



Writing Distance Materials

From Module Objectives to
Guiding Reading

These guidelines, prepared for workshop sessions, are intended to assist academic staff beginning and continuing development of **online, distance and mixed mode** units at the Australian Catholic University.

Learning and Teaching Centre
Australian Catholic University
Last updated November 2008

© 2008
Australian Catholic University

Learning and Teaching Centre

Acknowledgement: These workshop materials were developed in 2008 by H. Forsyth with contribution from M.J. Mahony.

The original material prepared for this guide is copyright. Apart from fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Enquiries should be addressed to the Director, Learning and Teaching Centre, Australian Catholic University, PO Box 456 Virginia QLD 4014.



About this guide

This guide provides guidelines on preparing distance education materials which are primarily print-based. Pre-workshop activities are provided on the next page. Please complete them before the workshop. We've provided you with reference to some optional reading as well.

After that, the guide provides information, examples and activities to be used during the workshop.

The following icons are used in this guide to signal information, activities for you to complete and examples.



Information



Activities



Example



Pre-workshop activities

Essential Reading:

- (a) Lockwood, Fred (2005). Estimating student workload, readability and implications for student learning and progression. ODLAA
<http://www.odlaa.org/events/2005conf/nonref/odlaa2005Lockwood.pdf>

Optional Readings:

- (b) Namin Shin (2003). Transactional Presence as a Critical Predictor of Success in Distance Learning. *Distance Education* Vol 24 (1), 69-86. Available in the library's eJournals.
Limit your reading to pages 69-71 and 81-83 unless you have time to read the whole of this (fairly lengthy) research article. These sections focus on the concept of transactional presence and the presence of teachers in distance education.
- (c) Rowntree, Derek (1994). *Preparing materials for open, distance and flexible learning: an action guide for teachers and trainers*. Kogan Page, London. Have a look through the section 'Sample pages from open learning materials'.

Write down: Consider your students' academic and cultural backgrounds. Which readings in your unit(s) do you think they would find (write down a few):

Easy?

Moderate?

Hard?

Why do you think they find the reading hard? How do you currently help them?

Read the next two sections on the purpose of a DE study guide and what makes a good study guide.

Bring: Please bring a reading that your students are required to do – you will need this for some of the exercises.

Workshop Session



Introductions

As we know, learning from one another is important – please use this time to share your experiences of distance education. 2006 CEQuery comments from students indicate that DE Education students complain most about their materials arriving late, their assignment returns not arriving before the next assignment is due, and the feedback not being helpful in allowing them to improve their work. **Discuss:** Your comments on these criticisms?



Preparing an overview

At the start of any study guide, a unit overview should signpost for students all the important features of the unit. Normally this will include:

- brief description of the unit
- unit learning outcomes
- prerequisites or assumed knowledge (and how to catch up if they lack this knowledge)
- assessment details
- list of topics (we'll call them modules in this guide)
- key dates (often combined with the above as a timetable)
- textbook
- core resources (e.g. key journals in the field).



Discuss: we normally need to write these outlines to have units approved and when we do so, they are written for our colleagues in the institution. What sort of language could we use when preparing overviews for students that could enhance a sense of 'presence' and your 'student-centredness'?

In a study guide, the overview can include a range of other things as well, for example:

- author bio
- bio of an academic who reviewed the unit
- bio of teachers

- teacher contact details and when they are available (and where, if online)
- how to use the study guide
- approaches to study
- what to do if students need help.



Think-share: what is different about an overview that contains the second list, as well as the first?



Preparing module objectives

When writing a DE study guide, once we've got our unit learning outcomes and our module headings, we then need to prepare the modules. In a study guide, each module would normally have:

- introduction
- learning outcomes
- how this topic helps you achieve unit objectives
- key concepts
- essential readings/optional readings/useful websites/other resources
- learning activities
- self-assessment activities.



Quick question: why would we have learning objectives at module, as well as unit, level?

It is important that the learning outcomes for each of the modules align with the learning outcomes of the unit. It's worth noting, though, that many people find as they write module learning outcomes they are clarifying their thinking about the unit overall, with the result that the unit outcomes may change somewhat as you work through module outcomes. This iterative process is healthy and is likely to result in a better study guide – go with it!



Think-pair: write down learning outcomes for one of your modules. Have a look at your unit objectives. Describe to your pair how these outcomes contribute to your unit outcomes.



Guiding students through resources

Study guide authors often make one of two opposite mistakes: thinking that they are writing a textbook, authors often write too much, making the study guide an extremely daunting task for both author and student. On the other hand, some will use the study guide as it is intended – to point to the range of resources available – but do so without any indication of how the resources are intended to help the student achieve the module’s learning goals.

