

Creating Accessible Online Courses

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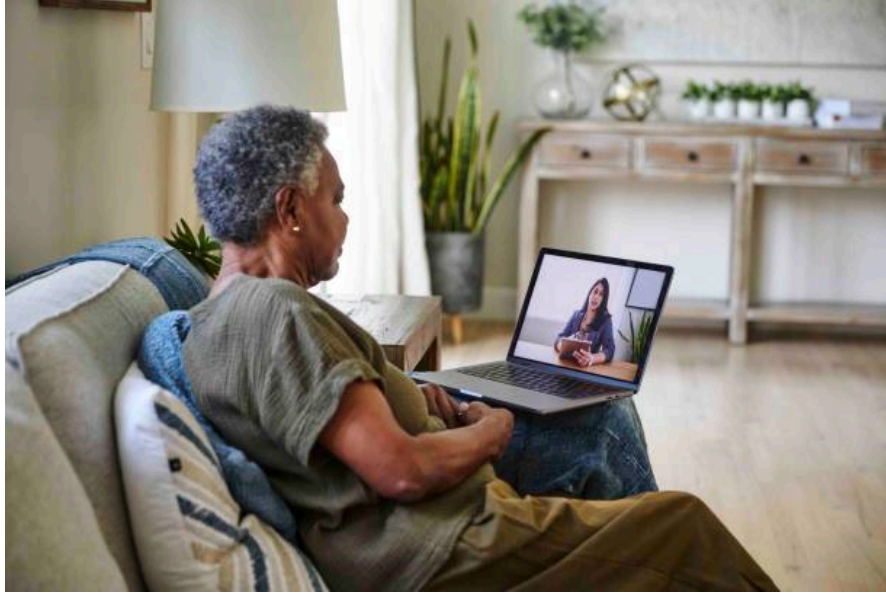
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Title II & Online Instruction: Faculty Quick Guide

Creating Accessible Online Courses for All Students

What is Title II?

Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires public colleges and universities to ensure that **students with disabilities have equal access** to all programs, services, and activities — including **online courses, digital content, and instructional technologies**.

This means accessibility is not optional or only “upon request.” It should be built into course design **from the start**.

Why This Matters in Online Teaching

In online and hybrid instruction, students must be able to **access, navigate, perceive, and participate** in all course materials and activities.

That includes:

- Canvas course pages
 - Syllabi and handouts
 - PDFs and Word documents
 - PowerPoints and lecture slides
 - Videos and audio recordings
 - Images, charts, and infographics
 - Discussion boards
 - Quizzes and exams
 - Third-party apps and publisher platforms
 - Email and course announcements
-

Faculty Responsibility: What You Need to Know

Faculty are expected to provide instructional materials that are:

1. Perceivable

Students must be able to access content in multiple ways.

Examples:

- Videos include **captions**
 - Images include **alternative text (alt text)**
 - Documents can be read by **screen readers**
 - Color is not the **only** way information is conveyed
-

2. Operable

Students must be able to navigate and use materials.

Examples:

- Course pages are organized with headings
 - Links are clearly labeled
 - Materials can be accessed using a **keyboard only**
 - Timed activities include accommodations when needed
-

3. Understandable

Content should be clear, consistent, and easy to follow.

Examples:

- Modules are organized in a predictable way
 - Instructions are specific and concise
 - Assignments include clear expectations
 - File names and page titles are meaningful
-

4. Robust

Materials should work with assistive technology and across devices.

Examples:

- PDFs are text-readable, not just scanned images
 - Documents use accessible formatting
 - External tools are accessible or have alternatives
 - Course content works on laptops, tablets, and mobile devices
-

Top 10 Accessibility Practices for Online Faculty

1. Use Headings Properly

Use built-in **Heading 1**, **Heading 2**, **Heading 3** styles in Canvas, Word, and Google Docs.

Why it matters:

Screen reader users rely on headings to navigate content quickly.

Do this:

- Heading 1 = main title
- Heading 2 = section titles
- Heading 3 = subsections

Avoid:

- Bold-only “headings”
 - Enlarging text manually instead of using heading styles
-

2. Caption All Videos

Any instructional video should include **accurate captions**.

This applies to:

- Recorded lectures
- Embedded YouTube videos
- Screencasts
- Video announcements
- Tutorials

Best practice:

Review auto-captions for errors before posting.

3. Provide Transcripts for Audio

If students must listen to content, provide a **text transcript**.

Examples:

- Podcasts
 - Audio lectures
 - VoiceThread or narrated content
 - Instructor audio feedback (when used for major content)
-

4. Add Alt Text to Images

If an image communicates meaning, it needs a short text description.

Examples needing alt text:

- Charts
- Graphs
- Diagrams
- Photos with instructional relevance
- Infographics

Example:

Instead of: “*image*”

Use: “*Bar graph showing student retention increased from 68% to 81% over three semesters.*”

Decorative images do not need descriptive alt text.

5. Use Accessible Documents

Upload files that can be read by assistive technology.

For Word Docs / Google Docs

- Use headings
- Use bulleted or numbered lists
- Use readable fonts
- Avoid text boxes when possible
- Add alt text to images
- Use sufficient color contrast

For PDFs

- Export from an accessible original file
 - Avoid scanned image-only PDFs
 - Ensure text can be highlighted and read aloud
-

6. Make Links Descriptive

Links should tell students where they are going.

Good example:

- *Read the APA Writing Guidelines*

Avoid:

- *Click here*
- *More info*
- *Link*

Why it matters:

Screen reader users often navigate by links only.

7. Don't Rely on Color Alone

Students should not need color vision to understand course content.

Avoid:

- “Items in red are due this week”
- “Correct answers are highlighted in green”

Instead:

Use labels, icons, bolding, or headings in addition to color.

8. Use Accessible PowerPoints

Slides should be accessible both live and when uploaded.

Best practices:

- Use slide titles on every slide
 - Keep reading order logical
 - Use high contrast text/background
 - Avoid cluttered slides
 - Caption embedded video
 - Describe charts and visuals verbally during lectures
-

9. Build Accessible Assessments

Quizzes, tests, and assignments should be usable by all students.

