building course material, learning activities, and assessments through [Modules in Canvas](#) adds structure to the learning process and helps keep students focused and on-track. In addition, using a similar design format for these modules (e.g., when modules start and end or using the same weekly due dates for discussions) acclimates students to your course and gets them on a regular work schedule. You can also reduce cognitive overload for students by [hiding links or tools on the left-hand Course Navigation menu](#) in Canvas that you do not plan on having them interact with or use.
- **Vary the representation of your content, and allow students to express their learning in multiple ways.** Use a variety of instructional materials in your teaching (e.g., readings, videos, podcasts, images), and provide multiple options for students to express and demonstrate their learning. For example, give students the option of writing a paper or recording a presentation of their final course project. Universal Design for Learning (UDL), as a pedagogical framework, stresses that these options positively impact the learning experience for all of your students, regardless of whether they have a disability or not (Burgstahler, 2015; Tobin and Behling, 2016). Whereas captions are essential for students with hearing difficulties, they are also beneficial for students working on your course late at night in their dorm room.

- **Adopt a “Plus-1” mentality in your teaching.** Designing accessible online courses takes time and effort. The “Plus-1” approach places a premium on small changes, or minor modifications. Rather than having a complete overhaul of your course in mind, making a mental note that you added captions for your introductory video or inserted alternative text for graphics in your lecture next week will motivate you to continue implementing these accessibility moves in practice and give you an incentive to improve the accessibility of your course in other areas.

#### Resources

Burgstahler, S. (2015). “Universal design for instruction: From principles to practice,” in *Universal design in higher education: From principles to practice* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) by S. Burgstahler. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Coombs, N. (2010). *Making online teaching accessible: Inclusive course design for students with disabilities*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Tobin, T.J. & Behling, K. T. (2016). *Reach everyone, teach everyone: Universal design for learning in higher education*. Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press.

*For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center by [email](#).*