COTC Course Design Recommendations

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Humanizing your Course

Many instructors worry about losing the great "feel" of a classroom full of engaged learners when moving a course online. While it is true that online learning can increase feelings of isolation and distance, there are some simple techniques you can use to connect with your students, and for students to connect to each other.

Tip #1: Be "real" to your students

Small details can make a big difference in the way students perceive you and your course. Try some of the following techniques to set your preferred tone for your course:

- **Record an intro video.** This doesn't have to be fancy - in fact, many students prefer a simple "talking to the webcam" style of video to something that looks professionally produced. Simply take 2-3 minutes to introduce yourself the way you would at the beginning of a face-to-face class and tell them what to expect from this course. This is a great time to share what *you* like about the course - your attitude toward the course will transmit to your students.
- **Check in weekly.** Each week, take a few minutes to write or record a message to your students. Respond to things you saw in the last week: great discussions, interesting points, lingering confusion. Including these "current events" lets students know you are paying attention to them and their work, which greatly improves feelings of belonging and satisfaction.

- **Use an Enhanced Syllabus**. Enhancing your syllabus with conversational language, logical organization, and simple visual touches can transform your syllabus from a boring "student contract" to something people actually read. COTC is still discussing changes to its syllabus template, so if it's not possible to enhance your syllabus, focus attention getting your voice into your course orientation module in Canvas.

Tip #2: Address student motivation and inclusion

There are lots of things that motivate students to show up and participate in any kind of class:

- Interest in the course material - fueled by utility ("I can use this information") or love ("I find this topic fascinating")
- Finding the instructor and other students interesting, engaging, or fun
- Getting caught slacking off or skipping class
- The need to fulfill academic requirements: deadlines, grades, requirements for the major

As courses move part or all of their activity online, the "push" of extrinsic motivators like "the prof will know if I skip her class" is reduced. One of the best ways to improve motivation is to be sure the "pull" of intrinsic motivation shines through in your course. You can do this in a number of recommended ways:

- **Introduce each module with a paragraph or two placing the module's topics in context.** What will this module help students DO? Is this information foundational to more complex and compelling topics later on? Put this paragraph on your course home page or in your Course Introduction.
- **Start your course with a Learner Connectedness Survey.** This survey helps you learn about your students and consider appropriate adjustments to course material or topics.
- **Include a COTC's**
- **Reitterate COTC's diversity statement** to indicate that your course is a welcoming environment.

    COTC's Current College-Wide Policies Diversity Statment: "It is the responsibility of the faculty member and the student to foster and maintain a harmonious, non-threatening and non-discriminating environment in the classroom. The College is committed to follow a non-discriminatory policy and encourages diversity as part of the community environment. Therefore, all individuals are to be respected as equal and contributing partners of our society."

    You can expand on this statement in your Course Introduction Module if you like.

- **Let your personality come through.** Your weekly intro is also a perfect time to let your personality show through. Are you enthusiastic? Meticulous? Brilliant? Concerned? Including some of your personality in your communications helps students feel like they're learning from a real person - and they'll respond in kind.

- **Create activities and assignments that have students apply what they've learned.** Reciting lists of facts is boring, and ultimately doesn't help students use their new knowledge in a way that matters. Instead, ask them to apply course concepts to a real or realistic scenario that has meaning to them. See this website for some examples of authentic assessments for more inspiration.

Tip #3: Create an appropriate community

In some courses, creating community is a key part of the point of having students learning together. In other courses, "community" may not be an explicit goal - but connecting learners to each other still creates a richer experience. At the same time, be mindful of students' overall workload. Group work takes time and effort, which are in especially short supply among working students, student parents, and people muddling through in general. If you don't have a compelling reason to foster deep ties among students, it's ok to design your course with the minimum elements of connection: **access to you**, simple ways to **hear each other's thoughts**, and **enough feedback** so they don't feel they're submitting homework to a faceless void.