Students can use and learn from resources – normally, but not exclusively, readings – in all sorts of different ways. This can be good, but it can also mean that students work hard only to miss the point entirely – which can quite seriously damage their learning experience.

To (largely) avoid either of these problems we can use strategies that help students to target their reading and use of learning resources to scaffold their learning towards the module’s objectives.

There are a lot of ways of doing this, such as:

- Precede the reading list with a paragraph or two of key concepts or questions
- Annotate the reading list, adding a sentence or two of your own observations from each of the readings you prescribe
- Give specific page numbers for students to focus their reading on
- Provide self-assessment questions around each reading that guide students’ thinking towards the point of the module – or a quiz could do the same thing
- Set small blocks of reading (up to 30 minutes) and attach each to learning activities.



Activity: The way you choose to guide students through their work will also depend on who your students are - their prior knowledge, their reading levels and cultural considerations. Spend 10 minutes thinking about your students and what might be best for them (for example, if your students tend to be average readers, you might want to assign them shorter readings, broken up by activities that will help them learn better).

My students’ reading levels:

My students’ cultural and academic backgrounds:

Times I have seen my students respond well to material are:

Some good approaches to guiding my students through resources might be:



Example *This is a simple example of guided reading based on our preparation for this workshop.*

Providing the right amount of reading for your students

This week we will be considering how to allocate an appropriate amount of reading for distance students. The amount of reading that is 'appropriate' will be different for different types of students, so it will be important for you to engage with the reading while thinking about the types of students likely to take your unit. After studying this, you should be able to estimate how much time your students have for studying and their approximate reading level to plan for an appropriate amount of reading to allocate them each week.

This activity will be based around one of this week's essential readings:

Lockwood, Fred (2005). Estimating student workload, readability and implications for student learning and progression. ODLAA

<http://www.odlaa.org/events/2005conf/nonref/odlaa2005Lockwood.pdf>

Read the background and the section titled 'How much time do students have to study' on pages 1 and 2 of the article.

Write down: what are three things that might impact the amount of time students have to study?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Read pages 2-4 about 'How could we estimate study time'

Try it out: choose a reading you might use in your unit. Using Lockwood's rule of thumb, estimate the word length and difficulty to calculate the study time needed to comprehend the reading.

Read pages 5-6 on over-length of materials and the implications of excessive workload.

Reflect: what might be the impact on *your* students of too-high workload, given their academic and cultural backgrounds?

Plan: how will you apply this reading in your preparation of DE materials?



Setting regular learning activities

Many textbooks provide learning activities themselves. These can be very helpful, but you should not rely on them except if you also point to them from your study guide and follow up on students' weekly activities. This is because of the 'transactional presence' issue that you may have read about if you had time to get to the Shin (2003) article.

Shin's research showed that students' behaviour was impacted by their sense that their teacher was 'present', despite distance. This is why a good study guide will outline weekly learning activities. These will be most effective when a teacher has a mechanism for following up with students and supporting their learning in the process. Some ways of doing this include:

- Setting (and assessing) weekly online discussion activities (this may not be possible if your students have limited internet access)
- Setting (and perhaps assessing and providing feedback on) regular (even weekly) quizzes, based on readings and learning activities and aligning to module learning outcomes
- Setting self-assessment questions, quizzes or tasks that allow students to monitor their own progress, with opportunities for help and support if they run into trouble. When relying on self-assessment, it is important that you provide enough tools for students to accurately self-assess, including indicators for when they should come to you for help.



Example

This is a simple example of scheduling distance education.

Key dates for Semester 2

Week	Dates	Topic	Activity
1	28/7-3 Aug	Introduction	Assumed knowledge quiz
2	4 -10 Aug	Writing study guides	Practical task
3	11-17 Aug	Telepresence	Quiz due 25/7
4	18-24 Aug	DE Workload	Calculate workload
5	25-31 Aug	Learning activities	Design activity
6	1-7 Sept	Using technologies	Choose tools to try
*	8-14 Sept	Mid-semester break	

7	15-21 Sept	Online facilitation	Design discussion activity
8	22-28 Sept	Assignment week	Essay due 21 Sept
9	29 Sept-5 Oct	Monitoring progress	Design activity
10	6-12 Oct	Assessing by distance	Design rubric
11	13-19 Oct	Giving feedback	Write feedback samples
12	20-26 Oct	Review & integration	Reflect on semester learning



Designing learning activities

The workshop 'Scaffolding Learning Activities' provided a range of tools and activities on this topic – if you would like an electronic copy of the workshop guide, it is available in the Blackboard training module.

