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Organize, Manage, and Present Content and Activities in Your Blackboard Vista Course

This document is intended to familiarize faculty who are new to using an online course management system, such as Blackboard Vista, with some of the best practices and pedagogical concepts that underlie the planning and development and delivery of their course content and activities. The principles and suggestions included in this document are equally applicable for faculty regardless of whether they are teaching a "web-enhanced" classroom-based course, a "hybrid" course (in which some classroom time is replaced with online activities), or a fully-online course.

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Principles of Visual Communication and Design That Enhance Student Learning

Classification, Consistency, Reduction, and **Redundancy** are principles of visual organization and communication that all work together to help your students navigate your course, find the information they need, and "make sense" of the information and activities you make available online.

Classification: Enhancing Encoding and Recall

*The principle of **classification** is supported by research that suggests that a student's ability to retrieve information is dependent upon the organization imposed upon the material during cognitive encoding.* Begin by creating an "organizational framework" for your course, and then developing a *Course Map*. This process will help you to classify and organize all of the elements in your course into a logical, visually recognizable, and consistent hierarchy. Accomplish this through:

- **Chunking**: Splitting documents or presentations into smaller chunks, and splitting explanations or instructions into numbered lists, can help students learn even difficult material faster.

- **Filtering**: This includes providing visual and typographic cues like bolding, italicizing, and using icons to draw attention to key points, which helps students to differentiate between different layers of information, and distinguish between "need to know" and "nice to know" information.

- **Sequencing**: Ordering the chunks or elements in a clearly prioritized and meaningful hierarchy.

Consistency: Enhancing Readability & Comprehension

*Apply the principle of **consistency** to your course development and design will help your students "learn how to learn" from your materials.*

- **Use consistent design rules** in your documents, so students don't need to "relearn" how to read each page. This also can save development time for instructors.

- **Use a consistent sequence of elements in learning modules:** For example, begin with objectives; follow with introduction and readings, followed by practice activities, etc. Students will be better able to anticipate what will be expected in each unit.

- **Label icons and content files consistently:** Be sure that icons on your Home Page or folders have labels that are consistent with each other, and with the related document or item names. This reduces confusion about whether or not the student has actually navigated to the right information.

Reduction: Simplifies Scanning and Course Navigation

Reduction refers to the process of minimizing the number of organizational units, which speeds information access.

- Limit the number of heads and other elements in documents.

- Limit the number of icons on your Home Page and Folders.

Redundancy: Reduces Search Time and Facilitates Course Navigation

- **Make course elements redundant to help minimize searching:** If a document or file may be needed to be accessed by students from more than one location in the course, don't hesitate to provide links to it from more than one place

Develop an "Organizing Framework" and Create a Course Map

There is no one "right way" to organize online course materials and activities--the framework and approach used will vary depending upon the educational goals and instructional preferences of the instructor and (in some cases) the institution. For example, a course might be organized:

- By units or modules based upon subject-specific concepts or theories (i.e., Cognitive, Behavioral, Social, and Developmental Psychology).
- Chronologically by week.
- By chapters in the textbook being used.
- By complexity of the content or ideas being introduced.
- By a combination, i.e., major units, containing sub-units organized by week, chapter, etc.

The framework that you identify for your course structure will become the major sections or units in your *course map*. Though this can be the most time-intensive aspect of developing your course, a course map will help you save time once you actually begin building your course in Blackboard Vista. *In the process of developing your course map, you can address the following planning activities:*

- **Content development:** Since you may not actually have all of the content developed or identified, this process will also help you identify gaps that need to be filled.
- **Link objectives, assessments, activities, and resources:** Each of the objectives identified for each unit should be explicitly linked with related assessments, and practice activities and resources should be linked to the assessments through which students will demonstrate mastery.
- **Timing:** Each unit can be planned so they take roughly the same amount of time to complete.
- **Sequence:** Order elements within each unit (module, chapter, topic, etc.) in a meaningful way.