Best practices:

- Use clear instructions
 - Avoid unnecessary time pressure
 - Allow accommodations as required
 - Ensure quiz tools work with keyboard navigation and screen readers
 - Avoid inaccessible drag-and-drop if no alternative is offered
-

10. Check Third-Party Tools Before Assigning Them

Publisher sites, apps, and external platforms must also be accessible.

Before assigning a tool, ask:

- Can students use it with a keyboard?
- Does it work with screen readers?
- Are videos captioned?
- Are images labeled?
- Is there an accessible alternative if needed?

If unsure: consult your campus accessibility, instructional design, or DSS/DSPS office.

Common Online Accessibility Problems to Avoid

Faculty often run into these issues unintentionally:

- Uploading **scanned PDFs**
- Posting **uncaptioned videos**
- Using **image-based flyers or announcements**
- Embedding inaccessible publisher tools without alternatives
- Organizing Canvas with unclear or inconsistent navigation
- Using “Week 1 stuff” or “Document 3” as file names
- Creating assignments with vague instructions
- Posting screenshots of text instead of actual text
- Using low-contrast fonts/colors in slides
- Requiring inaccessible participation formats only

Bottom Line for Faculty

Accessible online teaching means designing courses so students can fully participate from day one.

Your goal is to make sure students can:

- Access the material
- Understand the material
- Navigate the course
- Complete assignments equitably
- Engage in learning without unnecessary barriers

Why We Create Accessible Canvas Shells

Goals, Intentions, and Impact

What Is an Accessible Canvas Shell?

An **accessible Canvas shell** is a course design structure that ensures all students can **navigate, read, interact with, and complete course materials successfully**, regardless of disability, learning difference, technology limitations, or prior experience with online learning.

Accessibility is not simply a legal or technical requirement—it is a **student-centered teaching practice** that improves the learning experience for everyone.

Primary Goals of Creating Accessible Canvas Shells

1. Promote Equitable Access to Learning

The first goal of an accessible Canvas shell is to ensure that **all students have equal access** to course materials, assignments, instructions, and learning opportunities.

This includes students who may:

- Use screen readers
- Need captions or transcripts
- Have visual, auditory, cognitive, or mobility-related disabilities
- Access coursework from phones or tablets
- Experience temporary barriers such as illness, injury, or unstable internet

Intention:

To remove unnecessary barriers so students can focus on **learning the course content**, rather than struggling to access it.

2. Create a Predictable and Easy-to-Navigate Learning Environment

Students perform better when a course is organized clearly and consistently. Accessible Canvas shells help students quickly understand:

- Where to begin
- Where to find readings and lectures
- How to submit assignments

- When work is due
- How to contact the instructor

Intention:

To reduce confusion, frustration, and “hidden curriculum” issues by making the course structure intuitive and transparent.

Examples of this in practice:

- Consistent weekly modules
 - Clear naming conventions
 - Simple homepage directions
 - Logical placement of assignments, readings, and discussions
-

3. Support Student Success and Retention

When students can easily locate materials and understand expectations, they are more likely to:

- Stay engaged
- Complete assignments on time
- Participate in course activities
- Persist through challenges
- Remain enrolled in the course

Accessible design supports not only students with documented accommodations, but also:

- First-generation students
- Multilingual learners
- Students returning to school after time away
- Students balancing work, caregiving, or other responsibilities

Intention:

To create a learning environment that supports **persistence, confidence, and academic success.**

4. Reduce Cognitive Overload

Students should spend their energy understanding course concepts—not decoding disorganized instructions or navigating a cluttered course shell.

Accessible Canvas shells help reduce cognitive overload by:

- Chunking content into manageable sections
- Using headings and consistent formatting
- Keeping pages uncluttered
- Presenting instructions clearly and directly

Intention:

To make course content easier to process, especially for students with ADHD, executive functioning challenges, anxiety, or heavy outside responsibilities.

5. Improve Communication and Transparency

A well-designed Canvas shell clearly communicates:

- Course expectations
- Weekly responsibilities
- Assignment instructions
- Policies and support resources

When students know what is expected and where to find help, they are more likely to succeed.

Intention:

To build trust and reduce avoidable student stress by making course expectations visible and accessible.

6. Align with Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Accessible Canvas shells support **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** principles by offering multiple ways for students to:

- Access information
- Engage with content
- Demonstrate learning

Examples include:

- Videos with captions
- Readings paired with visual or audio support

- Clear instructions in both written and visual formats
- Flexible ways to interact with content

Intention:

To design courses proactively for learner variability instead of waiting until barriers arise.

7. Meet Institutional, Ethical, and Legal Responsibilities

Accessible course design also supports compliance with:

- **ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act)**
- **Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act**
- **Section 508 accessibility standards**
- Institutional equity and inclusion initiatives

However, accessibility should not be viewed only as a compliance issue.

Intention:

To uphold ethical teaching practices and institutional responsibility by ensuring educational materials are usable by all students.

What Accessible Canvas Shells Often Include

An accessible Canvas shell typically features:

- A clear **homepage** with start-here instructions
- Organized **weekly or unit-based modules**
- Consistent naming of assignments and materials
- **Alt text** for images
- Descriptive hyperlink text (not “click here”)
- Proper **heading structure**
- Good color contrast and readable fonts
- Captioned videos and transcripts when possible
- Assignment instructions written in clear, direct language
- Minimal clutter and reduced unnecessary clicking

These elements improve usability for **everyone**, not just students with accommodations.

The Larger Purpose

Creating accessible Canvas shells reflects a broader educational commitment:

We are not just building courses.

We are building environments where students can:

- Feel oriented
- Feel included
- Understand expectations
- Access learning without unnecessary obstacles
- Focus on growth and mastery

Core Intention:

To create a course space that communicates:

“You belong here, and this course is designed for you to succeed.”

In Summary

Creating accessible Canvas shells is about:

- **Equity**
- **Clarity**
- **Consistency**
- **Student success**
- **Inclusive teaching**
- **Removing barriers before they become obstacles**

Accessible design benefits all learners and helps create a more humane, effective, and supportive educational experience.