Tips for effective learning activities in distance education

- **Ensure the objective is clear** – students are far more likely to complete a task if they understand why and if motivation is built into the way you set it (Salmon, 2002).
- **Do not assign too much reading** – distance students are especially vulnerable to the problems of workload discussed by Lockwood in the essential reading. Remember that students will normally think *they* are at fault ('I am too stupid to study at university') if we overload them. This can detrimentally impact their learning for years (Lockwood, 2005).
- **Break up text and activities into short segments** – shorter amounts of text are easier to read and knowledge will be better absorbed when combined with activities: both will work better if they are broken up and scheduled at a manageable pace for students (Salmon, 2002).
- **Make the activity worthwhile** – set short-term, satisfying goals that will accumulate to meet overall module and unit aims (Salmon, 2002).

Every learning activity should include:

- The purpose/goals of the activity and how the students will know they have succeeded
- What students need to do and how they need to do it
- How long it should or could take, realistically, and their deadline for completion
- What to do if they need help (and how they will know they need it).

(Adapted from Salmon, 2002, p. 89)



Example 1

This is a simple example of a collaborative learning activity

Teleconference week 3

Purpose: to share experience about teaching by distance

Task: Call in to 4568 9682 at 7pm on Wednesday 22 August. The class will last for 2 hours

What to do if you need help: send me a text message on 0496 834 700



Example 2

This is a simple example of an individual learning activity

Calculate workload

Purpose: to identify the study time required to complete the Shin (2003) reading and make a recommendation to your teacher about how to use this reading in distance education.

Namin Shin (2003). Transactional Presence as a Critical Predictor of Success in Distance Learning. *Distance Education* Vol 24 (1), 69-86

Task: Use Lockwood's rule of thumb to calculate the study time needed to complete this reading.

Answer these two questions: Do you think that this time is worth the learning students are likely to achieve? What might you do to scaffold this learning for your students?

Send: Email me (email@address.edu.au) the answer to your questions. If you do not have access to email this week, send me a postcard or note through the mail: Address, University, NSW 9845

Duration: The task might take you between 45 minutes to 2 hours. Please send me your response by Friday of Week 3.

What to do if you need help: I will check the online discussion board on Tuesday and Thursday. I will be available in Skype between 3pm and 5pm on Wednesday. I will be available by phone in the office Monday and Friday 1pm – 5pm.



Technologies you could use

When you are designing your learning activities, you should consider which technologies your students have access to. Wherever you can have students collaborating or having some contact with you, their learning experience is likely to be enhanced. You could try:

- **Asynchronous web technologies**, such as the Blackboard LMS, websites, YouTube videos, blogs, wikis, del.icio.us, My Space, Facebook - or even just email¹
- **Synchronous web technologies**, such as live chat or videoconferences (Messenger, Skype or the chat tool in Blackboard)
- **Teleconferences**, if your students have limited internet access
- **Mail** – the traditional ‘correspondence’ mode – can also be used creatively (eg. Ask students to send weekly postcards answering a short question related to the week’s topic)



Next steps

Today we have covered:

- the purpose of a DE study guide
- what makes a good study guide
- preparing an overview
- aligning module outcomes with unit outcomes
- guiding students through resources
- setting regular learning activities
- designing learning activities.

You will have:

- given thought to the reading levels of your students
- considered how to establish a sense of ‘presence’ in your overview

¹ At ACU you can use these technologies, though they are not supported (email is, of course). This means that you should not use these tools for assessment of participation. If you are unsure if you are using tools within ACU policy, contact the Learning and Teaching Centre.

- worked through one module's objectives and its alignment with your unit objectives
- considered your students' backgrounds and thought about the best type of learning activity to suit them
- discussed why regular learning activities are important and what every learning activity should include.

Quickly jot down: what do you plan to do next?



Don't forget!

Don't forget that your work hasn't finished once your materials are despatched to students: you still need to make time for the feedback on assignments students need. This is most easily provided through the use of a rubric which indicates against each of the criteria for the assignment a level of achievement which relates to a particular grade. It saves a lot of time, although an encouraging phrase or more also establishes your 'presence' with students.



References used in this guide

Lockwood, F. (2005). Estimating student workload, readability and implications for student learning and progression. ODLAA. Retrieved November 20, 2008, from 'Breaking down Boundaries', 17th Biennial Conference of the Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia, 9-11 November 2005, Adelaide

<http://www.odlaa.org/events/2005conf/nonref/odlaa2005Lockwood.pdf>

Rowntree, D. (1994). *Preparing materials for open, distance and flexible learning: an action guide for teachers and trainers*. London: Kogan Page.

Salmon, G. (2002). *Etivities: the key to active online learning*. London: Kogan Page.

Shin, N. (2003). Transactional presence as a critical predictor of success in distance learning. *Distance Education*, 24 (1), 69-86.