Course Map Example/Template

Unit 1			
Pre-requisite Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSAs): • 1 • 2 • 3			
Participant Objectives: *By the end of this module, attendees should be able to…*	**Assessments linked to ach objective**	**Teaching & Learning Activities linked to Assessments**	**Readings, Multimedia, Websites, etc. supporting the various activities and assessments**
[Note: Be sure to use behavioral verbs when writing objecitves (i.e., identify, explain, compute, compare, diagnose, demonstrate, describe, etc….)] **Objective 1**	*Here you should identify assessments related to Objective 1, which could include:* • self-tests • gradable quizzes/tests • Group or individual research projects • Multimedia projects • Problem-based learning, or diagnostic exercises • Capstone project • Other types of assessments….	*Here you should list learning and practice activities that students must complete, related to Objective 1, which could include:* • Case scenarios for analysis • Reflective papers/essays • Collaborative/group projects • Asynchronous discussions and journals • Synchronous chats • Role plays or simulations • Games/puzzles • Other types of activities…	*Here you should list readings and other resources related to Objective 1, which could include:* • Textbook chapters • Supplemental readings, lecture notes • PowerPoints • Video demos, films, audio files or podcasts • Resource websites or other online tools • Reference databases • Worked problems for review • Charts/graphs/diagrams/maps • Analogies • Other kinds of readings and resources…
Objective 2	• Assessments for objective 2	• Activities for objective 2	• Readings, etc. for objective 2
Objective 3	• Assessments for objective 3	• Activities for objective 3	• Readings, etc. for objective 3

Create and Organize Course Content on Your PC

- **It is highly recommended that you complete your course map BEFORE you create your course content, or upload any course content into Blackboard Vista.** Once that has been done, the next step is to create a folder and sub-folder structure on your own PC that mirrors the organizing framework you have identified in your course map.

- **As you develop content files (readings, PowerPoints, etc.), place them into the relevant folders.** This folder structure will later be mirrored in the File Manager of your Blackboard Vista course section, which will make it easy for you to find and link to your various content files in your course. If you are able to use Web Folders to streamline the process of uploading your course files to Vista, you will easily be able to create a parallel folder structure in Blackboard Vista.

  For example, if you have decided that you will organize and group the content in your course based on the chapters in your text book, you should begin by creating a folder on your PC labeled with your course title. Inside that folder, create sub-folders labeled with each chapter's number or title (as shown in the screenshot below).
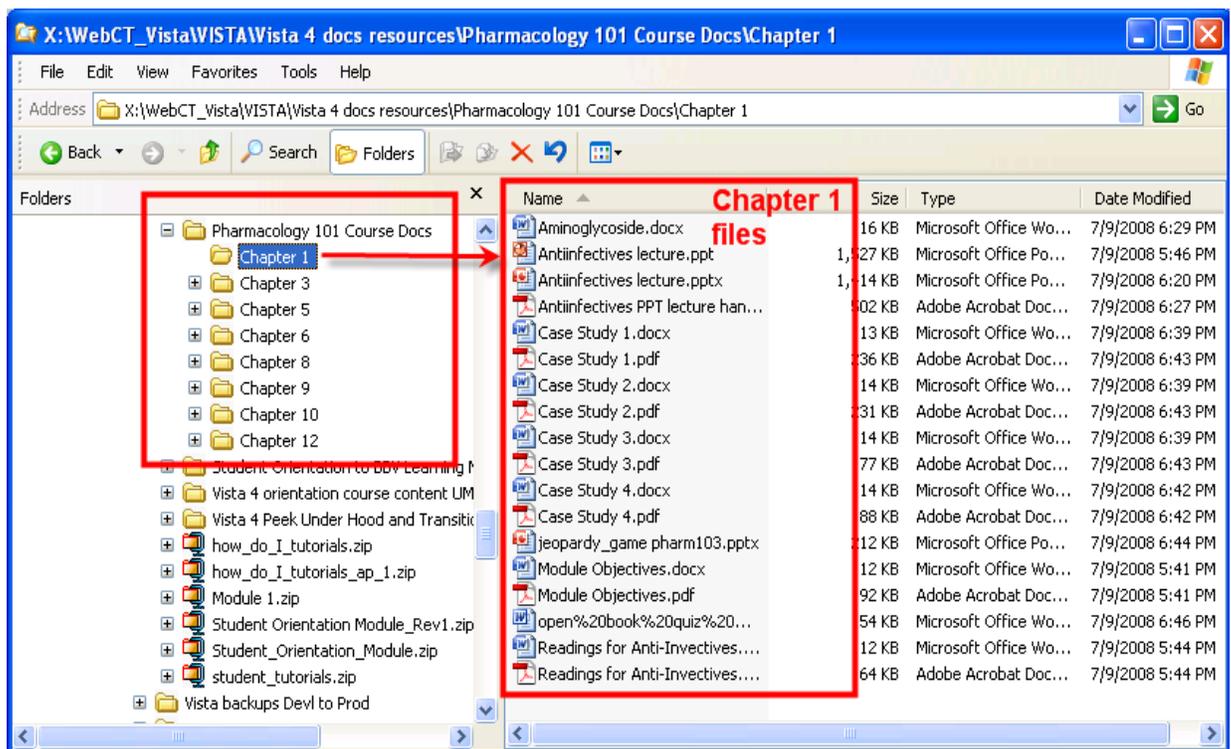
Page Layout Principles That Help Students Learn

