10 Instructional Design Tips for e-Learning Development

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In many ways, good instructional design is just common sense, combined with decades of observation about what works and what doesn't when teaching adult learners. Here are 10 basic tips to sharpen your own training programs:

1. Know your audience. Understand what they bring to the table, and what they need from each course. Determine your audience's education level, entry knowledge, and their goals in taking the course. This will help you identify their *performance gap*—between what they already know and can do, and what they need to know and be able to do.

2. Use learning (or performance) objectives to nail down what your learners are supposed to know and be able to do, once they have completed the course. Your learning objectives should be SMART (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**elevant (or Results-oriented), and **T**argeted to the audience. These learning objectives will help to guide your development of course content and provide a yardstick for measuring how well learners have mastered it.

3. Using these learning objectives as a guide, keep your course content pertinent to the task at hand. Keep the information in your course focused and relevant, with a minimum of extraneous detail. And "chunk" course content into small, digestible bites of information.

4. Use the variety of media available in e-Learning to serve different learning styles, such as auditory and visual learners. Use narration, graphics, and text, but not necessarily all at the same time.

5. Spell out the "WIFM" (What's in it for me?) for your learners. Adult learners want to know *why* they are learning something, and *how* it will help them on the job. This might easily be the most important tip!

6. Adult learners generally prefer to have some—or even a lot—of control over the learning process. They want to take responsibility for their own learning. This favors using self-paced instruction, providing tools for assessing one's own progress, and implementing the freedom to choose among different learning activities (where possible).

7. Provide a "gate" that learners must pass before they advance to more difficult content. This may be a test, a demonstration, or a role-play activity.

8. Related to the above, if your students possess different backgrounds and levels of experience, consider using a pre-test to "sort them out," and even allowing the more advanced learners to "opt out" of content that is too elementary for them.

9. Once you have constructed a course, have actual learners, not just other developers, test it. They can provide real-world insight and feedback that you can use to improve the course.

10. Consider developing "job aids," "cheat sheets," "quick reference cards," or other reminders based on your course content, which learners can easily access while they are on the job.

In short, understanding your learners' needs, and applying common sense to meet them, will dramatically improve your training programs.

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