



## 6 Tips for Developing a Course in an LMS

by [Ilka Kostka](#)

It is the time of year when summer is coming to a close and teachers are beginning to prepare for the upcoming academic year. One important part of this preparation is developing courses in online learning management systems (LMSs). Schools and universities may use different LMS platforms (e.g., [Canvas](#), [Blackboard](#), or [Moodle](#)), but the structure and features of these systems are typically the same. In this article, I describe six principles that I follow when setting up my English language classes, both on-ground and online, in the LMS used at my university.

### 1. Strive for Consistency

Consistency in both course delivery and LMS design can help students develop a rhythm in the course more quickly, including becoming acquainted with your teaching style, locating materials more easily online, and working more efficiently. Following are some ways in which I try to maintain consistency in my LMS, Canvas:

- Use the same organizational structure throughout the term (e.g., organize content either chronologically or by topic).
- Incorporate the same color scheme throughout the course to differentiate it from students' other courses in the LMS.
- Release content (e.g., weekly modules) at approximately the same time each week.
- Label assignments with the exact names listed on the syllabus (e.g., *Research Presentation* instead of *Presentation of Research Project*).
- Ask students to submit similar types of assignments in the same way (e.g., file upload, text entry).
- Communicate with students using the same medium (e.g., email, LMS announcements) so they know where to expect updates and information.
- Provide feedback in the same manner on student work (e.g., directly annotating students' papers or providing margin comments).

### 2. Create Cohesion Among Materials

Cohesion in an online course helps students see how objectives, assignments, and materials connect with one another. In Canvas, I set up weekly modules, or folders, to help me organize content. One way to build cohesion is to link weekly modules together with a summary and

“looking ahead” statement. I also post learning objectives in each module and in assignment guidelines so I can connect them back to the learning objectives of the course; this helps students see how assignments relate to each other and to the course more broadly.

Additionally, I like to create cohesion by inserting hyperlinks in modules where possible. For instance, in a place where I ask students to read through an assignment rubric before submitting, I include a link to the rubric so students don’t have to find it on their own. Students can also access the same link in multiple places (e.g., rubrics, assignments, list of weekly homework assignments). The screenshot in Figure 1 shows one section of a module from the first week of an ESL online culture and communication class for graduate students. Students can click on the links below to access files (e.g., the syllabus, videos); they can find these materials in other places as well.

## Module Activities

In this module, you should complete the following tasks:

- Read the article "[Introduction to culture](#)" before Thursday’s class (January 21) and be ready to discuss it
- Watch my [syllabus video](#) and read the [syllabus](#) very carefully
- Buy both required textbooks (see [syllabus](#))
- Browse through our Canvas course
- Watch the [videos](#) about email etiquette and [submit the accompanying handout](#)
- Complete the [speaking diagnostic assignment](#)
- Complete the ungraded [syllabus practice quiz](#)
  - Note: Familiarize yourself with the syllabus *before* you begin the quiz!

Figure 1. Example module section in Canvas.

## 3. Collaborate With Colleagues

Here, I’d like to emphasize the value of collaboration with fellow teachers when designing courses and exploring the features of your LMS. It is helpful to see what LMS tools colleagues are using in their courses. For instance, if another instructor is using [Perusall](#), I know that students with whom we share a cohort are familiar with the program. We don’t want to overburden students with too many different tools in different classes, but we could leverage the power of a tool for learning if students use it across classes. I also like to share my courses with my colleagues because they can provide feedback on the layout of my course and catch any inconsistencies or potentially confusing elements. In turn, it’s helpful to see how their courses are set up to gain ideas on how I can improve mine.

## 4. Be Creative

In addition to an organized and cohesive layout, I try to infuse creative elements into my courses wherever I can. For example, I post a colorful image in each weekly module where students read about the week’s learning objectives and homework tasks. I also include thought-provoking questions, a relevant quote, or an idiom underneath the image to pique students’ interest in the topic and provide a discussion point for synchronous sessions.

