

Best Practices for Building Student-Friendly Courses

By Dana Fine, Senior Instructional Designer and Implementation Consultant, SyberWorks, Inc.

At SyberWorks, we've developed quite a few courses, and seen many more that others have done. And though course development "best practices" should be common sense, they are often violated. So we wanted to offer our own best guidelines for building student-friendly courses:

1. A course should consist of at most five lessons, each 30 minutes long or less. Most online courses should never run longer than 2 hours, and if one does, it should be divided into more than one course (each containing 20-30 minute lessons).
2. We recommend that you allow at least three tries to pass a course test. In addition, build a "question bank" containing at least 5 times the number of questions that you will need in the final test. For example, a 20-question test could be assembled from a question bank of 100 questions. This offers protection against question repetition within tests and against cheating. Available question types include true/false, single-correct, multiple-correct, item-match (up to 6 elements max), and fill-in-the-blank.
3. In-lesson checks are used to provide student interaction with the material and for the student to check his understanding of it. In-lesson checks are not graded. We suggest including at least one true/false question for each in-lesson check because they are easier to answer and increase student confidence.
4. "Bookmarking" of online lessons is often overlooked, but is *key* to allowing students to learn at their own pace. They should be able to start a Web-based course, set a bookmark on a lesson page, log off, log back in later, and quickly return to their bookmarked lesson. (At SyberWorks, our motto is "*Learn Anytime, Anyplace*"...and the humble online bookmark fosters this!)
5. Use content elements as effectively as possible. Each lesson should contain audio, graphics, at least one interactive user activity, and some kind of in-lesson check. Audio should NOT simply repeat words from the screen; and on-screen text, graphics, and Flash movies should *further explain* what is being described in the audio. All text and graphics should enhance the audio and explain lesson concepts, and not simply repeat them. Also, graphics can greatly enhance a course, but should always further subject understanding. (Never add graphics just for "visual interest.")
6. We strongly suggest that you use Closed Captioning, so that students who cannot hear can read the course content.
7. We have found that if a video is included, it should be less than 5 minutes long. Not only is the delay in loading videos (even streaming videos) irritating for students without good internet connections (or attention spans), but videos are very easy to click away from if students don't find them compelling. So it's a good idea to keep videos as short, pertinent, and interesting as possible.

8. Flash demonstrations and activities can grab and hold student interest, but only if they are relevant to the course. SyberWorks has built an entire library of Flash interactions that clarify course concepts in interesting ways. For example, a course on “Hazard Hunts” may include a video stroll down a hallway, where students must circle every hazard that they see within 30 seconds. And at the end of 30 seconds, an “answer” graphic reveals all of the hazards. We always create such interactions to suit the course, and each interaction should be simple to understand and perform. These interactions are normally short (2-3 minutes), but can be longer. Another very useful type of interaction is a Flash activity where students put the steps to complete a task in their proper order. This is especially relevant for courses that cover compliance or SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures). This usually can be done in 2 minutes, but if a student wants to think for a longer time, it’s an interaction that carries no time penalty.
9. Offer as many course-related resources and links as possible, so that interested students can pursue additional information. And any supporting procedures, checklists, SOPs, and other job aids should be linked to the course pages, to make it easy for students to download them.
10. There should be an on-screen course description, course lesson menu, and lesson topic lists. As with a book, these indexes help the user understand what they are going to learn and to navigate through it. In addition, we recommend that a course Introduction page spell out what the student will learn, and that a Conclusion page reinforce it. The Conclusion is also a good place to collect all the links and other resources that were presented in the course.

About the Author

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About SyberWorks

SyberWorks, Inc. (www.syberworks.com) is a leader in the custom e-Learning Solutions and Learning Management System industries for Fortune 1000 corporations, higher education, and other organizations. Located in Waltham, Massachusetts, the company serves the multi-billion-dollar e-Learning market. Since 1995, SyberWorks has developed and delivered unique and economical solutions to create, manage, measure, and improve e-Learning programs at companies and organizations in the United States, Canada, Europe, and other countries.