Part II: Accessibility and Online Instruction



Core Goal

Design online courses so students can:

- **Access** course materials easily
- **Understand** content clearly
- **Navigate** the course independently
- **Engage** with learning in multiple ways
- **Demonstrate learning** through equitable options

Key Principles of Accessible Online Course Design

1) Make Course Navigation Clear and Consistent

Students should not have to guess where to find materials.

Best Practices:

- Use a **consistent weekly/module structure**
- Name items clearly (e.g., *Week 3 Lecture Video* instead of *Video 1*)
- Keep menus and pages uncluttered
- Post assignments, readings, and due dates in predictable locations
- Avoid burying important content in announcements only

Ask Yourself:

- Can a student find this material in **under 30 seconds**?
 - Is the layout the **same from week to week**?
-

2) Use Accessible Documents and Files

Uploaded files can become barriers if they are poorly formatted.

Best Practices:

- Use **heading styles** in Word, Google Docs, or Canvas pages
- Choose readable fonts (e.g., Arial, Calibri, Verdana)
- Use **high contrast** text (dark text on light background)
- Avoid tiny fonts or dense blocks of text
- Use **real text** instead of images of text
- Export documents as **accessible PDFs** when needed

Avoid:

- Scanned PDFs without OCR
 - Color alone to communicate meaning
 - Overly decorative fonts
 - Crowded slide decks with too much text
-

3) Make Videos and Audio Accessible

Multimedia must be usable by all learners.

Best Practices:

- Provide **accurate captions** on all videos
- Include **transcripts** for recorded lectures, podcasts, or audio clips
- Speak clearly and describe important visuals when relevant
- Avoid saying only “as you can see here” without explanation

Example:

Instead of:

“This graph shows the trend.”

Say:

“This graph shows that stress levels increased steadily from freshman to senior year.”

4) Use Accessible Text and Visual Design

Good visual design supports comprehension and reduces cognitive load.

Best Practices:

- Break content into **short sections**
- Use **headings, bullets, and white space**
- Align text left for readability
- Keep paragraphs concise
- Label links clearly

Instead of:

Click here

Use:

Review the Week 4 Study Guide

5) Ensure Images, Charts, and Graphics Are Meaningful

Visuals should support learning, not exclude students.

Best Practices:

- Add **alt text** to meaningful images
- Provide text explanations for charts, graphs, and diagrams

- Avoid using images only for decoration if they create clutter
- Make sure visuals are readable on phones and laptops

Good Alt Text Example:

“Bar graph showing exam scores increasing from 68% on Quiz 1 to 84% on Quiz 4.”

6) Design Assignments for Equity and Flexibility

Accessible design includes how students demonstrate learning.

Best Practices:

- Give **clear instructions and grading criteria**
- Use simple, direct assignment language
- Break major assignments into smaller steps when possible
- Consider offering **multiple ways to participate or submit work**
- Build in opportunities for revision, reflection, or clarification

Helpful Questions:

- Are the directions clear without me explaining them in class?
 - Does this assignment measure learning—or just students’ ability to navigate confusion?
-

7) Check Accessibility in Canvas (or Your LMS)

Learning management systems have tools that can help.

Best Practices:

- Use **built-in accessibility checkers**
- Structure pages with headings
- Avoid uploading everything as attachments only
- Put key information directly on the page when possible
- Test your course in **Student View**

Quick Canvas Check:

- Are links working?
- Are files opening correctly?
- Are pages readable on mobile?

- Are due dates and instructions easy to locate?
-

Accessibility = Better Teaching

When faculty build accessible online courses, students benefit through:

- Reduced confusion
- Better engagement
- Increased independence
- Stronger academic performance
- More equitable access to learning

Accessibility is not about making a course “easier.”

It is about making the course **usable, fair, and academically meaningful.**

Part III: Aligning Course Content with Accessible Course Design

Part III: Let's Get Started



Creating an Accessible Syllabus: Faculty Handout

Why Accessibility Matters

An accessible syllabus ensures that *all students*, including those with disabilities, can fully engage with course expectations, policies, and resources from day one. Accessibility is not just best practice—it supports compliance with **Americans with Disabilities Act** and **Section 508** standards.

Key Principles of an Accessible Syllabus

1. Use Clear and Simple Language

- Write in plain, concise language
 - Avoid jargon or define key terms
 - Use consistent terminology throughout
-

2. Organize with Structure

- Use headings (Heading 1, Heading 2, etc.)
 - Break content into sections:
 - Course Information
 - Learning Objectives
 - Assignments
 - Policies
 - Use bullet points for readability
-

3. Ensure Readable Formatting

- Use sans-serif fonts (e.g., Arial, Calibri, Verdana)
 - Minimum 12–14 pt font size
 - Maintain high color contrast (black text on white background)
 - Avoid using color alone to convey meaning
-

4. Make Digital Documents Accessible

- Use built-in heading styles (not just bold text)
 - Add **alt text** to images, charts, and graphics
 - Ensure PDFs are **tagged and searchable**
 - Use accessible tables (with header rows defined)
-

5. Provide Accessible Links and Media

- Use descriptive hyperlinks (e.g., “*View the course schedule*” instead of “click here”)
 - Ensure videos are:
 - Captioned
 - Transcribed (if possible)
 - Avoid embedding inaccessible content
-

6. Include an Accessibility Statement

Provide a clear statement encouraging students to request accommodations:

Example:

“If you have a documented disability and require accommodations, please contact [Disability Services Office] as soon as possible. I am committed to creating an inclusive learning environment and will work with you to support your success.”

7. Be Flexible and Inclusive

- Clearly state policies for:
 - Late work
 - Participation
 - Attendance
 - Consider flexibility for diverse student needs
 - Use inclusive language (e.g., avoid assumptions about background or ability)
-

8. Use Consistent Navigation (Especially in Canvas)

- Align syllabus sections with your LMS modules
 - Use consistent naming conventions
 - Provide a clear weekly or unit structure
-

Quick Accessibility Checklist

- ✓ Headings are used properly
- ✓ Font is readable and appropriately sized
- ✓ Color contrast is sufficient
- ✓ Links are descriptive
- ✓ Images include alt text
- ✓ Videos are captioned
- ✓ Accessibility statement is included
- ✓ Document is screen reader–friendly

Creating an Accessible Homepage in Canvas

Faculty Quick Guide

A well-designed Canvas homepage helps students **find what they need quickly**, reduces confusion, and supports **all learners**, including students using screen readers, keyboard navigation, mobile devices, or assistive technologies.

