Course Planning Quick Start Guide

30 Second Summary

We encourage you to first skim this guide to identify what content might be helpful to you at this point. Keep in mind that this is a QuickStart guide—other resources and workshops are in production—and that its intent is to get you started building a successful 7-week course, which involves many of the same steps and strategies you already use to build your courses. For those seeking additional support, the end of this guide lists a few PLTC and LTS colleagues who can help you move along to the next phases in planning. We want to thank the PLTC, LTS, and the Provost's Office for collaborating to create this guide.

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We are likely to find ourselves teaching in one of three modes in the fall—face-to-face, hybrid, or remote—and using a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning strategies. The Frequently Asked Questions document in the MyWellesley > Provost's Office tab discusses these terms in more detail.

Section 1: Strategies for Success in 7-week Courses

Courses that are 7-week long versions of 13-week courses are sometimes called *intensive courses.* The most successful such courses, according to the research (see the Appendix for links to the literature), have the following characteristics.

- **The students.** Students rely *more heavily* on instructor enthusiasm, good communication, and clear expectations to keep them engaged and on task.
    Why? In 13-week courses, students have a couple of weeks (or more) to settle in to a course's rhythm and figure out how to navigate it; not so in 7-week courses.

- **The instructor.** Faculty check in with each student frequently (not daily, but also more than once a week) about their academic progress to help them stay on track, connecting them with college support staff as needed (e.g., class deans).
    Why? Intensive courses feel intense (and short) to students. Any issues that arise, therefore, have greater potential to impact success in the course.

- **The materials, resources, and methods.** The course emphasizes depth over breadth and is organized into easily navigable chunks. A variety of learning activities are used, including a healthy dose of active learning -- learning activities in which students actively engage with content and each other (see the Appendix for active learning ideas).
    Why? Emphasizing depth gives students time to digest material while still allowing for rigor and intellectual challenge. And since students spend more time per week engaged with the course, varying the learning activities will help prevent the weeks from feeling long and monotonous.

- **The learning community.** Students rely *more heavily* on the instructor to facilitate and foster student-to-student and student-to-instructor interactions and build community (see the Appendix for community-building ideas).
    Why? Students have less time to get to know each other and the instructor in intensive courses.

- **The assessment activities.** Assessments and feedback become more frequent.

    Why? Infrequent assessments in intensive courses mean that students have less time to digest the results of the assessments and adjust their studying accordingly. This leads to increased anxiety about the course. High-stakes assessments, like exams, can still be given, but these are often split into multiple smaller assessments given over time.

    Why? There is little time for procrastination or struggling when a course moves fast. For large assignments, requiring students to submit outlines, sections, and drafts will allow you to keep tabs on whether they are making acceptable progress.

Section 2: Strategies for Success in Hybrid and Remote Courses

The most successful hybrid and remote courses, according to the research (see the Appendix for links to the literature), have the following characteristics.

- **The students.** Students direct more of their learning, as they decide when to engage with asynchronous content and when to participate in discussions (e.g., on a forum).

    Why? Students learning remotely must *choose* to open their emails, post to a forum, and otherwise engage with the course; they no longer have the social accountability or pressure that comes with being on campus (e.g., running into a classmate in the dining halls who is studying for the course).

- **The instructor.** Instructors coordinate student learning activities "outside of the classroom."

    Why? Remote courses have many components that require frequent management and upkeep (e.g., facilitating student-to-student discussions, perhaps via forums), many of which are asynchronous in nature. This requires faculty to take on the role of a coordinator in addition to the teaching role.

- **The materials and resources.** Students learn from a greater variety of materials, content, and platforms (e.g., YouTube), a high proportion of which is accessed asynchronously. Below are a few examples.

Examples of Asynchronous Content and/or Learning		
Commenting on readings in Perusall and responding to other students' comments	Engaging with the class discussion forum	Submitting a Google Form reflection on class materials
Watching a video (either instructor-recorded or from the internet)	Creating study guides, videos, and other products to summarize class materials	Listening to assigned audio podcasts
Learning from an online textbook with embedded questions, quizzes, or videos	Using interactive demonstration, simulation, or graphing programs or websites (e.g., Desmos)	Collaborating with peers on a writing assignment via Google Docs

This greater variety of course materials means that accessibility of course materials becomes especially important.

- **The learning community.** Students meet virtually and increase their use of asynchronous communication (e.g., email, forum postings) to stay in touch.

- **The assessment activities.** Assessment becomes more frequent and more varied.
  Why? More frequent and more varied assessments allow faculty to build a richer understanding of what students know. This helps thwart cheating and other Honor Code violations. In addition, a greater variety of assessments supports students from an accommodations perspective.

Below are some examples of assessments used in hybrid and/or remote courses.

Examples of Assessment Activities		
Post and revise answers to discussion questions on forums	Comment on others' work	Engage in self-assessment
Take Google Form quizzes, take-home exams, essay-based exams	Submit reflections on pre-recorded Zoom lectures	Submit reports on collaborative labs and/or projects
Create blogs, wikis, videos, and e-portfolios	Generate proposals or drafts	Write blog posts or newspaper articles

Section 3: Concrete Tips and Principles for Successful 7-week Courses

The above takeaways from the research on intensive and/or hybrid/remote courses suggest the following concrete actions. (See the Appendix for related links and templates.)

- **Modularize your course.** Organize content into shorter modules with clear unifying themes and organization. (Think back to your elementary school math teacher: "Today we're starting the unit (module) on fractions.")

- **Provide weekly schedules.** Whether on your syllabus or in a separate place (or both), communicate explicitly to students what they need to do during each week of the course.

- **Provide a detailed syllabus.** Students in remote courses generally need to schedule their work for the course well in advance (because, for example, a student might be in a different time zone). Similarly, students in 7-week courses need to plan their time well (because deadlines come so quickly). Therefore, a syllabus that lists explicit dates for all assignments and learning activities, in addition to the weekly schedules, is helpful.

- **Create and monitor discussion forums.** Discussion forums give students an asynchronous way to talk to each other, and give the instructor a way to monitor and assess learning. Forums also provide students opportunities to learn from each other's questions (and answers). They provide, in effect, the same benefits to both students and the instructor that circling the classroom while students are working in groups does. In most hybrid and/or remote courses, participation in discussion forums is part of a student's final grade.

- **Foster individual, paired, and small-group learning.** Building community in remote courses takes frequent and deliberate effort. Support this effort by building in activities in which students work with a variety of their peers and in varying group sizes.

- **Vary the assessment types used.** Timed, synchronous assessments (e.g., in-class quizzes) are problematic in remote courses--internet connectivity issues, time zone issues, and the challenges students being home present (e.g., younger siblings running around the house) may disrupt timed, synchronous assessments. Consider instead varying the assessments you use (see the previous section for examples).

- **Provide regular feedback.** Because of the intensive nature of the course, the turn-around time for graded assignments can be very short, so it's good practice to engage lots of help.
  - If computer-graded online homework is available, use it to give students immediate feedback about their comprehension.
  - Encourage students to submit some assignments in groups; the quality will be higher and the time needed to grade them will be shorter.
  - Require students to meet with peer tutors and editors before they submit work to you.
  - Give students brief, targeted feedback about outlines and early drafts of papers rather than thorough edits.
  - Encourage students to assess their own work against a clear rubric.

Section 4: Rethinking Your Course Design Process and Adapting to a New Environment

The concrete tips in the previous section are typical steps taken in the course design and development process. That process has its own best practices, which we briefly introduce in this section for those unfamiliar with them. Before you dive into designing (or redesigning) and developing your course using the information below, however, we recommend thinking through your course and identifying what needs to be done (or needs to be learned) versus what you have already done (or already know). This will help reduce the investment of time and energy into your course design.

The graphic on the right from Marquette University's Center for Teaching and Learning illustrates one model of the main stages of the course design and development process.[1]

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[1] Source: https://www.marquette.edu/center-for-teaching-and-learning/instructional-design-model.php

Though there are no rules dictating the order in which one should progress through the stages in the graphic, the sequencing suggested below works well. In each case, we encourage you to reflect on how a new learning environment might change the goals and materials you have used in the past.

- **Develop or re-examine your learning objectives.** It helps to begin with the end in mind: What are the main concepts and/or skills you would like students to have mastered by the end of the course? Have any of these goals changed because of the nature of the semester? (For example, would a stronger focus on writing for a particular audience, and less on public speaking, make sense in a remote semester?) Answering these questions first will help you anchor the course.

- **Choose or create the instructional materials, ensuring they are accessible to the students in your course.** What content and/or materials will you use and/or create to support your course? One potential approach: start by building in materials you already find effective, and identify "holes" where you need new material in new formats. Are any materials too long or non-essential for a 7-week intensive course?

- **Create or adapt the learning activities.** What learning activities will you implement? Would any past activities you have used be adapted to asynchronous/synchronous but online delivery? How?

- **Create or adapt the assessments.** How will you assess students to determine their progress toward mastering your course objectives? Are there new, different ways to assess student learning that might be more effective in an online or intensive environment than what you have used in the past?

- **Map out your course.** How will you organize the course to make it easy for students to navigate? How will you communicate this organization to students? (See the resources section below for course map templates.) If you might never meet your students face-to-face, or your direct contact was interrupted, could they still follow the flow of the course online?

- **Review.** What criteria will you use to determine when you are done with the design and development phase? Consider also asking a colleague for feedback.

The Appendix contains many links and templates to help you think through these questions.

Section 5: Next Steps

We are working to develop Wellesley-specific resources and workshops for the next academic year tailor-made to the needs of students and faculty. These resources will launch shortly. In the interim, we have included links to additional resources at the end of this guide.

If you have your syllabus and some new ideas in hand and are ready to dive into the details of the course design and development process, we are happy to help. We encourage you to reach out to any of the following colleagues with questions, comments, or suggestions.

<table>
<tr><td align="center">**PLTC**</td><td align="center">**LTS**</td></tr>
<tr><td>Oscar Fernandez (ofernand@wellesley.edu)</td><td align="center">David O'Steen (dosteen@wellesley.edu)
Rebecca Darling (rdarling@wellesley.edu)
Or your favorite subject specialist</td></tr>
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We look forward to working with you in the weeks and months to come.

Appendix: Additional Resources

Resources for Sections 1 and 2

- See this 2016 dissertation for a review of the literature on the effectiveness of intensive courses and hybrid courses.
- See this article for a review of the literature on the factors that predict student satisfaction with online courses.
- See this article for a review of the attributes of high-quality intensive courses.
- See this document from the University of South Florida for 273 examples of active learning, most of which can be directly employed (or easily adapted) in remote or hybrid courses.
- These two articles (here and here) contain great tips for building community in courses. Note: some of the tips are for K-12 courses, but apply just as well to college courses.

Resources for Course Design and Development

- *Developing learning objectives.* The table on this webpage is a great place to start.
- *Developing assessments.* Here is a useful document listing 53 simple ways to check for understanding.
- *Creating a course map.* Here is a helpful template that can help. Here is one from our Wellesley Extended colleagues.
- *Modularizing your course.* See the last page of this document for an example.
- *Providing weekly schedules.* Here is a useful template for the weekly schedules. Here is one from our Wellesley Extended colleagues.
- *Providing a detailed syllabus with weekly schedules.* Here is an example of a syllabus structured in this way; here is another illustrating just the weekly schedule part.

General Resources

- *The Online Teaching Survival Guide* (Jossey-Bass, 2016). We have full online access to this book via our library. (Simply log in to MyWellesley and use the SuperSearch feature in the Library tab to search for the book.) The book features 60 concrete tips, techniques, and tools for effective remote teaching and learning, categorized according to which part of the course you are in (e.g., the first week). All recommendations are evidence-based, and the relevant research findings are interwoven throughout the book.
- *Delivering High-Quality Instruction Online in Response to COVID-19: A Faculty Playbook.* Were this Quick Start Guide 55 pages long, it would likely resemble this Faculty Playbook. The Playbook is the result of a collaboration between the Online Learning Consortium and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, among other organizations. It contains many helpful frameworks and details about the course design and development process.
- University of Illinois' Online Course-in-a-Box. This webpage, maintained by the University of Illinois' Center for Innovation in Teaching and Learning, contains several helpful modules and videos on course design.