

NATIONAL COLLEGE OF IRELAND

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How do you Moodle?

A Course Page Style Guide for Lecturers

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Table of Contents

How to use this Style Guide	3
Make all class resources and links available	4
Upload lecture notes in advance	5
Structure the course material	6
Consider to link to videos rather than to embed them.....	7
Guide students to assignment information	8
Create On-line Quizzes	9
Use consistent naming convention	10
Provide material in common file formats.....	11
Provide communication facilities	12
Acknowledgements	13

How to use this Style Guide

You are lecturing in Higher Education. You are an expert in your subject and in how to teach that subject. But you are not a usability expert—of course not. Nevertheless, you are required to create course pages in the Virtual Learning Environment for your classes.

If the above applies to you, then this booklet is designed for you. It is intended as a support for lecturers when creating course pages in Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) such as Moodle or Blackboard. The Style Guide offers a series of solutions of typical problems that can occur when making online materials and learning activities available. VLEs are used in almost all Higher Education institutions and for most courses. However, surveys with students show that some of these course pages need improvement and that students are not satisfied.

By following this Style Guide you can enhance the learning experience of your students.

The Style Guide was developed in the context of a project funded by the National Academy for Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning (NAIRTL). The guidelines are derived from the results of two usability studies involving more than 50 students at National College of Ireland.

None of these guidelines are set in stone. In fact, just like any guidelines, you should always check whether they apply at all or whether there are ways of providing an even better learning experience. For each guideline you will find applicability conditions and justifications why you might want to follow the guideline. But ultimately, you should apply common sense.

Make all class resources and links available

Problem	Students have seen learning material and related websites in class and want to use them again, but cannot find them online.
Solution	Make all class resources and links available on the VLE's course page. Also additional material that may not be suitable for use during the lecture could provide valuable learning opportunities for students.
When to use	This guideline applies with only few exceptions. While in principle too many additional resources may distract students from the core subject and the related learning outcomes, it will generally help them to acquire a more rounded perspective. It may also help students with different learning preferences to keep engaged with the material.
Why	In line with previous studies in this area, students in our studies told us that for them, the most important use of Moodle was being able to access course materials on-line such as lectures notes (either for current class or previous classes), links, videos and other resources. They expressed their frustration on slow reaction from lecturers and delays in putting up class notes.

Upload lecture notes in advance

Problem	Students want to print notes in preparation for a class or use notes during class, but they are not yet available
Solution	Make lecture notes available on Moodle at least one day before the session. This allows students to prepare and print in advance.
When to use	This is in particular relevant, when the course notes mainly comprise of bullet points and students want to add their own comments and explanations to them during class. Some lecturers leave out key terms or solutions in the downloadable version so that students have to pay attention in class in order to fill the gaps.
Why	Students cited delay in uploading lecture notes or not available lecture notes as one of the most important frustrations in their experience with Moodle.

Structure the course material

Problem

Students get lost in the wealth of material.

Solution

Clearly label each section of the course. Structure your course material and use both topic and date/week in headings.



When to use

Whenever course sections include more than one or two resources or activities, additional structural elements can facilitate navigation.

Why

Our study has shown that topics and weeks can support students in finding relevant information.

Students say they prefer courses structured via topic (rather than week), but our observations show this slows down search behaviour. Lectures are advised to use both topic and week when designing courses.

When asked if they preferred courses structured via date or topic response was varied and there was no clear winner. This may reflect variety of different courses available to students but our observations show that the week design slows down search behaviour for certain tasks. We suggest lectures should to use both topic and week when designing courses to aid students.

Our aim was to see if the design of course by topics or weeks would have an impact on how the students engaged with Moodle pages.

When asked 'how to you normally find lecture notes', 15 students told us they use the week structure, while 12 said they look via the topic structure. This is likely related to how the lecturers structure courses. Interestingly, when asked 'How should Moodle be structured', this opinion was reversed somewhat as almost two thirds say they prefer topic (19/30). When asked in the interview to rank various course designs, there was no clear winner.

However, in our observation we found that on average, participants took 23% longer to find lecture notes when looking for a particular topic in a course that was structured in weeks.

Consider to link to videos rather than to embed them

Problem Embedded videos on a course page may seem like clutter and slow down navigation.

Solution Lecturers should be careful when embedding videos into course pages. If you have many videos, it may be better to link to them rather than to embed them in the course page. Provide a link to the video or create a sub-page that contains the video. The link label should make transparent that the resource is a video.