An accessible homepage should be **clear, simple, organized, and usable by everyone**.

Why Your Homepage Matters

Your Canvas homepage is often the **first impression** students have of your course. It should help them answer:

- **Where do I start?**
- **What do I need this week?**
- **How do I contact my instructor?**
- **Where do I find assignments, modules, and support?**

A cluttered or inaccessible homepage can create unnecessary barriers. A good homepage promotes:

- **Student confidence**
 - **Course navigation**
 - **Equity and inclusion**
 - **Reduced frustration**
 - **Improved engagement**
-

Goals of an Accessible Canvas Homepage

An accessible homepage should:

- Provide a **clear welcome and course orientation**
- Use **simple, readable formatting**
- Include **meaningful links**
- Be easy to navigate with a **keyboard and screen reader**
- Avoid unnecessary visual clutter
- Work well on **desktop and mobile devices**

Recommended Homepage Elements

1. Welcome Message

Start with a short, friendly introduction.

Example:

Welcome to PSY 101: Introduction to Psychology!

This course is organized by weekly modules. Begin by reviewing the Start Here module and checking the weekly overview each Monday.

Keep it brief—students should not have to scroll through long paragraphs to find important information.

2. Start Here / First Steps

Clearly tell students what to do first.

Example:

Start Here

1. Review the syllabus
2. Complete the introductory discussion
3. Check the Week 1 module
4. Review course policies and support resources

This is especially helpful for students who are new to Canvas or online learning.

3. Course Navigation Links

Provide direct access to the most important course areas.

Recommended links:

- **Modules**
- **Syllabus**

- **Announcements**
- **Assignments**
- **Grades**
- **Instructor Contact**
- **Student Support Resources**

Use Canvas page links or buttons **carefully**—buttons are fine if they are accessible and clearly labeled.

4. Instructor Contact Information

Make it easy for students to reach you.

Include:

- Your name
- Email
- Office hours
- Preferred contact method
- Expected response time

Example:

Instructor Information

Dr. Jane Smith

Email: jsmith@college.edu

Office Hours: Tuesdays 2–4 PM via Zoom

Response Time: Within 24–48 hours on weekdays

5. Student Support Resources

Include links to support services such as:

- Disability/Accessibility Services
- Tutoring
- Library
- Counseling
- Tech support
- Writing center

This promotes student success and helps normalize help-seeking.

Accessibility Best Practices for Canvas Homepages

1. Use Headings Properly

Headings help students using screen readers and make content easier to scan.

Use built-in heading styles such as:

- **Heading 2** for major sections
- **Heading 3** for subsections

Good Example:

Welcome

Start Here

Instructor Information

Course Resources

Avoid:

- Making text *look* like a heading by only changing font size, bolding, or color

If it looks like a heading, it should **be** a heading.

2. Keep Layout Simple

A simple layout is more accessible than a highly decorative one.

Best practices:

- Use **short paragraphs**

- Use **bulleted or numbered lists**
- Leave **white space** between sections
- Avoid large walls of text
- Keep important information near the top

Avoid:

- Overcrowded designs
 - Too many columns
 - Excessive emojis, icons, or decorative images
 - Text boxes that are difficult to navigate on mobile
-

3. Use Meaningful Link Text

Students should understand where a link goes **without guessing**.

Examples:

- **View the syllabus**
- **Go to Week 1 Module**
- **Contact Disability Support Services**

Avoid:

- **Click here**
- **More**
- **This link**

Screen reader users often navigate by links alone, so link text needs to make sense out of context.

4. Avoid Using Color Alone to Communicate Meaning

Color can support meaning, but it should never be the **only** way information is communicated.

Examples:

- **Required items are marked with “Required.”**
- **Important deadlines are labeled “Due Friday.”**

Avoid:

- “Items in red are required”
- “Green buttons are optional”

Students with color blindness, low vision, or device display issues may miss that information.

5. Ensure Good Color Contrast

Text should be easy to read against the background.

Best practices:

- Use **dark text on a light background**
- Avoid pastel text, neon colors, or low-contrast combinations
- Keep backgrounds plain when possible

Good contrast:

- Black text on white
- Dark blue on light gray

Poor contrast:

- Light gray on white
 - Yellow on white
 - Red on green
-

6. Add Alt Text to Images

If you use images, banners, or icons, include **alternative text (alt text)** so screen readers can describe them.

Good alt text:

- “Students studying together at a library table”
- “Canvas course homepage banner with books and laptop”

Avoid:

- “image”
- “homepage graphic”
- Leaving alt text blank unless the image is purely decorative

If an image adds **no instructional value**, it may be better to leave it off entirely.

7. Avoid Image-Only Homepages

A homepage should not be built entirely from one large image or flyer.

Why this is a problem:

- Screen readers cannot read embedded image text well
- Text may not resize properly
- Mobile users may struggle to read it
- Important information may be inaccessible

Instead:

Use real Canvas text, headings, and links.

Rule of thumb:

If students need to read it, it should be **actual text**, not text inside an image.

8. Make Sure It Works with Keyboard Navigation

Some students navigate using only a keyboard rather than a mouse.

Your homepage should allow users to:

- Tab through links in a logical order
- Access buttons and links without clicking
- Avoid hidden or difficult-to-select navigation items

If you use tables, embedded content, or custom buttons, test whether they are keyboard-friendly.

9. Keep Mobile Access in Mind

Many students use Canvas on a phone or tablet.

Best practices:

- Keep content vertically organized
- Avoid side-by-side text boxes
- Avoid tiny buttons or crowded layouts
- Keep homepage text concise

If a homepage only works well on a desktop, it may create barriers for students.

