

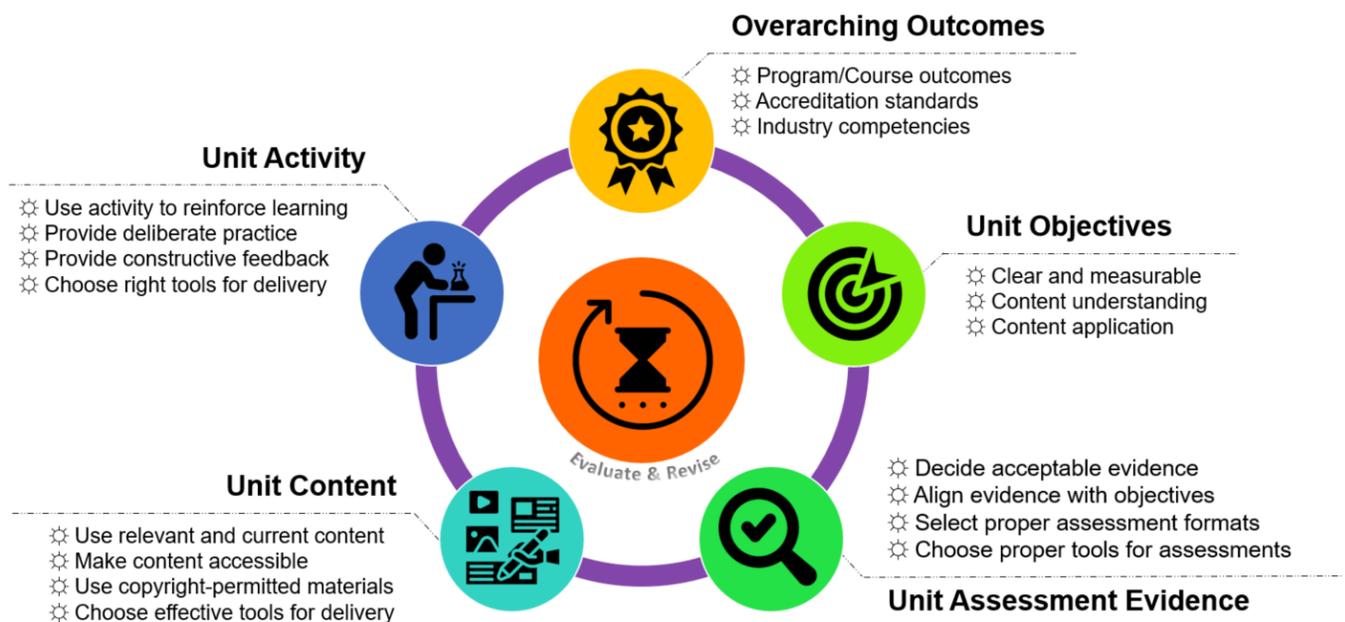
# Tier-Based Course Design Process

**Purpose:** Designing an effective course takes time and effort, which could feel overwhelming, with many considerations and decisions on what should go into the course. Following the backward design process (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), the design tiers below are intended to help make the course design process more manageable for instructors. Each tier provides certain suggestions that can be built upon one another. Based on existing courses, instructors may choose a tier to begin with and keep improving the course by consulting other (higher) tiers.

**Cautions:** By no means do these tiers represent all of what instructional design has to offer. They just provide a glimpse into the multivariate and interwoven nature of the teaching and learning process. We do not know for sure if a course is effective until it is delivered and evaluated. That's why course design is an interactive process, requiring constant reflections, tweaks, and updates. The design process stops when you stop teaching the course.

Although the tiers are organized by levels, they are not strictly hierarchical. The higher levels are more complex with more design suggestions. Instructors, however, can take pieces from different tiers as they see fit and make them coherent and purposeful in the course.

**Suggestion:** In addition to the design tiers, instructors are strongly encouraged to meet with an instructional designer to discuss and brainstorm more ideas that may or may not be addressed here. Each course has unique outcomes, instructional contexts, learner profiles, and many other variables to account for. Therefore, a discussion with an instructional designer is important to consider those factors in your course design. With all that said, let's begin.



## Basic Design Process

It is more practical to design at the unit level because units “embody a meaningful and connected chunk of learning events that build toward some important intellectual outcome [big idea]” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011, p. 39). A daily lesson is “too short to allow for in-depth development of big ideas” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 8).

Each course intends to address some overarching outcomes - accreditation competencies, college outcomes, general education outcomes, or department/program outcomes. Generally, those outcomes are broad and using them to design the units could be difficult. Therefore, it may be helpful to examine and determine which of those overarching outcomes are relevant to the course. Then, create specific course outcomes, phrased in terms of course content (see [example](#)), to help guide the creation of the unit objectives (see [example](#)). The course outcomes should focus on the [big ideas](#) or [big questions](#) that address the heart of your discipline.

***Begin with the end in mind.*** After defining desired objectives for each unit within your course, consider designing backward from those unit objectives to determine the unit assessments and learning experiences, instead of designing backward from the content (textbook) or learning activities because: (1) content coverage may become your class focus, and (2) fun and engaging activities may not purposefully and adequately address the objectives. However, you can consult the content or activities to help you define the desired objectives. Then, design backward from there (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

## References

This document is derived from our [best practices review document](#) (BPR) and relies on various works, some of which are listed here. For more references, check the BPR document.

- Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by design* (expanded 2nd ed.). Pearson Education.
- Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (2011). *Understanding by design: Guide to creating high-quality units*. ASCD.