Course Organization

While there is no single best way to organize courses, there are some guidelines to help you decide.

Uniform vs. unique

Most faculty hate working to a strict template, arguing (correctly) that not all courses can be fit into the same outline. However, if courses are *too* unique, students spend an inordinate amount of time just trying to find course materials and assignments. This reduces the amount of attention they have to actually *learn* the course material.

The next few sections of this guide give suggestions for a minimal, uniform set of tools to use as a basis for a wide variety of courses, plus suggestions for customizing courses without straying too far from the core tools.

Course Navigation

Canvas allows faculty to control the course navigation menu items students can see and use in a course. (left hand column). *At minimum*, all courses must make the following navigation items visible to Students.
- Syllabus
- Announcements
- Modules
- Grades
- People

- Bookstore

Additional navigation items must be made available if they are utilized in a particular course. Examples include:
- Panopto
- Publisher content, like Cengage Mindtap or Pearson Revel
- Respondus Lockdown Browser
- Voicethread
- Zoom

Add these at your discretion if they make sense for secondary navigation for your course:
- Assignments
- Discussions
- Quizzes
- Files

You can adjust the course navigation under Settings→Navigation. Be sure to click "Save" at the bottom of the screen!

Course home page

The home page for the course is an excellent opportunity to:
- Set the tone for the course
- Convey some of your personality and expectations
- Welcome and orient students to the course

To that end, all courses must include a Course Home Page (template provided for you in your Canvas shell). The course home page is the default landing place for students entering a course. (This is not a module overview page). Course Home Pages must include:
- Course Description (This is not the description from the course catalogue. This is your "elevator speech" about your class – a general description of what students will study and learn in your course)
- Instructor's name, email, office hours,
- Link to zoom session (synchronous), course meeting times
- Link to syllabus page
- Course Materials (Here's what you need to have for day one) Required and recommended.

It's best practice to include these items that further humanize the online environment and help prepare students to be successful in the course at the start:
- **Welcome Video to Course** (Essentially this will cover course expectations overview and FAQs – e.g. "there is a discussion due weekly, etc.")

- **A Course Home Page image that conveys a feeling**, not just a topic. For example, instead of using a globe as the image for an environmental science course, you might include a picture of a person enjoying a natural setting. An accounting class might use a stylized chart of increasing revenue instead of just columns of numbers.

Calendar

The Canvas calendar has several useful features, especially for courses with synchronous class meetings.

- Any item with a due date (assignments, quizzes, discussions) is automatically added to the course calendar.
- Additional items, like course meetings, can be added to the calendar. These meetings can contain links, so if you want students to read three documents and take a reading quiz before class, those links can show up on the calendar item. This is also a great place to put the Zoom links for your class.

- Students can get an iCal link for Canvas that shows all their course items inside their calendar on their phone, Google Calendar, Outlook, etc. This calendar link stays continuously updated automatically.

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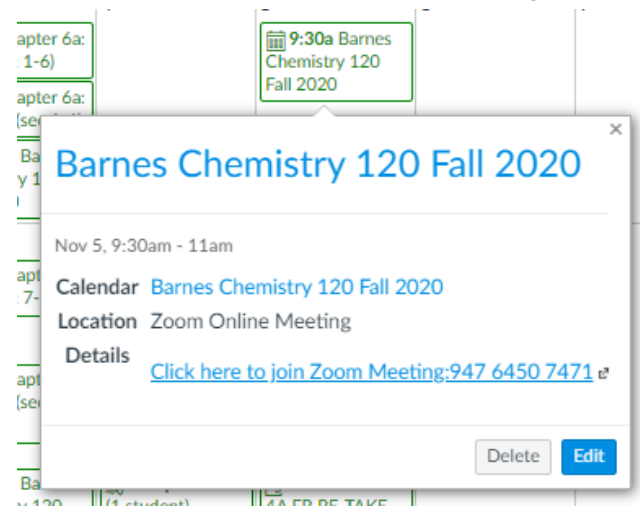
File organization options

If you've previously used the "Files" area as the primary organization for your course, you may already be meticulous about separating your readings into weeks, units, or modules. If you have more than 2-3 readings per module, that's a great practice to continue. However, if you have only a few readings, multiple folders aren't necessary, because students will primarily access course files via the Modules tool. Just put all your readings into one folder called "Readings."