[Ajax Design Patterns](#)
[Video: What is Usability?](#)

When to use Once a course page contains more than two or three videos it may become rather lengthy.

Why Students told us that they find additional resources such as links useful in Moodle. However, we found that embedding videos with a preview as opposed to linking to them had a negative (but statistically not significant) effect on task performance; students on average took longer to find relevant material if videos were embedded. Some students commented that the videos looked like advertisement and they tended to ignore them.

Guide students to assignment information

Problem	Students cannot find assignment related information. Others may forget about an assignment given earlier in the Semester.
Solution	Assignments that span over several weeks should occur at least twice in a course page: The assignment brief and related material should be provided in the section that refers to the session when the assignment is given. Moreover, a submission button or a link to the brief should occur in the week when the assignment is due, in order to remind students.
When to use	In particular for assignments that cover more than three weeks additional guidance is helpful. In case of weekly assignments, it might be better to keep all information in one place. Courses that have only a single assignment in the end may not require much extra guidance either and a dedicated section in the beginning or the end may be sufficient.
Why	In our studies students reported that Moodle is important for assignment submissions. Over half of the sample said they use Moodle to organise their study. Nevertheless, when asked to find out when the next assignment was due, many students failed. They did not know how to use the course calendar to find out information about assignments.

Create On-line Quizzes

Problem	Students want feedback on what they learned.
Solution	Create short multiple choice quizzes that provide automatic feedback.
When to use	There are no general constraints to this guideline. Multiple choice quizzes (MCQs) have a number of constraints in terms of assessing knowledge and skills. In particular, problem-solving and higher-order reasoning skills are hard to assess through this type of test. Nevertheless, MCQs can provide students with quick feedback on certain knowledge and skills.
Why	While some of our participants had never done a quiz through Moodle, many participants asked for more quizzes to be made available.

Use consistent naming convention

Problem

Students cannot find lecture notes or other material, because the filenames and labels are inconsistent or misleading.

Solution

Keep a consistent naming convention for all the files you make available on your course page. The name should describe the content, but should also carry information about the date/week it was used.

The following format has been proven to be useful. It combines programme title, year, material type and week into a single filename, using underscores to separate the components.

Example of a file name convention

Information	Examples
programme title and year	BScBIS2, BAHRM3, MScMgmt1
course title	QM, WebDev, FinAcc
material type	L(ecture notes), E(xercises), Q(uiz)
week or date (leading zero facilitates automatic sorting)	01, 02, .., 12, 13
Total concatenated filename	HCC2_WebDev_L04.pdf

Feel free to modify this scheme in line with the specific requirements of your course and material. In particular it may be useful to also include a topic.

When to use

There are no exceptions to this guideline.

Why

When students browse the available resources they should be able to determine what the file contains without opening it. Keeping a consistent way of naming things will help them to see quickly what they are dealing with.

Provide material in common file formats

Problem	A student wants to open a resource, but hasn't got the required software.
Solution	Where possible, provide your course material and notes in a file format that is platform independent. You should also consider whether you can provide your material in a way that it can be accessed with open-source software. In many cases, it is preferable to provide material in pdf format (as opposed to MS Powerpoint or MS Word documents).
When to use	There are only few exceptions from this guideline. In some cases, the proprietary software might be part of the course itself (e.g., statistical analysis software) and cannot be easily replaced. Using this particular format may be a learning outcome or at least a practical skill that should not be left out.
Why	Students use a wide variety of devices and platforms. As many students are on a tight budget, they may use open-source platforms (e.g., Linux) and software (e.g., OpenOffice) instead of the established commercial versions. They might also want to use the learning resources with devices such as mobile phones, tablet computers or e-readers. The pdf format is supported by a wide variety of devices and reader software is available for free as well as in open-source versions.

Provide communication facilities

Problem	Students want to contact their lecturer, but need to switch to another application.
Solution	Make it easy for students to get in contact. Put your contact details clearly visible either on top or on the bottom of the page. Where possible and feasible, link to the student email system.
When to use	There are no exceptions from this rule.
Why	When we asked students for recommendations, some wanted to see a closer link between the VLE and other information system, in particular with the email system.

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More information on our projects in the area of Technology Enhanced Learning is available from our website and blog at <http://www.ncirl.ie/nell>