To introduce the course and syllabus, I record a short video in which I share my screen, introduce myself, and discuss the course. Moving this information to the asynchronous space saves class time, and students can watch the video as many times as they like. Figure 2 shows a screenshot from a video I created to describe the syllabus in an ESL listening and speaking course. I wanted to provide an orientation to the course while drawing students' attention to critical elements of the syllabus. Blackboard was the LMS that our university used at the time.

The screenshot displays a slide with a table and a list of assignments. The table shows grade ranges and corresponding letter grades. Below the table is a 'Grade Breakdown' section with a bulleted list of assignments and their percentages. At the bottom, there is a section titled 'Audio Recordings & Videos' with a paragraph of text. A small video inset in the bottom right corner shows the instructor speaking.

95-100%	A	87-89.9%	B+	77-79.9%	C+	69.9% or below	F
		84-86.9%	B	74-76.9%	C		
90-94.9%	A-	80-83.9%	B-	70-73.9%	C-		

**Grade Breakdown:**

- Audio Recordings (5) – 15%
- Videos (3) – 15%
- Homework (10) – 20%
- Presentations (2) – 30%
  - Presentation #1 – 10%
  - Presentation #2 – 20%
- Participation/Discussion Board Posts – 20%

*Audio Recordings & Videos*  
 Audio recordings and videos are recordings that you submit via the course Blackboard site. The instructor can assess your spoken English and, if applicable, listening comprehension. Assignments could include reading exercises (phrases or passages), reacting to listening tasks, or spontaneous speech. In addition to assigning a grade to each task, the instructor will respond to your work.

Figure 2. Screenshot from ESL listening and speaking course orientation video in Blackboard.

I also try to use different tools within the LMS to spice up regular assignments. For instance, students sometimes submit a video or audio response to a reading instead of writing their response (see also [Betsy Gilliland's blog post from 2019](#) about role-playing games for online interaction). There are many ways to invigorate a course, and it's fun to think outside the box and experiment.

## 5. Aim for Clarity

Students are busy and read a lot on screen, and I don't want them to spend time trying to decipher my assignments or instructions. They are also likely checking their LMS on mobile phones where there is less space than on a computer screen. Thus, I try to keep titles and explanations short but informative. I use bullet points and numbered lists wherever possible to minimize the amount of text needed to describe homework assignments and to ensure that students read through every point and don't miss any information. I also use the same language that's on the syllabus when referring to assignments so students can make connections between the syllabus and the material posted in online.

Finally, I make sure that I clearly indicate my expectations for students' work. For instance, in all assignments, I indicate what kind of file students should upload (e.g., Word document, mp4) and what the due date is. I also attach a rubric to the assignment so students know how they'll be assessed.

## 6. Orient Students to Your Online Course and LMS

Being creative, cohesive, and consistent won't do any good if students aren't sure where to locate course materials or use the many features in the LMS (e.g., discussion board, grade center). In this final tip, I'd like to emphasize the importance of ensuring that students are oriented to the course and to the LMS more generally. This orientation can be done in different ways.

I usually give a tour of our Canvas course in class by sharing my screen and clicking through the major parts of the course in "student view," but another option is to use a screen-sharing software (e.g., [Screencast-o-matic](#)) to record a video explaining the different sections. Drawing students' attention to the course, as well as to our expectations for their engagement in the course, can significantly minimize confusion and frustration later and ensure that the semester begins smoothly.

Finally, I post information about technical support for the LMS in multiple places so students know where to go for help. Sometimes, technical problems arise that go beyond the scope of the course, and guiding students to technical assistance that's provided at your school can help them access help that's specific to their LMS and university.

### Conclusion

During the COVID-19 pandemic when I taught solely online, I relied on my LMS more than ever before. As I plan for the upcoming academic year, I will continue leveraging the many features of my LMS to organize content, foster collaboration among students, assess student learning, communicate with students, and keep grades up to date, among other activities.

The tips I've shared here are some of the most important principles that I try to follow when I set up my courses in Canvas. As I hope to have shown, taking special care to create a cohesive and well-organized course in your LMS can ensure a smooth start to the school year and get students excited about your course and about learning.

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