Another helpful folder is "Exams." If you need images or documents as part of a test, **be sure to put them in a separate folder** and set the permissions on the folder to "Only available to students with link." This allows the image to load from within the exam, but students can't navigate to the folder and see all the images inside it.

Finally, we usually recommend a folder for images as a place to tidy away the photos, icons, and such into one folder. Additional folders are at your discretion!

Determining time on task

If you are moving substantial parts of your course online, it can be difficult to know how much course material to plan for. Rice University has a great Workload Estimator that can help. For example, you can put in the number of pages you want students to read, the density of the material, and the level of comprehension you're hoping for, and it will tell you how many pages per minute average students are likely able to read.

A good target is 135 hours/8100 minutes per three credit-hour course. That's based on traditional calculations that a 3 credit hour face-to-face course has an expectation of 3 hours of class time plus 3-6 hours of homework per week, over a 15 week course. You can then divide the 8100 minutes by the number of weeks and credits your course actually has.

Available technologies

In addition to Canvas, all courses have access to the following tools:
- Panopto – for recording and playing videos
- Zoom for conducting online meetings
- Microsoft Office365

Some departments also have access to:
- H5P – for adding interactivity to Canvas pages
- Voicethread – for commenting on videos and images

- Adobe Creative Suite – for image creation and web design

Using Modules

Students generally approach their studies chronologically - they are always asking themselves "What do I need to do this week?" Student feedback shows they prefer courses organized according to theme- and time-based modules, as opposed to courses organized by activity type (e.g., grouping all readings together, all lectures together, etc.). This goes for courses that are online, hybrid, face-to-face, synchronous, and asynchronous.

Module Requirements

It is <u>required</u> that all Course modules and their content are to be organized chronologically by week (Week 1, Week 2, Week 3, etc.) or course topic and by the order of the coursework is to be completed. This is as opposed to organized by information type – such as "readings", "assessments", "handouts", etc..

For example, some courses will be designed to unfold by weeks. In that case, each week will be a module. Others may want to design their course around topics so that each module is a topic. In that case, the individual topics for the course each get their own module, and those modules are organized in the order they will be covered in the course.

Within each module, we are no longer using the "Introduction and Objectives", "Coursework", etc., headers to organize each week's or topic's content. Rather, the content in each module should be organized in the order it is to be accomplished. For example, if your course is organized by weeks and on a particular week you would like to open with a discussion question, then that discussion will be the first item in your Module after the Module overview and Coursework pages. If after the discussion you have a video for students to view, then that will come next, etc.

Each module <u>must</u> include the following pages:
- "Module Overview" page that gives a description of the module work at a high level and lists outcomes. It is recommended by not required to have an image setting the tone of the module.
- "Coursework" page that outlines the things that students will do in the module including readings, assignments, quizzes, discussions, etc..
- All pages and content *within a module* will include a naming convention that identifies the module that content is found in. E.g. Module 1 Discussion, Module 1 Quiz. Week 1 Discussion, Week 1 Video, etc..

Module design tips best practices

- It is recommended that there be separate pages for most content. For example, embed videos on pages and, ideally, include some language setting the context for the video and drawing students' attention to important points to watch for.
- Balance "not putting too much in one module" with "not having too many pages with tiny bites of content on each." 3-7 items per module is a good target range.
  - Courses with more online content will have more items in each module.
  - Face-to-face courses may only have a module overview, a page listing readings and linking to lecture notes or recordings (if pertinent), and assignment in each module.

Module rules and gating

"Gating" a course means you force students to view materials in a certain order, and you hide some materials until other materials are completed. Except in a few rare cases, faculty usually find it's better to let students see the contents of all modules from the beginning of the course. This lets students see each topic in context and plan their upcoming work better. It also reduces chances that you'll have to handle permissions manually as the course is running if something is wrong in the setup.

The obvious exception is test questions - students should be able to see that they have a test on a certain date, but not be allowed to see the questions until the day the test is released. And occasionally, faculty may want to lock a module until students have submitted work in a previous module, because the later module contains the explanations and "right answers" for the previous module. But outside of these scenarios, it's less trouble for everyone to simply publish all modules from the beginning of the course.

Course Introduction module

A Course Introduction module sets the students up for success by explaining, in clear, plain language, how the course is organized and what your expectations are. This is especially important in courses with a heavy online component, because the introduction replaces your usual "welcome to class" speech you'd give during your first class meeting. For example:

- "This course meets twice a week for lecture and discussion. There will be weekly homework, a midterm exam, and a final project."
- "This course is mostly online and asynchronous. Each week, you'll have readings and several short videos, one or more practice exercises, and an assignment. Instead of a final exam, you will work on a large project throughout the semester. Roughly every other week, you'll complete a different portion of this project."

The Course Introduction module MUST include these few key parts, plus other items at your discretion. Key information includes:

About Your Instructor – a video intro is optional but recommended.

- Course Expectations that states in "plain language" how the course works, your expectations for all students, and a high level view of the work that will be accomplished in the term.
- How to be Successful in this Course section. The information contained in this section will be provided partly by the Administration and partly be completed by you, the instructor:
    - Provided by the Administration:
        1. How to be Successful in College (This will be provided to you by Ferdinand's Office and part of WIG)
        2. Calendar Study schedule (This will be provided to you by the Administration.)
        3. How to be Successful in Online Courses (link provided) (Tips and Resources – Troy) https://www.cotc.edu/online-success
    - Completed by the Instructor:
        1. How to be Successful in this specific course

At your discretion, you might also include:
- Course Objectives
- Information about unique aspects of the course, such as labs, simulations, or special software needed
- Student entry survey
- Syllabus Quiz
- Link to Technical support
- Link to personal support, such as counseling, tutoring, financial aid, etc.

Instructor module

It is optional but recommended to have a module with facilitation tips for running this course – especially useful when a course is taught by adjuncts. This module, which remains unpublished so students can't see it, alerts faculty to aspects they must or can update before running the course. You can include other notes and tips as appropriate.

Assessment and Grading

Planning a grading scheme

As you develop your course grading scheme, keep in mind the following best practices:
- **Students learn more when given lots of chances for feedback.** So, in addition to high-stakes assessments like papers and tests, consider having multiple lower-stakes assignments that give students a chance to practice applying course concepts, get feedback, and correct their understanding before a final evaluation.
- **Give every activity some points.** While we'd all love students to dive deep into our subject just for the joy of attaining new knowledge, the reality is that busy people need to prioritize their activities. Activities with zero points attached rarely motivate students to produce great

work. That being said - it's fine to give relatively small numbers of points, and to weight groups of assignments (e.g., discussions - 10% of final grade) lighter than others (e.g., final presentation - 25% of final grade).

- **Don't over-weight "traditional" assessments.** You may need to reduce the weight of your traditional final exam or project to give adequate weight to your other activities. Ideally, no one assessment will be worth more than 25-30% of the final course grade.
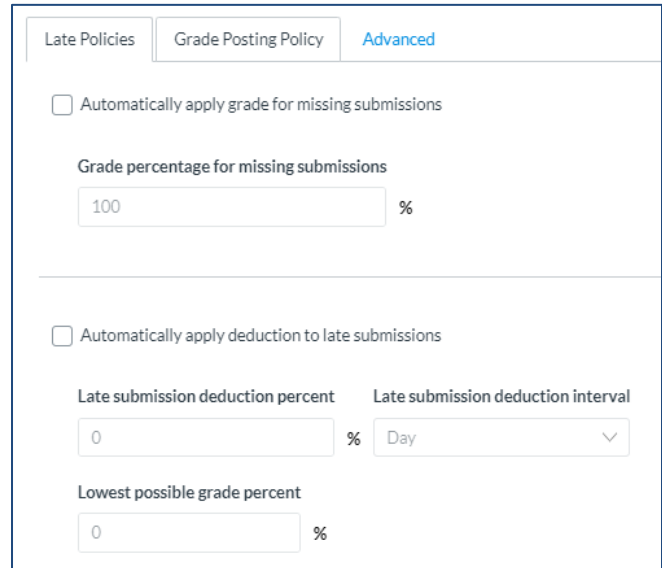
Extra Credit

"Extra credit" as a concept suggests to students that there's room for them to goof off, and there's always a way to make up something they didn't prepare for. A more refined approach is to plan multiple assessment activities that spread the grades across a number of assignments, which reduces the need for "bonus" points. If you are concerned about accommodating students with a legitimate reason for missing assignments, you can have a policy on your syllabus that extenuating circumstances will be taken into account in grading. Finally, while it is technically possible to incorporate extra credit into Canvas, it's not necessarily intuitive. So avoiding extra credit is a good move all around.

Techniques for making grading easier

Several Canvas tools can make grading easier on you.

- [Speed Grader](#) - usually used for grading written work; allows you to write comments on submitted texts and to use a rubric
- [Rubrics](#) - allow you to set up grading criteria and assign grades with a few clicks (used in conjunction with SpeedGrader)
- [Quizzes](#) - can grade many questions automatically. Sometimes short "worksheet" type assignments can be converted into quizzes that reduce or eliminate hand-grading

The Canvas Gradebook has a "hidden menu" with many useful grading options:
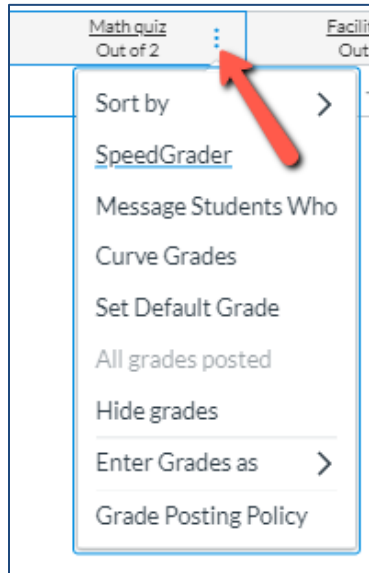
Accessibility

Building accessible courses helps all students - not just students with visible disabilities. You can think of accessibility on a continuum, rather than a simple yes/no question of accessible-or-not. The most basic tenets of accessibility include:

- Don't rely solely on color to convey information (e.g., highlighting key terms without also making them bold or italic)
- Include transcripts or closed captioning of video and audio - Panopto does a reasonable job with automatic captions. Some specialized vocabulary, such as medical terms, may need revision by hand.
- Adequately describe image alternate text
- Wherever possible, make sure that documents posted to the course are accessible to screen readers. For example, when using PDF documents avoid scanned images (scanners and copiers only creat an image of a document's text, and does not identify the text itself). For further information about accessible documents, review this website: https://www.section508.gov/create/documents

Minimally, in accordance with ADA considerations, all courses are required to:

- use preformatted headers / text.
- use alternative text for images.
- use hyperlinks that are descriptive and clear (not just "click here").
- maintain suitable text / background contrast.

Managing Live Sessions

Synchronous live sessions, often run using Zoom, are important parts of many courses. While it's tempting - and in the COVID era, often necessary - to simply deliver your existing lectures in Zoom, there are steps you can take to maximize this time.

Making the most of live sessions

The first step to great live sessions is to know your students. Do they have the maturity, drive, and time to self-direct a lot of their learning? If so, don't use your live sessions to lecture. Give students other resources, like readings and videos, to learn the basics. Then use your live sessions to really dive deep.

- Talk about ways to apply what they've learned
- Have great discussions
- Call on students
- Work through problems in small groups
- Discuss examples, using the terminology they learned from their pre-class work

Your goal is to really add value with your in-person time. Imagine if you were taking a class after work, and you rearranged your life to attend class one evening, and all the prof did was read some notes that you could have read at a more convenient time. You'd probably be pretty frustrated! So keep it active.

It's worth acknowledging that some students are not up for a lot of self-directed learning. Especially when many students are taking online courses by necessity, rather than choice, you may find a more traditional synchronous session works best. In that case, follow guidelines for good lectures, such as:

- Break up the lecture with activities. Try posting questions for students to answer via poll, or break out into small groups for discussion or problem-solving.
- Ask students to participate by calling on students.
- Give breaks if the class is longer than an hour.

Videos on or off?

Many instructors want students to keep their videos on during live (Zoom) sessions. This better simulates the classroom, lets you gauge student reactions, and helps you be sure students are actually paying attention. And let's face it, it's a lot nicer to teach to faces than to blank squares! Before you require that students keep their cameras on, however, consider these factors:

- Video requires bandwidth that some students can't afford, or simply can't access. Turning their video off might be the difference between being able to follow a class or not.
- Students may be in a physical location that they'd rather not share with their classmates. Not everyone has a nice home office, their own bedroom, or clean quiet table to work from.
- Students may need to participate in classes from a phone, which is hard to hold at the right angle for an hour at a time.

- If you are sharing your screen, you can only see 4-5 students at a time, anyway - so you can't even tell if their video is on.

Best practices:
- Allow students to keep their videos off, especially during a lecture part of the live session.
- Don't rely on seeing them on camera to give attendance grades.
- Ask students to put a picture in their Zoom profile so you can see a still image of them instead of. just their name if they do turn their cameras off.

Grading live sessions

Proponents of online learning recognize that "seat time" has very little bearing on student learning. Therefore, online courses usually avoid giving credit to students just for showing up. Instead of using graded attendance as a main motivating factor, try some of these ideas instead:
- Give graded quizzes during class time
- Have individuals or groups complete an assignment during class time and turn it in before the end of class
- Keep your live sessions useful and interesting - don't repeat material from the week's readings or videos
- If you do have a live session attendance grade, keep it a fairly small portion of the total grade for the course - 5-10% maximum

Canvas Build Checklist

After you've followed the style and content guidelines to build your course, use this checklist to confirm you've included all the element you intended to.

Course settings

- Add a cover image that shows in the dashboard (recommended)
- Include the course number *and* title in the course name (required)

Navigation

All courses MUST have:	If applicable:	At your discretion:
☐ Syllabus	☐ Panopto	☐ Attendance
☐ Announcements	☐ Publisher content, like Cengage Mindtap or Pearson Revel	☐ Assignments
☐ Modules		☐ Discussions
☐ Grades	☐ Respondus Lockdown Browser	☐ Quizzes
☐ People	☐ Voicethread	☐ Files (be sure to organize into folders as suggested above)
☐ Bookstore	☐ Zoom	

Gradebook

- ☐ Use the gradebook to record ALL student grades on assignments, quizzes, etc. (required)
- ☐ Be sure the grades are grouped and weighted appropriately (under Assignments). Be sure weights add up to 100%. (required)
- ☐ Optional: Use gradebook to calculate final grade.