10. Use the Canvas Accessibility Checker

Canvas has a built-in accessibility checker in the Rich Content Editor.

Use it to catch issues such as:

- Missing alt text
- Poor table formatting
- Incorrect heading structure
- Color contrast problems

Tip:

Run the checker **every time you update your homepage.**

What to Avoid on Your Canvas Homepage

Try not to include:

- Large blocks of dense text
- Too many fonts, colors, or styles
- Decorative elements that distract from navigation
- Auto-playing media
- Flashing GIFs or animations
- Image-only announcements or banners
- Too many buttons competing for attention
- Broken or outdated links

If everything is emphasized, **nothing is emphasized.**

A Simple Accessible Homepage Template

You can use a structure like this:

Welcome to [Course Name]

Welcome to this course! This homepage will help you quickly find important materials and weekly course content.

Start Here

- Review the syllabus
- Read the course introduction
- Complete the Week 1 tasks
- Introduce yourself in the discussion

Course Navigation

- [Modules]
- [Syllabus]
- [Assignments]
- [Announcements]
- [Grades]

Instructor Information

Instructor: [Your Name]

Email: [Your Email]

Office Hours: [Days/Times]

Response Time: [Example: Within 24–48 hours]

Student Support

- Accessibility Services
 - Tutoring Center
 - Library
 - Counseling Services
 - Tech Support
-

Accessibility Self-Check for Faculty

Before publishing your homepage, ask:

Can students quickly tell where to begin?

Are headings used correctly?

Are links clearly labeled?

Is all text readable and high contrast?

Are images supported by alt text?

Can students access the page on mobile?

Would this page make sense to a student using a screen reader?

If the answer is “no” to any of these, revise before publishing.

Bottom Line

An accessible Canvas homepage does not need to be flashy.
It needs to be:

- **Clear**
- **Consistent**
- **Readable**
- **Navigable**
- **Inclusive**

When students can easily access and understand your homepage, they can spend less time figuring out the course—and more time learning.

Faculty Handout: Creating Accessible Canvas Pages

Designing course pages all students can access and use

Accessible Canvas pages help ensure that **all students**, including those using **screen readers, keyboard navigation, captions, zoom tools, or mobile devices**, can successfully engage with your course content. Accessible design also improves **clarity, consistency, and usability for everyone**.

Why Accessible Canvas Pages Matter

Accessible pages help students:

- Navigate content more easily
- Read and understand materials more efficiently
- Use assistive technologies successfully
- Access course materials on different devices
- Reduce barriers to participation and learning

Accessible design is not just a technical requirement—it is a **student success strategy**.

Accessibility Checklist for Canvas Pages

1) Use Built-In Headings to Organize Content

Headings help students and screen reader users understand the structure of your page.

Best Practice

Use Canvas heading styles in order:

- **Heading 2** for main sections
- **Heading 3** for subsections
- **Heading 4** if needed

Do

- Course Overview
- Weekly Objectives
- Required Readings
- Assignment Instructions

Avoid

- Making text **bold and larger** just to look like a heading
- Skipping heading levels randomly

Why it matters

Screen readers use headings to let students jump quickly to different parts of the page.

2) Keep Page Layout Simple and Consistent

A clean layout helps students find information quickly.

Best Practice

Organize pages in a predictable order such as:

1. **Overview**
2. **Learning Objectives**
3. **To-Do List**
4. **Readings/Materials**
5. **Assignments**
6. **Support/Resources**

Do

- Use short sections
- Use white space between sections
- Keep formatting consistent across modules

Avoid

- Overly long blocks of text
 - Cluttered pages with too many colors, fonts, or icons
 - Important instructions buried in paragraphs
-

3) Write Clear, Descriptive Page Titles

Page titles should tell students exactly what the page contains.

Better Titles

- Week 3 Overview
- Module 2 Assignment Instructions
- Research Methods Study Guide

Avoid

- Page 1
- Start Here
- Important Info
- Read This

Why it matters

Descriptive titles help students using screen readers, mobile devices, or module navigation know where they are.

4) Use Meaningful Link Text

Links should clearly describe where they go.

Do

- Read the **APA Style Guide**
- Watch the **Lecture Video on Memory**
- Submit your work in the **Week 4 Assignment**

Avoid

- Click here
- More
- Link
- Read this

Why it matters

Screen reader users often navigate by links alone. “Click here” gives no useful information.

5) Make Lists with the List Tool

Use Canvas bullet or numbered list tools instead of typing symbols manually.

Do

Use:

- Bullet lists for materials
- Numbered lists for steps or instructions

Avoid

Typing lists like:

- - o item
 -
 - o item
- - 0. itemwithout using the actual formatting tools

Why it matters

Assistive technologies can recognize real lists and announce them correctly.

6) Use Color Carefully

Color should never be the only way students receive information.

Do

- Use **bold**, labels, or icons in addition to color
- Example: **Required:** Complete Quiz 2 by Friday

Avoid

- “Items in red are due this week”
- “Green means optional, blue means required” without additional labels

Why it matters

Some students may not perceive color differences, and screen readers do not announce color meaning.

7) Ensure Strong Color Contrast

Text should be easy to read against the background.

Best Practice

Use dark text on a light background or light text on a dark background.

Avoid

- Light gray text
- Pale colors
- Decorative colored backgrounds behind text

Why it matters

Low contrast can make content difficult to read for students with low vision, color blindness, or eye strain.

8) Add Alt Text to Images

Alternative text (alt text) describes images for students who cannot see them.

Do

Add short, meaningful descriptions:

- “Bar graph showing student success rates increasing across four semesters”
- “Diagram of the neuron showing dendrites, soma, and axon”

Use Decorative Images Sparingly

If an image is only decorative and adds no instructional value, it may not need a detailed description.

Avoid

- “image”
- “photo”
- “graphic123”

Why it matters

Students using screen readers need access to the same visual information.

9) Avoid Uploading Pages as Images or Unformatted PDFs

Whenever possible, build content directly in Canvas rather than relying only on scanned or image-based documents.