A consistent approach to the design and layout of all of your course documents and presentation will not only streamline the development process—it will also enhance your students' ability to read and retain the information in your documents.

Layout Tips

- **Use a consistent design template** for all of your Word documents and PowerPoints, so there is consistency in the layout, fonts, heading styles, etc. from one document to the other.
- **Use headings and lists** to help readers distinguish information and quickly scan a document.
- **Use spacing effectively between headings and sections** of your documents, to help readers distinguish between content areas. Similar or related items should have *less* space between them, while items that need to be differentiated from each other should have *more* space.

Enhancing Readability: Working with Type

- **Use different fonts and styles** to help readers differentiate heading levels: For example a "sans serif" font for headings and "serif" font for text.
- **Use a readable text font:** Research suggests that certain fonts, such as Calibri and Verdana, are highly readable as text online. Also, text font size that's too big can make your text *less* readable.
- **Don't forget about font conversions:** Fonts in pages Word or HTML files display text and headings only in fonts that installed on the *user's* PC, so stick with common fonts like Ariel and Times Roman. PDF files, however, embed all fonts and graphics so they display correctly.

Using Headings & Text Emphasis Effectively

- **Short, concise, meaningful headings help increase retention.** Headings should *only* be used to signal the start of new topics. Headings in the form of questions can be helpful to students.
- **Limit the number of heading levels.** Most documents should not have more than three.
- **Avoid using boxes or rules to emphasize text elements.** These stop the progression of the eye.
- **Avoid emphasis through the use of color, unusual or "fun" fonts, or animated icons,** as these are often more of a distraction to readers, color blind people will not notice a difference.

Graphics & Backgrounds

- **Avoid "decorative graphics":** Use only graphics that serve to illustrate a concept in the text, or add value to the text content. Research suggests that "decorative graphics" *hinder* learning from text.
- **Don't stop the eye!** Don't place graphics on a page in a way that hinders visual scanning from top left to bottom right.
- **Symbols:** If used for emphasis of various text elements, use them sparingly, and consistently.
- **Contrast**: If you use a background color or graphic, be sure you have plenty of contrast between the text and the background color.
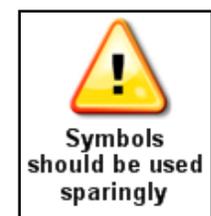
Meaningfully Sequence Your Course Content and Activities

- Using your course map as your guide, you can begin creating folders or learning modules (as in the screenshot below) in Blackboard Vista to group and order your content and activities.

- Each of the "organizing units" that you identified in your course map (i.e., chapters, topics, units) should be ordered in a consistent way.

