



# Teaching online:

Your guide to ensuring  
academic continuity



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Engaging students through virtual academic courses comes with its challenges—particularly for faculty members who have never taught online. In this guide, we will review recommended strategies for effective online teaching.

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# Get started

Before you start thinking about the nuts and bolts of effective online teaching, it's important to consider some factors up front. Knowing details about the closure and institution or department expectations will help you plan accordingly.

## Find the facts

- **Go to your campus website or intranet to get the details about the closure**, including estimates of how long you will have to offer online instruction. If the institution anticipates a longer closure, it may be looking at extending the semester. Knowing this will help you to gauge how much instruction needs to be offered online.
- **Make sure that you know your institution or departmental policy** for assisting any learners who are directly impacted by the emergency. Should they be offered an extension? An incomplete? Your learners are probably taking more than one course, so it is important to maintain consistency.
- **Check with your department for further details about the closure.** Your department might have some guidelines about tools and techniques to follow in order to offer a consistent learner experience.
- **Monitor any channels that your campus set up for emergency notifications.** Keeping current will help with ongoing planning, implementation, and learner communication.



## Determine your priorities

- **Review your course schedule or calendar to help you determine your early efforts.** This could include offering online lectures, setting up online assessment submissions, structuring asynchronous discussions, etc. Based on the length of the closure, you may consider postponing some activity.
- **Check your syllabus** for anything that has to change based on what you have learned in the fact-finding phase. This could include policies, due dates, or even assignments. For example, you might reconsider assignments that require learners to interview people in the community or visit public places like museums or theaters. Knowing this information will help you in crafting your initial communications with learners.
- **Provide learners with the activities that will equate to one week's worth of time**, which is nine hours for a three-credit, 15-week class. These activities can include reading, viewing, writing, and researching. If you are not offering your class synchronously (using a web conferencing system), think about how you might account for those in-class hours that learners are missing. This could mean providing a discussion forum, group work, or additional activities.

## Stick with the familiar

- **Review your institution's website** for any recommended online teaching tools and techniques. Wherever you have a choice, select tools and techniques familiar to both yourself and your learners. Institutional closures are often stressful events, which may put limitations on the abilities of your learners to absorb new information. Keeping things simple and relying on prior knowledge will help both you and your learners.



# Communicate with learners

Keeping channels of communication open between you and your learners is always important; it becomes crucial in an emergency situation. Your learners should know your preferred communication methods, how frequently you will communicate with them, how rapidly you will respond to their questions, and your expectations of them. Communicating early and often will ensure that your course runs smoothly throughout the duration of the closure.

## Preferred communication methods

- If you have given your office phone number to learners, make sure that you can remotely check voicemail messages. If this is not possible, direct learners to another phone number or email alternative.
- There are several email channels available. You will also be able to email your learners from the learning management system (LMS); your LMS email allows you to easily email the entire course, a group of learners, or one learner at a time. It is recommended that you use either the LMS or your institutional email to communicate. If you have been emailing learners from the LMS, please continue with that channel. Make sure that learners have email forwarding or notification preferences set up properly so they will not miss any important communication.



- In addition to email, you can communicate with learners via the announcements and discussions tool within the LMS.
  - » **Email** should be used for early or urgent updates and communication with individual learners.
  - » **Announcements** are available within your course site. They can be written for immediate release or scheduled in advance for a specific date and time.
    - › Announcements should be added to alert learners of due dates for assignments, exams, projects, and discussions. This is particularly important if your course calendar has changed as a result of the emergency.
    - › Announcements can also serve to introduce a course session to the learners. It is an excellent place to post what you would ordinarily say during the first five minutes of class. This space can advertise the purpose of the session, how it connects to the previous class, and the specific topics covered. Any instructions particular to the class can be posted here as well.
    - › Even if you've been using the LMS announcement tool, recommend that learners check the notification settings permitting announcements to be forwarded to their email address. In most learning management systems, learners receive email announcement notifications by default; the recommendation would ensure that learners turn the feature back on if they have opted out.

## Communicate early and often

- **First things first:** As soon as possible, tell learners what you know and that they can expect more details shortly. Emphasize that they should be checking email or the course frequently.
- **Expectations:** It's important to let learners know what channels you will use to communicate with them and how often. If you decide to hold online office hours, let the learners know when office hours will be held and how they can attend. Learners should know your planned response time (at least every 24 hours) and how often you expect them to check their email and/or the course site. Clarifying what learners can expect from you and what you expect from them can prevent misunderstanding.
- **Frequently asked questions:** You may receive a lot of questions from learners, some of which may overlap. Keeping track of these questions and sending out a group email or announcement once per day can be more feasible than responding to each individual learner. If you choose to send out an announcement, you can ask learners to check previously sent announcements before sending an email. This will reduce your email load while ensuring that the learner receives a rapid, correct answer to their question.

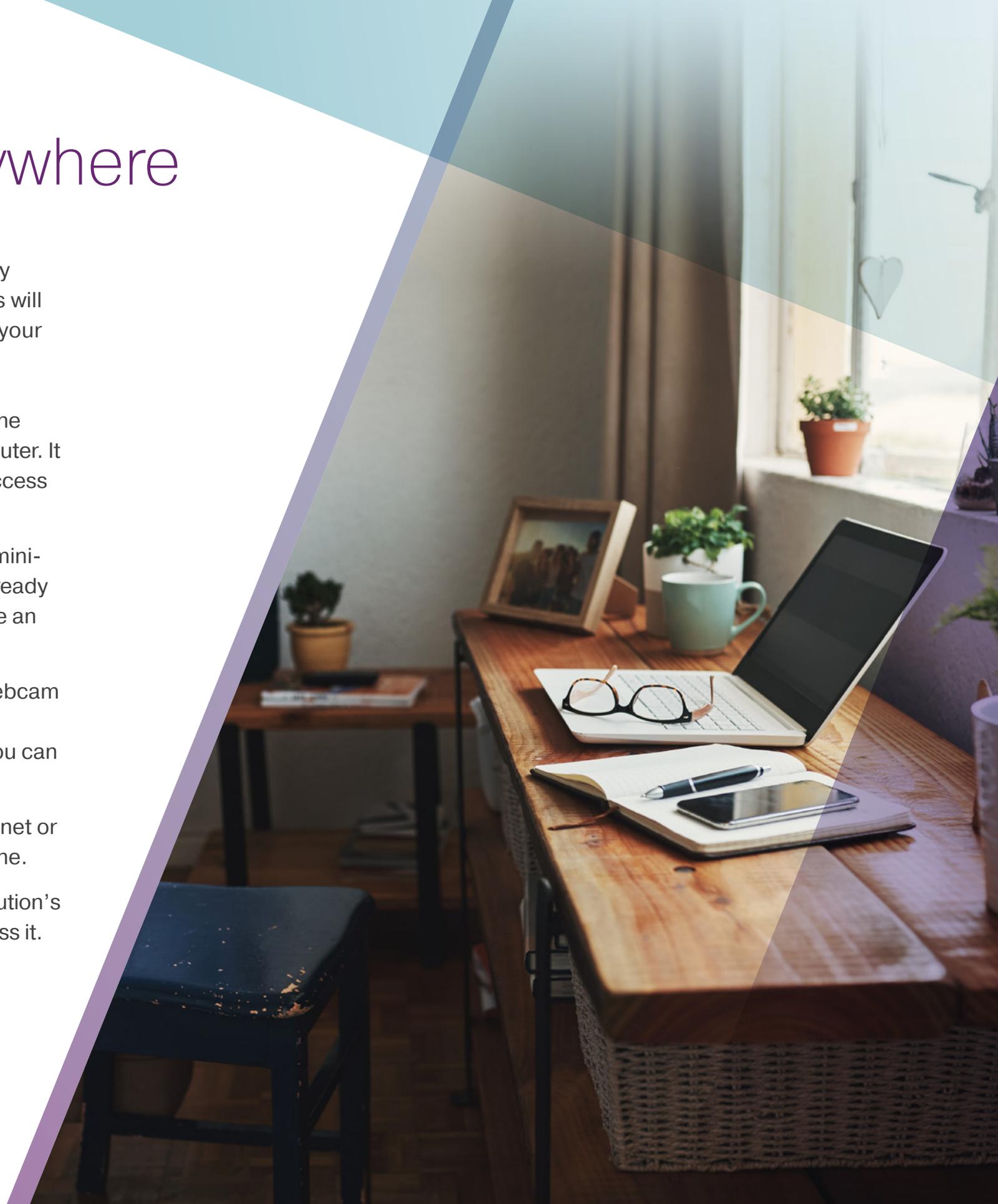


# Prepare for teaching anywhere

It is important to make sure you have the necessary hardware, security preparation, and access abilities in order to teach from anywhere. This will vary from one institution to another, so the best practice is to contact your IT department.

- **VPN:** You may need to remotely connect to your institution's VPN. The VPN creates a "tunnel" between the campus network and your computer. It authenticates you as a member of the institution and allows you to access restricted networked resources.
- **Microphone:** Consider using a microphone for recording video mini-lectures or participating in synchronous class sessions. You may already have a microphone built into your computer; otherwise, you can use an external headset or USB microphone.
- **Webcam:** By allowing learners to see your facial expression, a webcam can help preserve that sense of classroom connection. Similar to a microphone, a web camera may already be built into your laptop. You can also use an external USB camera.
- **Internet:** You will need either reliable commercially provided Internet or the ability to access the Internet through a hotspot on your cell phone.
- **Course site:** If you do not already have a course site on your institution's LMS, you may need to request one and make sure that you can access it.