Home page

All courses MUST have:

- ☐ The "landing page" of the course should be a page, not the Modules overview.
- ☐ Instructor contact information
- ☐ Course description (text) setting the tone for the course
- ☐ Link to zoom session (synchronous), course meeting times
- ☐ Link to Syllabus page
- ☐ Course Materials

At your discretion:

- ☐ Home page image (dimensions: 1200 x 200 pixels is ideal)
- ☐ Intro video (could also go in the course orientation module)
- ☐ "Start here" button
- ☐ Course objectives (could also go in the course orientation module)

Course introduction/orientation module

All courses MUST have:

- ☐ About the Instructor
- ☐ Course Expectations
- ☐ How to be Successful in Online Courses
- ☐ How to be Successful in College
- ☐ How to be Successful in this specific course

At your discretion:

- ☐ Video intro to faculty/course optional but recommended
- ☐ Information about unique aspects of the course, such as labs, simulations, or special software needed
- ☐ Student entry survey
- ☐ Syllabus Quiz
- ☐ How to be Successful in the Course (Studying Advice)
- ☐ Technical support (link to common page)
- ☐ Personal support, such as counseling, tutoring, financial aid, etc. (link to common page)

Modules

All courses MUST have:

- ☐ Modules organize the course chronologically or by topic.
- ☐ Each module has:
  - o An overview page
  - o A Course Work page that lists all the content that will be assigned.
  - o All pages and content *within a module* will include a naming convention that identifies the module that content is found in.

Accessibility

All courses MUST:

- ☐ Use preformatted headers / text.
- ☐ Use alternative text for images
- ☐ Use hyperlinks that are descriptive and clear (not just "click here")
- ☐ Maintain suitable text / background contrast

Best Practice:

- ☐ Syllabus
  - o The syllabus includes the institution's recommended/required statement regarding support for students with disabilities.
  - o The syllabus in an accessible format.

- ☐ Documents
  - o All text can be highlighted, copied, and pasted.
  - o Headings used are properly so that a heading level was NOT skipped.
  - o Good: H1, H2, H2, H3, H3, H3, H2, H2
  - o Bad: H1, H3, H3, H2, H5, H4. (for example, H2 was skipped)
  - o There is sufficient color contrast between text and background colors.
  - o Images (which offer important information not contained in the text) include text descriptions as Alt Text.
  - o Use built-in MS Office Accessibility Checker.
    - o View Creating accessible Word documents from Microsoft Office Support for more information.

- ☐ PowerPoint
  - o The slides were created using built-in slide layouts as opposed to making free-hand additions to slides (e.g., adding textboxes manually).
  - o The read order of the text in the presentation be verified in the "Outline" panel.
  - o When tabbing, the cursor moves in a logical order as if it were read aloud.
  - o There is sufficient color contrast between text and background colors.
  - o Do images (which offer important information not contained in the text) include text descriptions?
  - o Use built-in MS Office Accessibility Checker (or similar if not doc)?
    - o View Creating accessible PowerPoint presentations from Microsoft Office Support for more information.

- ☐ Excel Workbooks

- o Images (which offer important information not contained in the text) include text descriptions.
  - o Header rows and column headings specified.
  - o The hyperlink text is descriptive.
  - o Merged cells are avoided.
  - o Use built-in MS Office Accessibility Checker
    - o View Creating accessible Excel workbooks from Microsoft Office Support for more information.

☐ Video and Audio
  - o All video content is captioned.
  - o Transcripts are available for video-based materials that were not able to be captioned.
  - o Transcripts are available for audio-based materials.

Design best practices

☐ Follow the COTC style guide for colors and fonts.

☐ Use headings instead of changing font sizes.

☐ Ideally, resize images before importing to Canvas; don't rely on Canvas to resize.
  - o Image sizing guidelines: up to 2000 pixels wide, and 72 dpi).
  - o File saved as .jpeg or .png

Final check

☐ Run a link check (Settings) to find any broken links.

☐ Manually check links to any external plugins (e.g., publisher content)

☐ Review site in Student View.

☐ Review the Files area for permissions and logical organization

☐ Confirm that all rubrics have the "Use rubric for grading" box checked