

# Guidance for Online Courses

*(Current as of August 2025)*

## Federal guidance on student interaction in online courses

Guidelines issued by the U.S. Department of Education went into effect on July 1, 2021.

These guidelines require synchronous and asynchronous online courses to include substantive and regular interaction between instructors and students. Courses must be delivered to adequately engage students through teaching, learning, and assessment and facilitate two-way engagement with students.

**Online courses should contain at least one hour of active faculty-student interaction per credit hour per week - ideally spread out during multiple sessions.**

This interaction should include at least two of the following:

- Interactive feedback regarding a student's coursework (examples below)
- Responses to student questions about course content
- Facilitated group discussions about course content or competencies
- Virtual or in-person office hours
- Other instructional techniques that provide similar engagement to an in-class setting
- Direct instruction (synchronous interactive sessions)

## What are some ways in which faculty can meet these requirements?

- Use web conferencing tools, such as [MS Teams \(pdf\)](#) or [Webex in Canvas \(docx\)](#), to facilitate synchronous interactions for the entire class or small groups. Recorded MS Teams sessions can be [uploaded to your Canvas course](#).
- Schedule student office hours using [Canvas Scheduler](#) or the [Office Hours in Webex](#) within Canvas. Scan [Effective Practices for Students \(Office\) Hours \(pdf\)](#).
- Share course updates, deadlines, or relevant resources with the entire class or individual sections via [Canvas course announcements](#). Announcements can also be posted automatically on a preset schedule.
- Send messages to individuals or groups via [Conversations \(Inbox\)](#) in Canvas.
- Provide detailed, personalized feedback on student assignments through [Canvas Speedgrader](#).
- Send [a message via Canvas Gradebook](#) to multiple student recipients simultaneously, and each will receive an individual message if they have not submitted an assignment, or have scored above or below than expected.

- Create low-stakes [quizzes](#) in Canvas for practice and feedback opportunities.

### **Do simple adjustments to traditional teaching methods qualify as “substantive interaction” between the student and instructor?**

- No. Posting a video of pre-recorded lectures or providing lecture materials online does not count as substantive interaction. To be considered as such, the instructor might:
  - Require students to watch the lecture ahead of time and then participate in a live text or video chat
  - Include self-assessment questions for a set of pre-recorded lectures. Use student performance on the questions to guide content covered in an office hour session.
- Simply assigning a grade to an assignment does not constitute interactive feedback. The instructor should also do one or more of the following:
  - Provide each student with comments unique to their submission;
  - Utilize mastery paths in Canvas to help students explore additional materials related to the topic;
  - Summarize common issues students are experiencing using a video, announcement, email, or discussion, and distribute to the whole class.

### **Best Practices for Teaching Online**

- Use the [ISU Course Template \(preview\)](#) in Canvas. It helps create accessible courses with ISU branding and can be adapted to different formats. Includes Home page, Syllabus, Start Here module, example content, and “[How to Customize Your Canvas Course](#)” resource.
- Ensure that your course is designed for accessibility, [ISU Digital Accessibility Toolkit](#).
- In an online course, students may lack the traditional class structure of “going to class.” Establish clear course learning objectives, align content delivery, and set assignment due dates at the start of the semester to provide a clear pathway for the student learning process.
- Use various methods to deliver course content, including mixing short discussions, collaboration exercises, video clips, and hands-on exercises with text or brief video lectures.
- Be mindful of the amount of work you assign to students. Sometimes, efforts to increase engagement inadvertently significantly add to students’ workload.
- Schedule multiple assessments, including several low-stakes assessments throughout the semester.
- Create a feeling of community by acknowledging student contributions, providing positive reinforcement, sharing personal experiences, helping students share ideas with peers, and encouraging networking.

### **What Additional Resources Are Available?**

- The [CELT Teaching Online Toolkit \(pdf\)](#) for more effective strategies and best practices.
- Review more ideas in the [CELT Teaching Online Engagement Strategies \(docx\)](#).
- Teaching online comes with unique opportunities. CELT is here to help you create an engaging, student-centered learning environment; please email us at [celt-help@iastate.edu](mailto:celt-help@iastate.edu).

**For questions or more information,** please contact us at [Academic-Programs@iastate.edu](mailto:Academic-Programs@iastate.edu).