Best Practice

Use Canvas pages for:

- Instructions
- Weekly overviews
- Assignment directions
- Announcements
- Resource lists

Why it matters

Canvas pages are generally more accessible, mobile-friendly, and easier to update than image-based files.

10) Use Tables Only for Data

Tables should be used only when presenting actual rows and columns of information.

Appropriate Uses

- Assignment schedule
- Office hours
- Grade weighting

Avoid

Using tables just to control layout or spacing

Why it matters

Screen readers interpret tables differently, and layout tables can be confusing and difficult to navigate.

11) Keep Embedded Media Accessible

If you include videos, audio, or multimedia:

Best Practice

- Use **captioned videos**
- Provide **transcripts** when possible
- Make sure links to media are clearly labeled

Why it matters

Students may need captions, transcripts, or alternative access methods to fully engage with content.

12) Write in Plain, Student-Friendly Language

Accessible writing is easier for everyone to understand.

Best Practice

- Use short sentences
- Break up complex instructions
- Define unfamiliar terms
- Use direct, supportive wording

Instead of

“Students are expected to demonstrate proficiency in the completion of the aforementioned instructional activity...”

Try

“Complete the discussion post by Friday and reply to two classmates by Sunday.”

Recommended Structure for an Accessible Canvas Page

Sample Page Layout

Page Title

Week 5 Overview: Memory and Learning

Section Headings

Overview

This week we will examine short-term and long-term memory processes.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this week, you should be able to:

- Define working memory
- Compare short-term and long-term memory
- Apply memory concepts to real-life examples

To Do This Week

1. Read Chapter 6
2. Watch the lecture video
3. Complete the quiz
4. Submit the reflection assignment

Resources

- Chapter 6 Reading
- Lecture Slides
- Study Guide

Need Help?

Contact me through Canvas Inbox or attend office hours.

Before You Publish: Quick Faculty Self-Check

Before publishing a Canvas page, ask:

- Does the page have a **clear title**?
- Did I use **real headings** instead of just bold text?
- Are my **links descriptive**?
- Are lists formatted properly?
- Did I add **alt text** to meaningful images?
- Is the page easy to read and navigate?
- Is color used accessibly?
- Is all media captioned or supported with transcripts?

If yes, your page is much more likely to be usable for all students.

Use the Canvas Accessibility Checker

Canvas includes an **Accessibility Checker** in the Rich Content Editor.

Use it before publishing

It can help identify issues such as:

- Missing alt text
- Poor heading structure
- Table formatting issues
- Color contrast concerns

Best practice

Run the checker every time you create or revise a page.

Key Takeaway

Accessible Canvas pages are:

- **Clear**
- **Consistent**
- **Structured**
- **Readable**
- **Inclusive**

When faculty design pages with accessibility in mind from the start, they reduce barriers and improve learning for everyone.

Need Support?

For help creating accessible Canvas content, contact:

- Your campus **Instructional Design Team**
 - **Disability Support Services / Accessibility Services**
 - **Canvas Support**
 - Your campus **Distance Education or Online Learning Office**
-

If you want, I can also turn this into either:

1. a **1-page printable faculty handout**,
2. a **more polished campus professional version**, or
3. a **Canvas-ready page with headings and formatting you can paste directly into Canvas**.

Faculty Handout: Creating Accessible Files in Canvas

How to Make Uploaded Course Files More Accessible for All Students

Accessible files help ensure that **all students**, including those using **screen readers, captions, keyboard navigation, text-to-speech, magnification, or mobile devices**, can fully engage with your course content.

When you upload files to **Canvas** (PDFs, Word docs, PowerPoints, Google exports, etc.), it is important to make sure those files are accessible **before** posting them.

Why Accessible Files Matter

Accessible files support:

- Students with **visual, auditory, cognitive, mobility, or learning disabilities**
- Students using **assistive technology**
- Students accessing coursework on **phones, tablets, or low-bandwidth connections**
- Clearer, more organized course materials for **everyone**

Accessible design is not just a compliance issue—it is a **student success issue**.

Before Uploading a File to Canvas, Check These Basics

1. Use Clear, Descriptive File Names

Students should be able to understand what a file is **before opening it**.

Good examples

- `Week_3_Lecture_Notes.docx`
- `Chapter_5_Study_Guide.pdf`
- `Research_Methods_Article_Response_Instructions.docx`

Avoid

- document1.pdf
- scan0003.pdf
- week3stuff.pdf

Best Practice

Use file names that include:

- **topic**
 - **week/module**
 - **purpose**
-

2. Prefer Editable Files When Possible

Whenever possible, provide content in a format students can **resize, read aloud, annotate, or convert** more easily.

Most accessible file types

- **Canvas Pages** (best option for most content)
- **Word documents (.docx)**
- **Accessible PowerPoints (.pptx)**
- **Properly tagged PDFs**

Less accessible options

- scanned PDFs
- image-only documents
- screenshots of text
- handwritten uploads without transcription

Best Practice

If information can live directly in a **Canvas Page**, that is often more accessible than uploading a file.

How to Create Accessible Word Documents

3. Use Built-In Headings

Headings create structure so students can navigate content quickly.

Do this

Use:

- **Heading 1** for the main title
- **Heading 2** for major sections
- **Heading 3** for subsections

Do not

- Make text look like a heading by only:
 - bolding
 - enlarging font
 - changing color

Why it matters

Screen readers rely on real heading styles to help students move through a document.

4. Use Simple, Readable Fonts

Choose fonts that are easy to read on screen.

Recommended fonts

- Arial
- Calibri
- Aptos
- Verdana
- Tahoma

Recommended size

- **11–12 pt minimum** for body text
- Larger for headings

Avoid

- decorative fonts
- compressed fonts
- all caps for long passages

5. Use Strong Color Contrast

Text should be easy to see against the background.

Best Practice

- Use **dark text on a light background**
- Avoid light gray, yellow, or pastel text
- Do not rely on **color alone** to communicate meaning

Example

Instead of saying:

- “Items in **red** are due this week”

Say:

- “Items labeled **Due This Week** are due this week”
-

6. Make Lists and Tables Properly

Use built-in tools instead of typing your own formatting.