- Using Blackboard Vista to build *Learning modules* enables instructors to present content and activities in a particular sequence, with a table of contents in a frame on the left side:

Gagne's "Nine Events of Instruction"

Following is an example of a learning module with content and activities sequenced based on Robert Gagne's *"Nine Events of Instruction".*

1. **Gain attention:** A case example or scenario or sample problem relevant to the topic

2. **Describe the goal:** An overview of the module objectives, including relevance to the overall course goals

3. **Stimulate prior knowledge:** Review previously presented relevant rules or concepts and connect them to the material to be addressed in the current module. Can provide students with an opportunity to test their prior knowledge through a self-test, game, puzzle, or other learning activity.

4. **Present the material to be learned:** For example, text, lecture, demonstrations, multimedia, graphics, audio files, animations, etc. Note that "cognitive load" research recommends avoiding overloading auditory/visual channels.

5. **Provide guidance for learning:** Discussions to enable learners to actively reflect on new information in order to check their knowledge, worked problems, practice sessions in a coached setting so students can determine/identify gaps in their knowledge.

6. **Elicit performance:** Learning activity--essay, research project, discussion, homework, etc.

7. **Provide feedback:** Immediate, specific, and constructive feedback is provided to students.

8. **Assess performance:** Assessment activity, such as a research project, essay, demonstration, or test.

9. **Enhance retention and transfer:** Provide opportunities for additional guided practice, or practice/problem-solving opportunities in a more authentic situation.

Storyboarding or Flowcharting Your Course Design

Some people like to make diagrams, storyboards, or flowcharts to help them plan how their course will look. *If you like to visualize your projects in this way, grab some blank sheets of paper and sketch out the way in which you plan to organize your course folders and learning modules in Blackboard Vista.* (If you want to make it fancy in you can use a flowcharting program like Visio or the drawing tools in Word, like the example below), but pencil and paper works just as well!) The process may help you think through and improve the navigability of your course.

In the diagram that follows, a flowchart of major folders and learning modules in a resource course for faculty in the Connecticut Community College system is shown, followed by screenshots of the Home Page and two of the sub-folders from the finished course.
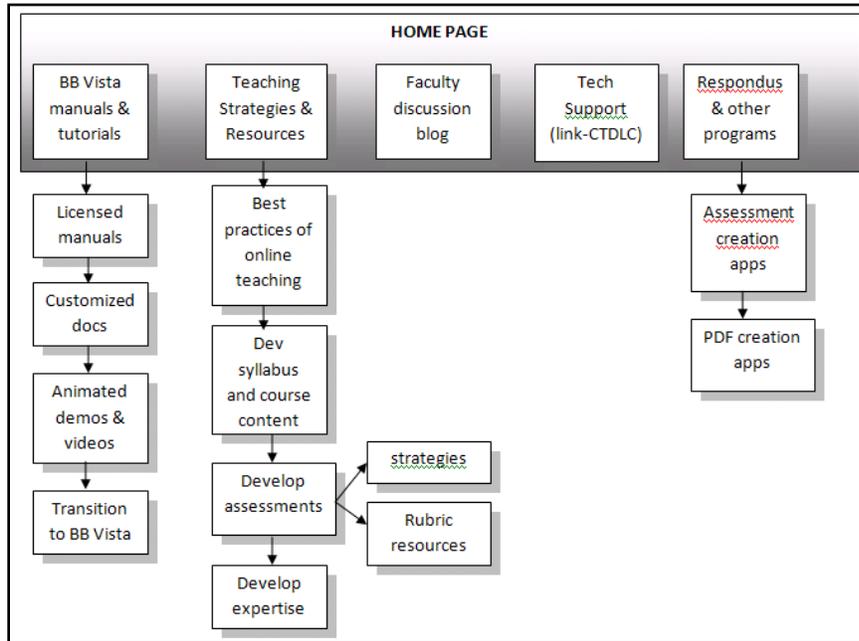
What the final course Home Page, and two modules, looked like: