

Distance Learning Community of Practice

Course Awards Criteria

The awards criteria described in this document are intended to guide Course Awards judges in assessing courses and making recommendations for Distinguished and Meritorious course awards.

There are many models from which course design and development may draw.

1. Courses may vary in format, including print-based, Web-based, or fully online. Thus, a course may comprise a printed study guide, a Website, a CD-ROM, or various combinations of these.
2. Courses may vary in layout. As with print layout, online and hybrid courses may use specific techniques that facilitate student learning. For example, some online courses use links or hypertext to help students make non-linear connections.
3. Courses may vary in support tools. Generally, courses submitted for awards in this category are asynchronous, but there may be exceptions that employ synchronous tools.
4. Courses may vary philosophically and pedagogically. Educational learning goals may require different degrees of interactivity and other strategies.

These are just a few examples of the differences we have seen in submissions over the past few years, but the examples are not meant to include all differences in course design and development that you may see. Our point is that all distance courses must be judged according to how well they instruct through the written word, though we acknowledge that audio and video features are being used more and more in online courses.

The descriptions that follow are meant to be suggestive, not restrictive; they certainly should not supplant and cannot overrule a judge's professional evaluation.

I. COURSE PREFACE (10 points)

Introductory Material can be found in a variety of places. For example, in a printed course, the material will most likely be found in the front of a study guide or in a separate packet of information. For an online course, this material may be linked from the home page or it may be hyperlinked within the content. In general, this material is explanatory and sometimes motivational. The following are some items you may consider for judging the introductory material. Please note that all courses will not present all the listed items and should not be penalized for exclusion of one or more items. However, inclusion of the items may warrant additional points.

- A philosophic statement of the reason for or value of studying the subject of the course, the sort of thing one would expect a teacher to say in the first class of the semester
- A convincing argument that the content is important to learn and that the approach will be effective (may appear in a straightforward statement or in the form of a real world problem or application of the materials)
- Overall goals or big ideas the student will understand by the end of the course

- A statement of prerequisites, including specific courses and skills required
- Clarification of the special procedures involved in independent study/distance learning for students who may never have attempted such an approach before
- Useful study skills, ways of avoiding procrastination, or an indication of the best order for progressing through the lessons. (These recommendations should be positive and encouraging, so as to encourage the student to launch into the course. Please note that study skills are often integrated throughout the course.)
- Precise and intelligible performance standards (For high school, the course materials may discuss specific state and/or national standards and how the design of the course supports the standards. For university level courses, materials may include departmental goals and philosophies.)
- Clear and consistent grading criteria (Students should not infer that grading depends on the whim of the instructor or that the instructor has no systematic approach to grading. A system that is too complex might be faulted. In an assignment in which numerical calculations are not appropriate—an essay—terms of the evaluation should be provided in a rubric or some other form that clarifies how a grade will be awarded. For an online course, clear and consistent criteria should specify how students will be evaluated for participating in the course through different tools (such as bulletin boards, chat rooms, etc.)
- Adequate support to help students achieve course performance standards (For example, a course that awards a majority of the grade points for mastery of content but focuses discussion on personal interpretation should be downgraded.)
- When appropriate, clear explanations on how to use technology components (This includes instructions that focus on technology requirements such as downloading instructions, how to post messages, how to receive messages) and Netiquette guidelines for students who have little experience with using technology in learning environments.)

II. LESSONS (25 points)

Lesson Introductory Material (5 points)

Simplicity, focus, clarity, avoidance of jargon—all of these are characteristics of a quality distance learning course. Read the lesson introductory materials from the point of view of students. Will students read and use the information, or is it so long, general, and scattered that they are more likely to skip over it? Does the introduction focus attention on the material and give students a clear sense of where the lesson is going, or does it merely list the topics and/or activities that the lesson includes? Is the lesson itself, including the written assignments and the evaluation, aligned with the objectives, big ideas/questions posed in the introductory material?

Look for the following in the lesson introductory material:

- clearly stated performance objectives/big ideas or questions that are covered in the lesson, depending on the theoretical approach

- introduction of terms
- motivational text or problems that help students see a need for learning the material. These can be in the form of complex or ill-structured problems. They can also be scenarios, cases, or real-world applications.

Instruction (10 points)

A variety of approaches and teaching styles can be applied effectively in distance learning instruction. In many courses that have won awards, the instructional piece is a substantive presentation that builds on, supplements, and highlights the textbook. Sometimes the instruction supplants the textbook or relegates it to a secondary position. In other award-winning courses, the instructional piece works more informally to mediate between the student and the course material, to help students understand their reading rather than to reiterate it or to provide additional content.

Some effective instruction often provides the following:

- interactions between the student and the materials (active environments versus passive reading)
- opportunities for reflection, including what the student has learned or how the student has changed because of the course
- authentic problem situations (examples)
- small chunks of information with formative assessments throughout the lesson
- multiple representations of content (verbal explanations, illustrations, graphic organizers)
- opportunities for meaningful communication and constructive dialogue between the student and the teacher
- opportunities for meaningful communication and constructive dialogue among students
- effective outlines or study tips that require the student to be engaged and actively involved in the learning
- aids that help students organize lesson content and make connections to their own life experiences
- personal anecdotes and interpretations, humor, commiseration with students on the difficulty of the material, honesty about content that students will have problems mastering
- multimedia that are appropriate and useful (Gratuitous media that demand a lot of students' time will often be ignored and should not receive extra points. Media should be well integrated with the discussion and should support goals in a way that prepares students for assessments.)
- multiple and ongoing self-help exercises that assist students in monitoring their progress in the course (Self-help exercises should help students identify strengths and weaknesses and determine a course of action to address weaknesses. Certainly, factual materials set up in short-answer questions with answers available but not too

available are an obvious good choice. Study questions regarding readings in a lesson are also helpful.)

- activities that encourage students to work with others, such as a questionnaire to try out with family and friends, or exercises for which students can poll people in their families or local communities

Submitted Assignments and Assessment (10 points)

The assigned questions and activities should be appropriate to the subject matter and should promote not only mastery but also thoughtful consideration of the content and skills the course is designed to teach.

Effective assignments and assessments promote active, deep learning. Many award-winning courses accomplish the following:

- promote rapport between instructor and student that physical presence usually generates in a classroom (An answer sheet with nothing but a series of blanks filled in promotes little rapport.)
- motivate in a way that will make students eager to hear comments
- provide opportunities to elaborate on connections students have made
- give students clear signals and assistance in preparing for examinations, including providing information to help them organize their study for exams
- include some computer-graded assignments but require higher order thinking skills on most assignments and assessments
- provide opportunities for individualized feedback from the teacher
- require students to connect material to their own life experiences in a way that invites individual feedback from the teacher
- provide a variety of exercises to help students avoid the sense of being constantly drilled or falling into a black hole of routine
- require students to consolidate, analyze, and interpret subject matter, as well as ask them to repeat and report it
- include large projects, such as term papers, surveys, continuing lab experiments, annotated bibliographies, etc., especially in college courses
- allow students opportunities to make personal responses to material as a means for the instructor to engage the student, (However, a course that bases a substantial part of a student's grade on purely personal reactions can be faulted.)

III. COMMUNICATIONS (15 points)

Writing Style (5 points)

Consider all of the elements of good writing: clarity, conciseness, elegance, order, eloquence. Remember that more prose is not necessarily better prose.

Also, look for the course to project a “voice,” or a personality with which students can interact.

Writing Mechanics and Editorial Consistency (5 points)

The course should reflect the highest professional standards, including careful attention to fundamentals such as grammar, spelling, and mechanics.

Page Organization, Layout, Cover, Additional Graphics (5 points)

Effective page organization and layout can improve students’ ability to comprehend and master course material and can present the material in ways that promote student comfort and progress. If the lesson follows a specific logical or sequential order, are the elements laid out on the page to suggest that order? Simple matters like spacing can make all the difference. Some open spaces to provide the illusion of speed as students work through a lesson can motivate students to keep going. Not absolutely necessary, but sometimes effective, are the use of varied fonts for different parts of a lesson, bullets and rules, inset quotes, summaries, glossaries, and the like, to break up otherwise solid chunks of text. To avoid prejudicing the criteria in favor of programs that have copious resources for development and production, one can apply the standard—has a program made the most of the resources it has available? A course should reflect some production values; it should not look like an abandoned document.

Additionally, for online and Web-based courses, consider whether links are well positioned, allowing the student to go beyond the immediate information at an appropriate time.

IV. GENERAL QUALITY (5 points)

A course should get extra points in this category when all its elements fit together neatly, when no single element is weak or lacking, and when each lesson forms a part of a coherent progress (rather than one of a series of disconnected units). At the end, a student should have an idea of how the various pieces fit together into the whole. In this holistic category, a course can also receive points for filling a special need, for successfully addressing a specialized audience or topic, or for being particularly innovative.

**Course Rating Form
For Distance Learning Course Awards**

Course Title _____

Institution _____

Level (check one): College _____ K-12 _____ Non-credit _____

Please see the Course Awards Criteria for additional guidance on completing this form.

I. Course Preface (10 points)

Total points for Course Preface (possible 10) _____

II. Lessons (25 points)

Lesson Introductory Material

Subtotal points (possible 5) _____

Instruction

Subtotal points (possible 10) _____

Submitted Assignments and Assessment

Subtotal points (possible 10) _____

Total points for Lessons (possible 25) _____

III. Communication (15 points)

Writing Style

Subtotal points (possible 5) _____

Writing Mechanics and Editorial Consistency

Subtotal points (possible 5) _____

Page Organization, Layout, Cover, Additional Graphics

Subtotal points (possible 5) _____

Total points for Communication (possible 15) _____

IV. General Quality (5 points)

Total points for General Quality (possible 5) _____

GRAND TOTAL (possible 55) _____