For lists

Use:

- bulleted lists
- numbered lists

For tables

Use tables only for **data**, not layout.

Table tips

- Include a **header row**
- Keep tables simple
- Avoid merged cells when possible

7. Add Alt Text to Images

If a document includes images, charts, diagrams, or graphics, add **alternative text (alt text)**.

Alt text should briefly explain

- what the image is
- why it matters in context

Example

Instead of:

- “graph”

Use:

- “Bar graph showing enrollment increasing from 2021 to 2025”

If an image is decorative

Mark it as decorative if the software allows.

8. Use Meaningful Hyperlinks

Students using screen readers should know where a link goes.

Avoid

- Click here
- More
- Link

Use instead

- **Read the APA Formatting Guide**
- **Watch the Week 4 Lecture Video**
- **Access the Library Database**

Best Practice

Link descriptive text, not raw URLs when possible.

How to Create Accessible PDFs

9. Avoid Scanned PDFs Whenever Possible

A scanned PDF is often just an **image of text**, which many students cannot read with assistive technology.

Problems with scanned PDFs

- unreadable by screen readers
- not searchable
- difficult to highlight or annotate
- poor quality on mobile devices

Best Practice

Create PDFs by **exporting from Word or PowerPoint**, not by scanning.

10. Make Sure PDFs Are Tagged

An accessible PDF should include **tags** that identify:

- headings
- paragraphs
- lists
- tables
- reading order

Best Practice

Create your original file in:

- Word
- PowerPoint
- Google Docs / Slides

Then export to PDF **after** accessibility checks are complete.

Important

If the original file is inaccessible, the PDF will usually be inaccessible too.

How to Create Accessible PowerPoints

11. Use Slide Titles on Every Slide

Each slide should have a **unique title** so screen readers can identify and navigate slides.

Best Practice

Every slide should answer:

- “What is this slide about?”
-

12. Use Built-In Slide Layouts

Built-in PowerPoint layouts preserve reading order and improve accessibility.

Avoid

- manually placing text boxes all over the slide
- cluttered slides with too many visuals

Best Practice

Use consistent slide structure:

- title
 - main content
 - image/chart with explanation
-

13. Keep Slides Readable

Recommended

- minimal text per slide
- large font sizes
- high contrast
- limited animations

Avoid

- tiny text
 - flashing or distracting movement
 - too much information on one slide
-

Audio, Video, and Embedded Files

14. Caption or Transcribe Multimedia

If your file includes links to videos, lectures, or audio:

Provide

- captions for videos
- transcripts for audio when possible

Why it matters

Captions support:

- Deaf and hard-of-hearing students
 - multilingual learners
 - students in noisy or quiet environments
 - students who benefit from reading while listening
-

Using Canvas to Support File Accessibility

15. Don't Upload Files Without Context

Students should not have to guess why a file is there.

Always include

- a short description
- what the file is for
- what students should do with it

Example

Instead of only posting:

- `Week4Reading.pdf`

Add:

Week 4 Reading: Please read pages 1–12 before Thursday’s discussion.

16. Organize Files Clearly in Modules

Avoid creating a “file dump” in Canvas.

Best Practice

Place files inside **Modules** with:

- clear titles
- sequence
- brief instructions

This improves accessibility and student navigation.

17. Use Canvas Pages Instead of Files When Possible

If the content is short (instructions, announcements, weekly overviews, study tips, etc.), put it in a **Canvas Page** rather than uploading a file.

Canvas Pages are often better because they

- work better on mobile
 - are easier for screen readers
 - reduce downloading/opening barriers
 - are easier to update
-

Quick Accessibility Checklist Before Uploading a File

Before posting a file in Canvas, ask:

Structure

- Does the file have a clear title?
- Did I use real headings and lists?
- Is the reading order logical?

Readability

- Is the font readable and large enough?
- Is there strong color contrast?
- Did I avoid using color alone for meaning?

Images and Media

- Did I add alt text to important images?
- Are charts/graphics explained in text?
- Are linked videos captioned?

Links and Navigation

- Are hyperlinks descriptive?
- Is the file name clear and meaningful?
- Did I explain the purpose of the file in Canvas?

Format

- Is the file editable or accessible?
- Did I avoid uploading a scanned image-only PDF?
- Did I run an accessibility checker if available?

Recommended Tools to Check Accessibility

Microsoft Word

Use:

- **Review → Check Accessibility**

Microsoft PowerPoint

Use:

- **Review → Check Accessibility**

Adobe Acrobat Pro

Use:

- **Accessibility Tools** to review PDFs

Canvas Accessibility Tools

If your institution uses them, tools such as:

- **Canvas Accessibility Checker**
- **Ally**
- other institutional accessibility tools

can help identify issues before students encounter them.

Faculty Reminder

Accessible files are not about perfection—they are about **removing barriers**.

A few small changes can make a major difference in whether students can:

- open a file successfully
 - read it independently
 - navigate it efficiently
 - complete your course with equal access
-

Bottom Line

Before uploading a file to Canvas:

Make it readable, structured, searchable, and usable by all students.

If a file is difficult to navigate, read, or interpret, students may miss content **even when they are fully capable of doing the work.**

Accessible files create a course environment that is:


- clearer
- more inclusive
- more student-centered
- easier to use for everyone

Part IV: Final Accessibility Checklist

Pre-Publish Accessibility Checklist for Canvas Courses

Course Structure & Navigation


9.1 Monday	✓	+	⋮
Get Started 🌀	✓		⋮
📄 9.1 What am I learning & doing today?	✓		⋮
📄 9.1 Warm up your brain!	✓		⋮
Consider This! 💡	✓		⋮
📄 9.1 Read: Who was George Washington Carver? (about 15 minutes)	✓		⋮
📄 9.1 Watch: GWC makes his mark! (8 min)	✓		⋮
Respond & Reflect 😊	✓		⋮
🔗 9.1 Check your Understanding	✓		⋮
🔗 9.1 Padlet: KWL on GWC!	✓		⋮
Wrapping Up ⌚	✓		⋮
📄 9.1 Wrap-up & Closure	✓		⋮
📄 9.1 Exit Ticket: Connect, Extend, Challenge	✓		⋮




HIST101 >

Summer 2017


- Home
- Assignments
- Discussions
- Grades
- People
- Pages
- Files
- Syllabus
- Quizzes
- Modules
- Conferences
- Collaborations
- SCORM
- Chat
- Announcements
- Outcomes
- Settings




Account




Dashboard




Courses




Groups




Calendar



Inbox



Help




HIST101 > Modules

Recent Announcements


- > Midterm Project
- > Welcome to Class!