As you gather your technical tools, be sure to test them from home and make sure that they work properly. Remember, you can always contact your institution's tech support for assistance.

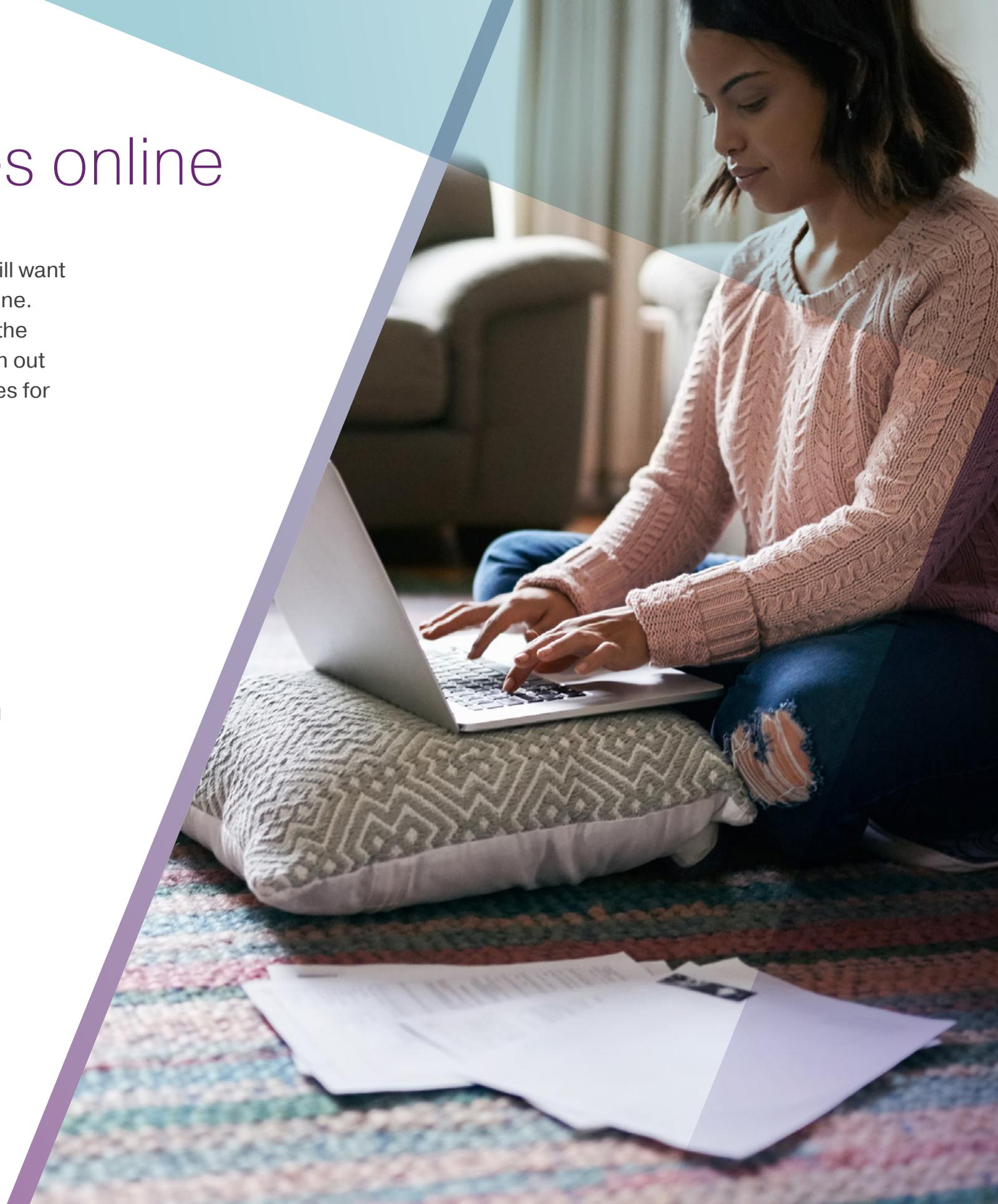


# Provide course resources online

Although your learners will still be able to access their textbooks, you will want to put any handouts, video materials, or other classroom resources online. Also, you want to consider alternatives to library reserve materials that the learners would have to access in person. We recommend that you reach out to your institution's library for assistance, but there are also other venues for finding this material.

