# **20 TIPS FOR TEACHING AN ACCESSIBLE ONLINE COURSE**

Taken from Educause Review, “ADA Compliance for Online Course Design”, 1/30/17

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## Tips for Teaching an Accessible Online Course

I taught the first online learning course at the University of Washington in 1995. My co-instructor, Norm Coombs, is blind. We designed the course to be accessible to students who had a broad range of challenges, including those related to vision, hearing, learning, attention, and mobility. We employed the latest technology of the time — e-mail, discussion list, Gopher, file transfer protocol, and Telnet. All online materials were in a text-based format, and videos — which were mailed to the students — were presented in VHS format with captions and audio description.

When asked how many of the students in this course had disabilities, we were proud to say that we did not know. No one needed to request disability-related accommodations because of the accessible design of the course. We offered the class many times over the course of a few years; no student requested an accommodation, even though we knew from voluntary disclosures that some of them were deaf, some were blind, and some had disabilities related to reading. Our accessibility efforts benefited not only students with disabilities but also students who are English language learners and those working in either noisy environments or quiet settings, such as a library where others are working or a dorm room when a roommate is sleeping. *Accessible* instructional design is *good* instructional design.

Although the technology today is more advanced and diverse, the basic issues are the same when it comes to accessibility. Faculty and instructional designers need to make sure that screen readers can access content in a text-based format; that content is accessible by using the keyboard alone; that videos are captioned; that content is presented in a clear, consistent, structured format; and so on. Clearly, design of an accessible course involves considerations related to both IT accessibility and pedagogy.

From my experiences teaching online, I have developed a list of 20 tips — with references to in-depth resources for some of the topics — that can help online instructors make their courses accessible to a broad audience. Although the tips do not cover every potential accessibility issue, they provide a good start…

### **"**[**20 Tips for Teaching an Accessible Online Course**](https://www.washington.edu/doit/20-tips-teaching-accessible-online-course)**"**

1. For [course web pages, documents, images, and videos](http://www.uw.edu/accessibility):
   1. Use clear, consistent layouts and organization schemes for presenting content.
   2. [Structure headings](http://www.uw.edu/accessibility/documents/) (using style features built into the learning management system, Word, PowerPoint, PDFs, etc.) and use built-in designs/layouts (e.g., for PPT slides).
   3. Use descriptive wording for hyperlink text (e.g., "DO-IT Knowledge Base" rather than "click here").
   4. Minimize the use of PDFs, [especially when presented as an image](http://www.uw.edu/accessibility/documents/); make sure the text is accessible by testing to see if you can copy and paste it. Always offer a text-based alternative as well.
   5. [Provide concise alternative-text descriptions](http://www.uw.edu/accessibility/documents/) of content presented within images.
   6. Use large, bold fonts on uncluttered pages with plain backgrounds.
   7. [Use color combinations that are high contrast](http://www.paciellogroup.com/resources/contrastanalyser/) and can be read by those who are colorblind.
   8. Make sure all content and navigation is accessible using the [keyboard alone](http://www.uw.edu/accessibility/web/).
   9. [Caption or transcribe video and audio content](http://www.uw.edu/accessibility/videos/).
2. With respect to [instructional methods](http://www.uw.edu/doit/equal-access-universal-design-instruction):

10. Assume students have a wide range of technology skills and provide options for gaining the technology skills needed for course participation.

11. [Present content in multiple ways](http://www.uw.edu/doit/equal-access-universal-design-instruction) (e.g., in a combination of text, video, audio, and/or image format).

12. Address a wide range of language skills as you write content (e.g., spell out terms rather than relying on acronyms alone, define terms, avoid or define jargon).

13. Make instructions and expectations clear for activities, projects, and assigned reading.

14. Make examples and assignments relevant to learners with a wide variety of interests and backgrounds.

15. Offer outlines and other scaffolding tools to help students learn.

16. Provide adequate opportunities for practice.

17. Allow adequate time for activities, projects, and tests (e.g., give details of project assignments in the syllabus so that students can start working on them early).

18. Provide feedback on project parts and offer corrective opportunities.

19. Provide options for communicating and collaborating that are accessible to individuals with a variety of disabilities.

20. Provide options for demonstrating learning (e.g., different types of test items, portfolios, presentations, discussions).