Class Information


- Class Reading
- Course Introductions
Jun 2 | 10 pts
- Position Paper
Jun 6 | 10 pts




Account




Dashboard




Courses




Groups



Calendar



Inbox



Help



Account

Admin

Dashboard

Courses

Groups

Calendar

Inbox

Commons

Help



Module 1: [DAY, WEEK, UNIT/CHAPTER]	+	
Lecture Material	✓	
Module 1 Lecture Material	✓	
Learning Activities and Assessments	✓	
Discussion 1	✓	
Assignment 1 (Text-Based) 0 pts	✓	
Assignment 1 (File Upload) 0 pts	✓	
Quiz 1 3 pts	✓	

Module 2: [DAY, WEEK, UNIT/CHAPTER]	+	
Lecture Material	✓	
Module 2 Lecture Material	✓	
Learning Activities and Assessments	✓	
Discussion 2	✓	
Assignment 2 (Text-Based) 0 pts	✓	
Assignment 2 (File Upload) 0 pts	✓	
Quiz 2 0 pts	✓	

Module 3: [DAY, WEEK, UNIT/CHAPTER]	+	
Lecture Material	✓	
Module 3 Lecture Material	✓	
Learning Activities and Assessments	✓	

The screenshot shows a course page titled "Module 1: Overview" in a Learning Management System (LMS). The page has a dark sidebar on the left with navigation icons and labels: Home, Announcements, Syllabus, Modules, Grades, People, Send Grades to Banner, DUO System, Google Drive, Conferences, Collaborations, Assignments, Discussions, Quizzes, Outcomes, Files, Pages, Class Website, and Settings. The main content area has a header "Module 1: Overview" and a large graphic with the text "MODULE 1" and puzzle pieces. Below this, there are sections for "Module Outcomes" and "Module Activities". The "Module Outcomes" section lists three bullet points: "Explain the challenges and benefits associated with teaching in the online environment," "Identify differences between teaching online and teaching face-to-face," and "Apply time management strategies to efficiently manage an online course." The "Module Activities" section lists three bullet points: "Time Management presentation," "Who Are Online Students and Teachers?," and "Advantages of Teaching Online assignment." At the bottom, there is a "QUICK LINKS" section with a red banner for "MIAMI REGIONALS E-CAMPUS" and a list of links: "Regional E-Campus", "Online Essentials", "One Stop", "Academics", and "Library Research". Navigation buttons for "Previous" and "Next" are visible at the bottom of the page.

- Modules are used to organize all course content clearly
 - Course navigation menu is simplified (unused links hidden)
 - Homepage clearly explains how to start the course
 - Weekly or unit structure is consistent throughout
 - Links and buttons have clear, descriptive names (avoid “click here”)
-

<p>Good Contrast</p> <p>Bad Contrast</p>	<p>Good Contrast</p> <p>Bad Contrast</p>
<p>Good Contrast</p> <p>Bad Contrast</p>	<p>Good Contrast</p> <p>Bad Contrast</p>
<p>Good Contrast</p> <p>Bad Contrast</p>	<p>Good Contrast</p> <p>Bad Contrast</p>

Good Contrast

Bad Contrast

- Headings (H2, H3, etc.) are used in logical order (not just bold text)
- Font is readable (no decorative fonts; minimum ~12–14pt equivalent)
- Text has sufficient color contrast (dark text on light background)
- No ALL CAPS paragraphs (harder to read)
- Lists are formatted using bullet or numbered list tools

Images & Visual Media

- All meaningful images include **alt text**
 - Decorative images are marked appropriately (empty alt text)
 - Complex visuals (charts/graphs) include a text explanation
 - No images of text unless necessary (and then described)
-

Audio & Video Content

- All videos include accurate **closed captions**
 - Audio-only content includes a transcript
 - Auto-generated captions are reviewed for accuracy
 - Visual-only information in videos is verbally explained
-

Files & Documents (PDFs, Word, PPT)

- PDFs are **tagged and readable** (not scanned images)
 - Word documents use built-in heading styles
 - PowerPoints have slide titles and reading order set
 - All documents pass built-in accessibility checkers
 - File names are descriptive (e.g., “Week1_Reading.pdf”)
-

Links & External Content

- Links are descriptive (e.g., “APA Style Guide” not “click here”)
 - Links open in the same tab unless there is a clear reason
 - External tools/resources are accessible (or alternatives provided)
-

Assessments & Assignments

- Instructions are clear and written in simple language
 - Timed assessments allow for accommodations
 - Question formats are accessible (no confusing layouts)
 - Rubrics are included and clearly structured
-

Canvas Accessibility Tools

- Used the **Accessibility Checker** in Canvas pages
 - Fixed flagged issues (color contrast, missing alt text, etc.)
 - Checked content with a keyboard (tab navigation works)
 - Verified content works with screen readers (basic check)
-

Communication & Inclusivity

- Syllabus includes an accessibility statement
 - Instructions invite students to request accommodations
 - Language is inclusive and clear
 - Multiple ways to engage with content are provided
-

Final Pre-Publish Check

- All modules are published in the correct order
 - No broken links (use Canvas link validator)
 - All required materials are accessible **before Day 1**
 - Student View has been used to test the course
-

Pro Tip for Faculty

Accessibility isn't just compliance—it improves learning for **all students**, including multilingual learners and mobile users.

Final Note:

I know this appears to be a very daunting task ahead of us! However, designing with warmth, welcome, empathy, and accessibility are critical. Please note that I am here to answer questions or aid you in any way I can.

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