

Course Design: Orienting Students to Your Course Quickly

Whether your course is face-to-face, fully online, or a blended format, provide a user-friendly orientation plan. Your orientation plan should account for common student needs and questions and be a part of your initial course activities. **A well-designed course orientation can foster a positive first impression of the course, prevent learner frustration, and significantly reduce the need for instructors to troubleshoot student difficulties.** This guide includes our recommendations for orienting students for any course delivery method, including fully online and hybrid learning environments.

Clarify Course Expectations

When creating your orientation materials, consider your student audience. Students can have widely different academic experiences: they may come to your course fully aware of the culture of higher education and the expectations of them, or, they may need insights to help them be more successful. Likewise, students may or may not have worked within a Canvas course site, been graded according to an assessment plan similar to the one in your course, or have previous experience engaging with their classmates and instructors for certain types of activities. **Allowing students insights into your expectations will make for a better course experience for everyone.**

Did you know? The [CEHD Canvas Template](#) includes a ready-made course welcome and orientation module, including an organizational structure that can be tailored to suit any course, an FAQ discussion board, and links to technical support resources. It is available to all CEHD instructors and can be applied to any Canvas site.

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Reach out to students

- [Send a welcome email to your students from your U of M email account](#) before the course begins. Introduce yourself and include information about the first few steps that students can take to prepare for the first day of class (for example, sign into Canvas, update their Canvas profile, [add Canvas Calendar events to their Google calendar](#), and begin reviewing the course syllabus).
 - **Note:** Students do not receive announcements or messages sent from Canvas until they have accepted the invitation to your course. You can [check student status on the People page](#). Include in your welcome email [how students can enable notifications](#).

Design an intuitive Canvas site

- **Take stock of your current course site** [using the student view](#). Consider the following questions as a guide:
 - *If this was your first visit to your site, would you know how to begin?*
 - *Where would you get help?*
 - *How would you reach the instructor?*
 - *Are titles and links self-explanatory?*
 - *What content is explicit? What content is implied?*
- Use [Canvas Modules](#) to arrange course content and activities into a hierarchy that helps learners identify logical pathways and limits potential confusion.
- Use the same terminology, naming convention for assignment and activities titles, and sequence of events in your Canvas site that you specify in your course syllabus. Consistency reduces the need to relearn where things are located or what they are called and it helps students stay on track.
- Use clear, directive titles (for example, use “*Introduce Yourself to the Class*” as a title for the ice breaker activity, or “*Guidelines for the Midterm Essay*” as the title for detailed instructions about a major course assignment).

- Use a clear and consistent format for the instructions for assignments, quizzes, and discussions. Include the due date and total points possible, any formatting requirements, word count, or questions students will need to answer.
- Include a [grading rubric](#) so students will know how they can achieve full credit. Make sure that each assignment group—assignments, quizzes, and discussions—has a consistent rubric across all assignments and is being shared in a consistent manner for all activities.
- Arrange course content and links in a logical sequence. [Hide unused or redundant links](#).
- [Use Canvas Pages](#) to nest related content, resources, and activities in ways that reduce visual clutter and facilitate ease of access. Using pages can provide students with context related to class content and activities.

Create an orientation module

- Set it as the first module for your course site so that students can easily locate it.
- Include the following:
 - A welcome page with a clear title that invites students to view the page (for example *Welcome and Getting Started*)
 - Your self-introduction
 - An overview of the course activities
 - The technologies you plan to use during the term and [where to get support](#)
 - How you expect to communicate with them, and how they should communicate with one another
 - How you prefer to be contacted (email, [Canvas Inbox](#), online office hours) and the length of time students should expect to wait for a response from you (for example, “*I check email from 8 AM to 5 PM CT and will respond within 24 hours*”)
 - A section on grounding assumptions and expected class etiquette such as this [example of grounding assumptions](#).
 - The first few activities or icebreakers they should complete before getting started on the main course content
 - A directive to read your course syllabus
 - A [discussion board in Canvas](#) for “questions about this course.”
 - This space can be used by students to ask for clarification from the instructor and each other. Having a central location for questions and

answers can serve more students in less time and with fewer email messages.

Record a course orientation video

- Introduce yourself, give a virtual tour of your Canvas site, and talk through your syllabus. This could even be embedded on your course welcome page.
 - [How to Record a Video Lecture](#) (Tutorial)
 - [Create an Instructional Video Without Presenting Slides](#) (Tutorial)

Establish a classroom culture

- Draft a statement on expected behaviors and respectful contributions. Invite students to contribute. This will cover etiquette and [expectations](#) for student contributions to the course.
- Co-create [grounding assumptions](#) with your students. Establish what is needed to have a safe and productive online learning environment.
- If conducting your course online, establish your [virtual culture](#).

Engage students

- Encourage TAs, co-instructors, and students to [customize their account profiles](#) and [add an avatar](#).
- [Include an ice breaker activity](#) for students to introduce themselves and meet classmates.
 - If assigning points for this activity, be sure they are minimal. The focus is on participation, getting to know the technologies, each other and you.

Help students stay on track with activities and assignments

- Use the automated scheduling features of Canvas including the [Calendar](#), the [activity stream](#), and the activity schedule on the [Canvas Syllabus](#) page.
 - [Students can also access the activity stream](#).
- Encourage students to review and [configure their account notifications](#) to stay up to date with course deadlines and announcements.
- [Set due dates for all graded assignments and add non-graded or required course activities to the To-Do list](#) that students can view.

Help us improve our resources. Take this [one-minute survey](#).