## Investigate open educational resources (OER)

- OER Commons: [oercommons.org](https://oercommons.org)
- OpenStax Textbooks: [openstax.org](https://openstax.org)
- Open Textbooks SUNY: [textbooks.opensuny.org](https://textbooks.opensuny.org)
- Multimedia Educational Resource for Online Teaching and Learning (MERLOT) Search: [merlot.org/merlot](https://merlot.org/merlot)
- Open Michigan: [open.umich.edu](https://open.umich.edu)
- Khan Academy: [khanacademy.org](https://khanacademy.org)



## Organize your materials

Once you've determined the materials that you want to share with your learners, you will be ready to upload them to the LMS. If your LMS has a file management area, we recommend uploading them to that location in clearly marked folders. Setting up folders labeled with the subject area, topic, or class week will help you when it gets to Day 15 and you've uploaded 25 files. After organizing the file management area, you can then set up folders or lessons in the course which your learners can see and access.

## Alert your learners

Remember to send out an announcement or email alerting your learners about the availability of new materials and where your learners can access them. Because your learners may be new to the LMS, it is important to let them know exactly where to go in the course.

## Keep things mobile friendly

If possible, make sure to keep your materials friendly to mobile users. Learners who depend on campus labs or community libraries may not have a computer at home and will have to access the course over a mobile device. PDF (portable document format) is the best format for mobile use so it is recommended that you save PowerPoint presentations and other files as PDF. This will minimize the file size and make the documents easier to read on a mobile device.

## Consider accessibility

There are some quick checks you can do to make sure that your materials are available to all learners:

- Check that selected YouTube videos have reliable closed-captioning or a transcript.
- Make a transcript available for any videos that you create.
- Provide alternative text for images, which can be easily done in most LMS.
- Avoid multiple fonts and font sizes which might be difficult for vision-impaired learners.
- Avoid using color alone to differentiate texts or important concepts as this could confuse color-blind learners.

Many LMS have an accessibility checker which will help you catch and correct many of the most prevalent issues.



# Assess your learners

Most LMS have the following tools available to help move your assessments to the online environment:

- **Assignment** functionality allows learners to submit multiple file types or enter their submission in a text box. You can grade these submissions online and your grades will be automatically entered into the online grade book.

✔ **Tip:** Use assignment functionality instead of email. Learner submissions over email can be difficult to monitor and grade, especially as email does not interface with the grade book.

When assigning papers, require specific filenames. Give your learners a simple file naming convention, for example, *FirstnameLastname-Essay1.docx*.



- **Test, survey, and/or quiz** functionalities allow you to post a variety of questions for learners including multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, multiple answer, matching, and essay. Depending on your LMS, you may have a much wider variety of question choices. Also, keep in mind that:
  - » Most questions are computer graded.
  - » You can set a due date and the LMS will delineate any late assessments.



- ✔ **Tip:** There are many strategies that you can use to preserve academic integrity in your online exams, such as:
  - Considering other strategies for learner assessment such as an online paper or a project. Learners could also take oral exams or deliver presentations synchronously.
  - Limiting the time that learners have to take the test.
  - Randomizing questions and answers to appear in a different order for each learner.
  - Selecting a smaller number of questions from a larger bank so that each learner receives a slightly different test.

# Hold a synchronous class online

One option for offering your class from anywhere is to offer a synchronous session at the same time that you would have held a face-to-face course, if the campus were open. There are a variety of tools that make this easy to do and you can find out more from your IT department, which can give you information about the tool's capabilities, how to access it, and tips for use.

## Effective practices for synchronous delivery

- **Sharing video and audio:** Although not all learners will have access to a webcam, encourage them to use it if they have one available. Video sharing helps overcome the disconnect that many learners feel and holds them accountable. It's normal to feel uncomfortable when appearing on video, but it's important to set an example for your learners by sharing your video as well.
- **Sharing screens:** Sharing your computer screen has many benefits in the synchronous classroom. Many instructors begin by sharing the agenda for the session and questions prepared in advance. You can also share PowerPoint presentations or videos with sound.
- ✔ **Tip:** If your screen freezes or delays, you may be having bandwidth issues as a result of having too many video feeds. You can always turn off your video and those of your learners.



- **Muting:** As the meeting host, you can mute and unmute participants. It is recommended that you mute or ask learners to mute themselves if their background noise interferes with class. Barking dogs or Amazon deliveries can be distracting and absorb needed class time.
- **Recording:** Most synchronous tools allow recording. It is an effective practice to let learners know that you are recording the session and make the link or file available in the LMS after the session.



## Before class

- **Let your learners know what to expect.** Send out an announcement or email before the synchronous session to outline your agenda for the session. For instance, you may open with questions from the last session, continue with a presentation, and conclude with a discussion. Let learners know the topics you will cover, how they should prepare, and what you expect them to do. Specify that you expect learners to focus on the class and avoid multitasking.
- **Set chat room expectations.** Most synchronous learning environments also offer a chat area where learners can send private or public messages. We recommend disabling the private message option. The public chat can be disabled as well but we discourage it. Provide your learners with expectations for using the public messaging option. The following are example messages you can share with learners to shape their expectations:
  - » The chat area serves as your online classroom; please observe the same etiquette that you would in our face-to-face meetings.
  - » Limit side conversations and observations in public chat.
  - » Use the chat area to indicate if you have a question, would like to respond to a question, or participate in the discussion and your instructor will call on you.
  - » Questions in chat will be dealt with in the order that they are posted.
- **Know your forum.** If you are using the discussion forum in your LMS, read through it quickly an hour or two before the synchronous class. Note any areas of confusion or breakthroughs that your learners have had. Referring to these in the synchronous session will help reinforce learning and validate learner participation.

- **Prepare for participation.** There are several strategies that you can use to make sure that learners come ready to participate.
  - » Ask learners to come with a “burning question” about the reading or topic. This can be an area of confusion, discussion, or debate.
  - » Send out an “essential question” that gets learners thinking and intrigued about the discussion to come, such as, “When is restriction of freedom beneficial?”
- **Perform a tech check.** Experienced users of synchronous tools log online 10 to 15 minutes before the class starts in order to check their camera, sound, and materials. This practice can save you valuable time when class starts. Also require your learners to perform technical checks by getting the room ready early or even the day prior to class. This ensures that they have time to call the help desk or tech support with any difficulties and will not disrupt class by asking for help.
- **Monitor the chat room.** Students will use the chat area to indicate that they have a question, would like to respond to a question, or participate in the discussion. Acknowledge them by name and ask them to participate. If you have several students asking questions in chat, emphasize that you will address them in the order posted. Alternatively, you may ask a student to monitor the chat room. At intervals, you can acknowledge the student and ask her to summarize or read the posted questions.
- **It’s not all talk.** Giving students a question or problem and asking them to write for three to five minutes can prepare them to actively participate in your synchronous classroom. This will ensure a lively discussion and let you know that students will be prepared when you call on them.
- **Engage in debate.** Asking students to pick a side in a debate can help stimulate discussion. Learners can write and support their opinions in the chat. You can then ask learners to share their options. If you are concerned about all learners selecting the same side, you can always assign sides according to the first initial of the student’s last name.

## During class

- **The first five.** Just as you would in class, check up on and chat with learners as they arrive. Allow them to chat a bit with others. This can help learners relax and get ready to learn. You can have your PowerPoint preloaded and open with a trivia question, cartoon, or observation to help stimulate conversation. As class begins, highlight your prepared agenda describing the topics and learning objectives for the session.
- **The five-minute rule.** Keep learner interest by actively engaging your learners every five minutes. You can ask open-ended questions or provide scenarios. Use your knowledge and notes on the discussion forum to reference the ideas in specific learner posts and call on the learners who authored them. This brings the class together and validates learner work.

## After class

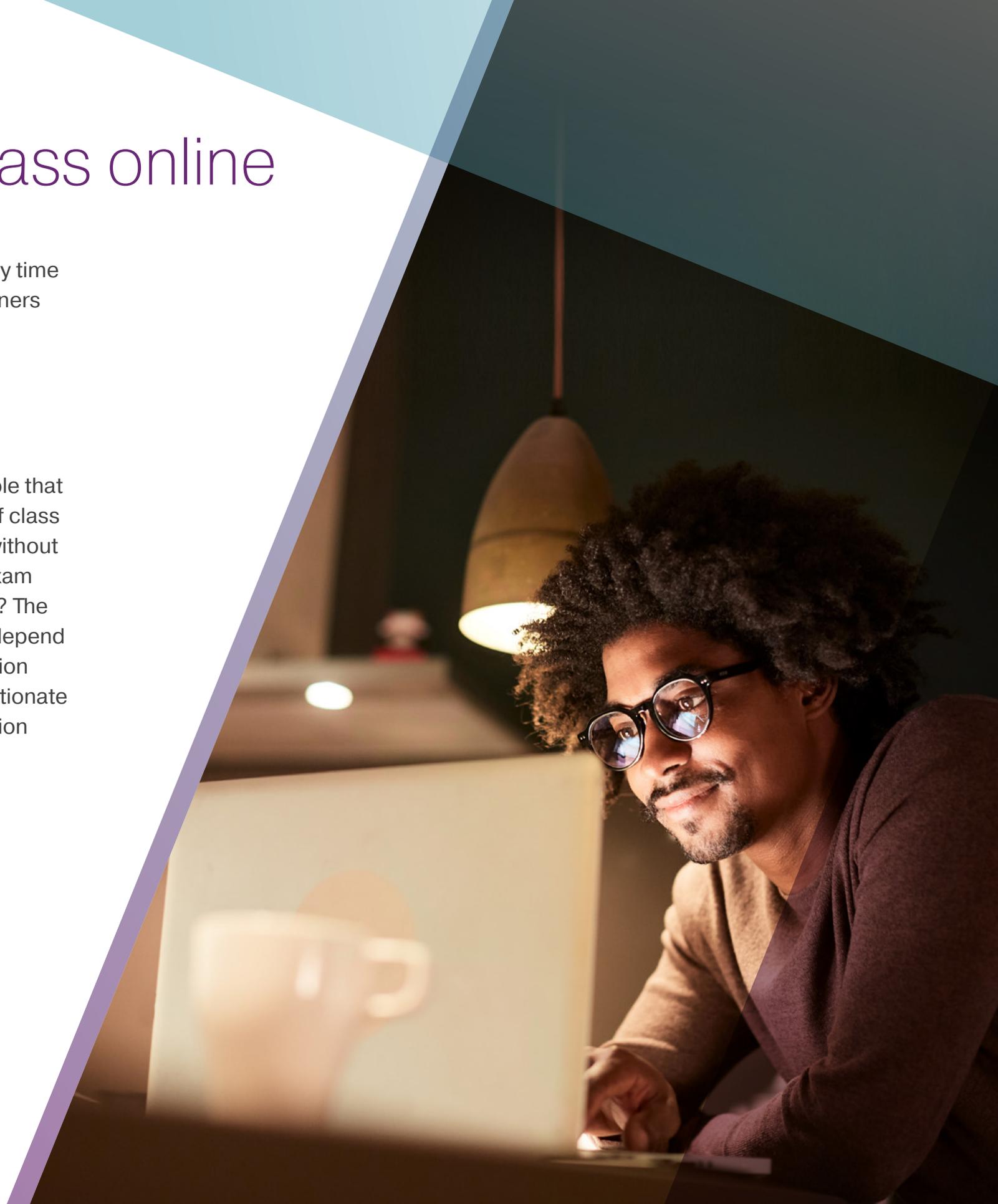
- **Share the recording.** Send out an announcement summarizing the session and emphasizing the next steps for your learners. Make sure that you provide the recording or a link to it. Most synchronous systems also allow you to save and share the in-meeting chat.

# Hold an asynchronous class online

Asynchronous communication allows learners to communicate from any time and any place, as opposed to synchronous communication, where learners can communicate at the same time, but from different places.

## Establish guidelines

- **Grade weights for discussions.** Begin by considering the role that the discussion forum will play in your course. Will it take the place of class meetings? Replace an assignment that learners cannot complete without physically accessing the campus or the library? Substitute for an exam or quiz that would be problematic to offer in the online environment? The grade weight that you give to asynchronous discussion will mostly depend on your answer to the questions above. Avoid including the discussion forum in your course without giving it a definite purpose or a proportionate grade weight. The majority of learners will not participate in discussion forum unless it is graded.
- ✔ **Tip:** Your LMS will allow you to attach a rubric to the discussion forum, which can simplify grading. Discussion forums can be easily graded online with seamless transition to the grade book.

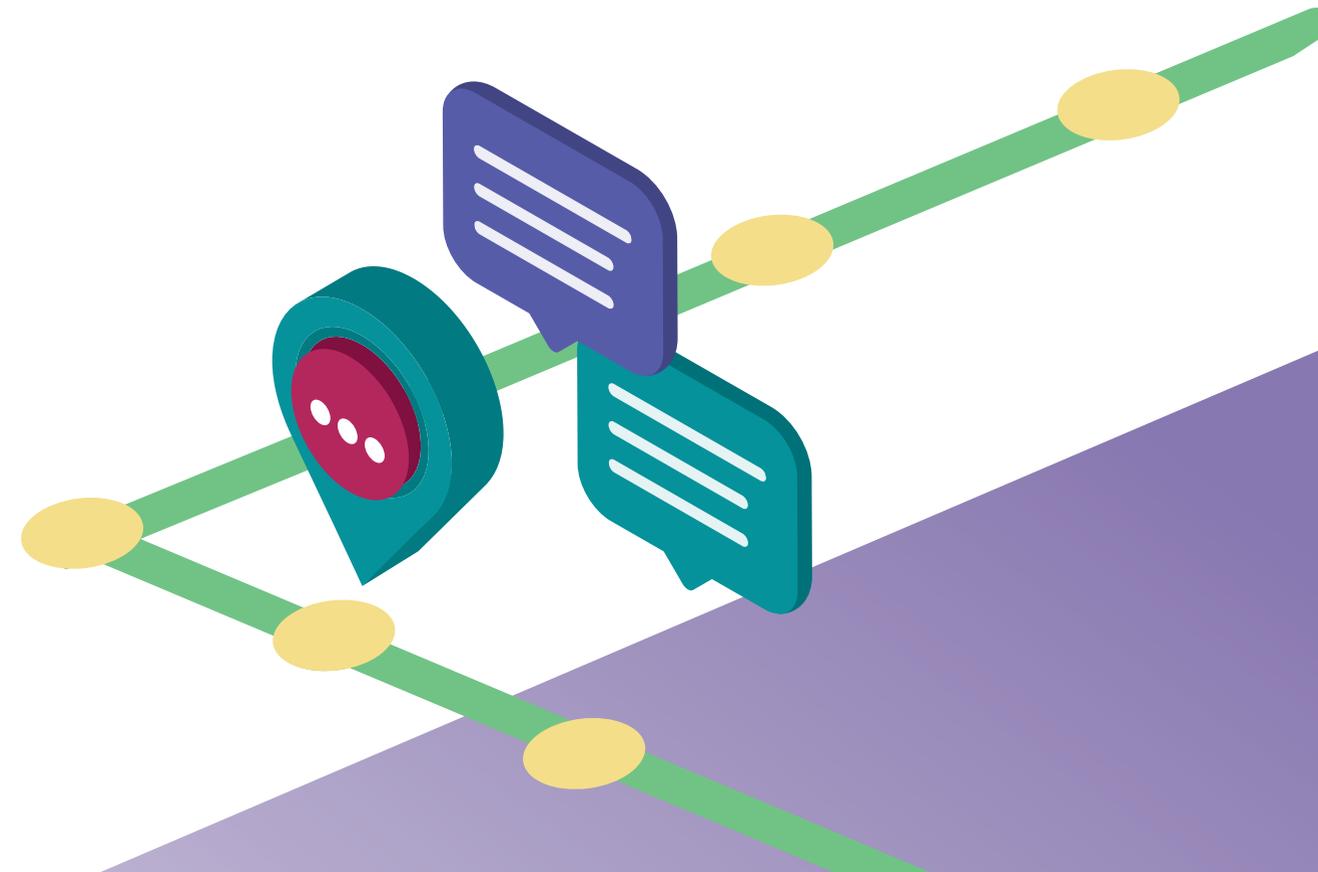


- **Practice good digital citizenship.** Your classroom learners might need assistance in grasping consequences of being unable to read body language, tone of voice, and facial expression. It is easy for misinterpretations to arise in the online environment. Advise your learners to observe the following:
  - » Write discussion forum posts and responses in Microsoft Word or another word processing program. Save and revise before copying and pasting into the discussion text box. Reading your posts aloud will help you to gauge whether you've articulated your point concisely and accurately.
  - » Practice good grammar and proofread your discussion posts and responses. Even if your instructor is not grading on grammar (although many do), observing proper sentence construction will only improve your ability to communicate. Consider using Grammarly, a free online grammar and proofreading tool.
  - » Observe academic writing conventions. Just like the classroom, the discussion forum is an academic environment. Avoid writing in all caps, using emoticons, or slang.
  - » Write carefully. Avoid sarcasm and humor. Tone down your language to avoid provoking other learners and distracting from the discussion. If you continue to have doubts, give yourself some time for reflection before contributing to the forum. Remember that once submitted, student posts cannot be edited or deleted.
  - » Read the forum before posting. It's very tempting to formulate your response and post it before reading what your classmates have written. However, this practice can lead to repetitive posts that don't build the discussion and apparently ignores what others have said. Just as you would in a classroom discussion, attend to what others have said and tailor your response to the question accordingly.

- **Provide details.** You may want to provide details as to the number of posts expected per week or per forum, the length (word count), number of sources required (if any), and citation style (e.g., APA, MLA, Chicago) required (if any).

## Structure your discussion

- Set due dates for initial posts and responses to classmates. This prevents learners from entering their initial post too late for their classmates to respond. It also reinforces the idea that the discussion forum is a conversation with a certain amount of expected back and forth.
- Encourage learners to read what their classmates have posted before they post themselves. Although LMS allow instructors to cut off access to the discussion forum until the learner has posted an initial response to the prompt, this can lead to repetition which does not advance the conversation.



## Design thought-provoking prompts

Your discussion forum will only be as good as the initial prompt. However, there are many strategies for designing an engaging, open, critical discussion.

- **Create prompts that focus on higher levels of critical thinking** such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. These result in more thoughtful, varied student responses than posts that assess memorization, comprehension, and application. Prompts that ask students to address a right or wrong question tend to solicit repetitive replies.
- **Avoid asking questions that have only a limited number of correct responses.** For instance, a prompt asking students to compare and contrast two texts, concepts, or principles will solicit similar answers opposed to one that is more open ended.



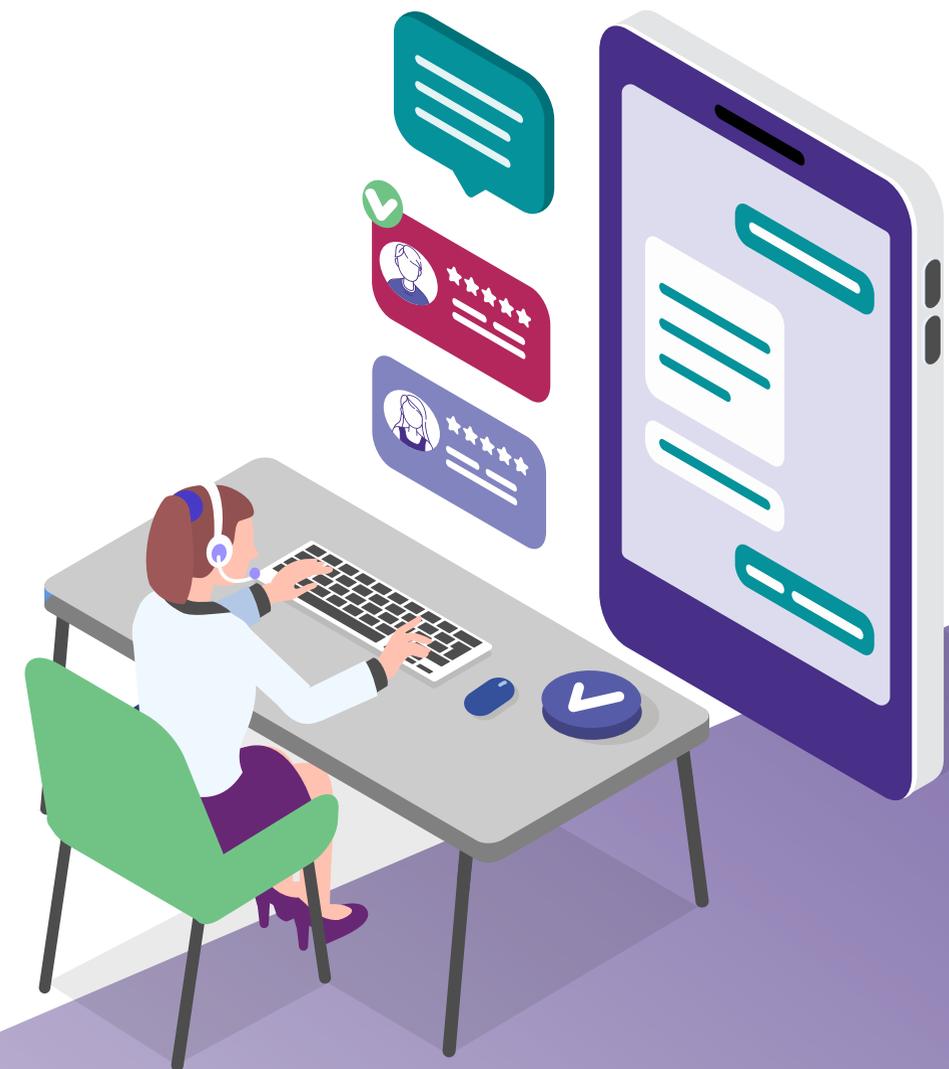
Also, consider the following strategies to increase engagement:

- **Role play scenarios** give learners the opportunity to adopt a specific perspective as related to a case study, scenario, or story. This can take the form of a debate or be less structured. Role play allows learners to practice writing and thinking as a member of your discipline. Studies show an increase in the number and quality of posts when learners responded to a scenario from a specific role as opposed to not being assigned a role.
- **Learner-designed prompts** can ensure variety and diversity. For example, in a financial management course, learners were asked to watch a video on the time value of money and another on using the TI BAII Plus Calculator before posting a question. Classmates posted the solution along with an explanation of how they solved it. In another example, nursing students were asked to write a scenario based on course materials and their own experiences with nurse bullying; classmates responded by demonstrating their communication and conflict resolution skills.
- **Videos** can also be incorporated in prompts to connect with learners. You can also allow students to post videos as either a part of or complete response. This can capture some of the belonging that learners felt as part of a traditional class.

## Facilitate the forum

There are some simple strategies to follow to enhance engagement with the discussion forum, including:

- **Modeling** the type of post that you expect from your learners.
- **Calling learners by name** when addressing them in the forum.
- **Following up on an answer** after asking a learner a specific question. This demonstrates your interest in the student and the response.
- **Referring learners to each other** when they make similar points. This can build community and connection between your learners. It acknowledges trends in the forum and can push learners to think beyond their initial assumptions.
- **Introducing or drawing attention to opposing viewpoints.** Learners can sometimes be wary of disagreeing with each other and may need an example of how to do so constructively.
- **Asking additional questions** of the entire class as the discussion evolves. You can do so by bringing up an interesting point and asking the class to share their opinions and their experience. Be sure to title your post appropriately, so that learners know that you're looking for additional feedback.
- **Taking notes** about the points that your learners have made throughout the discussion so you can post a summary at the conclusion of the forum. You can also assign this task to a rotating sequence of learners.



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