

Structuring and presenting course content on Canvas

How you structure and present a course on the Virtual Learning Environment can make a substantial difference to how easy it is for students to find and engage with course materials. A well-structured course will clearly guide students through their learning journey so that they are clear what they should be doing at any point in the course and can easily access the necessary materials or tools to do so. This guide will help you think through how you can make the most of Canvas to support student engagement in your course.

Structuring your Canvas course using HW-approved templates

The structure of your course should help students to navigate their learning so that they are clear on what they should be doing at each point in their studies.

The **University-approved course templates** provide a consistent experience for students and staff, ensuring that course content is clearly organised and structured. You can choose from:

- [Week-based course template](#), or
- [Topic-based course template](#).
- If you are in SoSS please use the [SoSS module-based template](#).

If you have not used Canvas Commons before find out [how to use Canvas Commons](#).

When you have chosen whether to use the week-based or topic-based template, make sure that modules and headings reflect that e.g. Week 1: Introduction to astrophysics. If there is course-specific induction information that you need to tell students? Consider having a *Week 0* or *Induction* module.

General support

Course team

A list of the course team helps students get to know staff. This could include contact details, office hours and areas of expertise, letting students know that the course team is there to support and help them.

Key dates

The Canvas calendar stores the dates for any scheduled assignments, events or to-do items. The calendar can be set up as a feed to Google and Outlook calendars.

You may also wish to provide a downloadable list of key dates for ease of reference.

Assessment & feedback

Coursework, exam information and feedback should be easy to find. In addition to use the Canvas assignment tools to set up and mark any online assignments, it is recommended that you have a page which provides an overview of the assessments, how they contribute to the course outcome, and the deadlines for each assessment. This will help students to understand how and when they will be assessed. It is also essential to explain how and when they will be provided with feedback and how they can use the feedback to support their learning.

Presenting content on Canvas

Present content so it is clear, appealing and easy to engage with. Do not just provide pages of links, lists or collections of documents – explain why students should engage with such information and what they should do with it.

Follow a recognisable structure for each item, so that students know what to expect. Items do not have to be identical, but it is a good idea to have recurring activities in the same order.

Students may skim online content rather than working through it in a linear fashion as they would with a textbook. **Use heading and subheadings to draw their attention** to key information. Use paragraphs, bullet points, tables, media etc. to make it easy to find and engage with content. These can be edited using the Rich Content Editor on Canvas (see [‘How do I edit a page’](#) for further guidance).

Consider which medium is the most effective to convey the information – in some instances an image, diagram, video or audio will be more effective than text. For example, a short video or narrated PowerPoint can help students understand topics and enables them to hear your enthusiasm for the topic, that may not be apparent in written pages. Remember sometimes text plus some media will be most effective. It is straightforward to embed media using the Rich Content Editor on Canvas (see [‘How do I upload and embed media in the rich content editor’](#)).

Within each week / topic

Use a new ‘module’ for each week / topic. You can then add pages or other activities to that module to provide the content for the week / topic. Things to think about include:

Week/Topic Theme Introduction

Introduce the weekly/topic theme. Be informative and tell them why this is important and exciting. Relate it to the Learning Outcomes and how it fits with the other topics on the course, and the programme.

Explain the student activities which are associated with the week/topic. Highlight asynchronous directed and self-study activities, live sessions, and pre- and post-session activities. This helps with time management which can be challenging for students.

Activities

You can use the Canvas tools to embed activities in each module e.g. adding quizzes, discussions, assignments as an integral part of the module. This gives students a smooth journey through their learning as they can select 'next' or 'previous' on each page to navigate the content. You can use 'pages' to present content that is not linked to activities.

It is good practice to present the activities and content in the same order as explained in the introduction so that they follow the chronological flow of the week/topic. Each activity should have a description, links to resources, and instructions on what is expected. It can also be useful to give an indication of the time that students are expected to spend on the activity, including any thinking or reflection time as well as the time needed to read / listen / watch / participate in the activity.

Resources

You can embed resources e.g. PowerPoint, PDF etc. so that they will be automatically visible to students on Canvas rather than them having to download these. Use this approach if these are your own materials. If you are using resources which are copyright, check whether you are permitted to use them in this way before embedding. It may be that you need to signpost students to these materials instead. The [Liaison Librarians in Information Services](#) can provide advice and support on finding appropriate resources for your course.

References and further resources

Curate any references and further resources for each week/topic, clearly indicating whether they are essential or optional study items.

Accessibility

It is essential to design your course site to be as accessible as possible. Here are a few key points which will help accessibility:

- Have a clear structure and navigation.
- Label hyperlinks with a meaningful phrase which describes what the link will take people to, rather than a generic description such 'here' or 'website'.
- Provide descriptions of any images, diagrams or table. (These can be easily added in Canvas).

- Do not use colour alone to convey meaning.
- Provide a transcript and captions for AV materials.

Canvas has an [accessibility checker](#) built into the rich content editor so use this before you publish each item. You may also find it useful to refer to the [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\) 2 Checklist](#) for other key points to consider.

Signposting to relevant resources/services

Where appropriate signpost or link to resources and services provided by the University, e.g. library, skills hub, wellbeing, careers, which will support their studies and their wellbeing. Making these an integral part of your course site will help students to engage with them at relevant times and help raise awareness of this support.

Further support

Use [Canvas 24/7 support](#) for immediate help with Canvas features and tools from a dedicated Canvas online support team via live webchat, phone or email. Simply choose 'Help' from the global navigation menu in Canvas.

[Canvas Instructor Guides](#) – step-by-step guidance on how to use each of the Canvas tools.

Visit the [Canvas Community sites](#) to find answers, share ideas, discuss feature ideas and join groups.

The [HW Canvas SharePoint](#) includes a suite of resources and FAQs to support staff to get the most from Canvas.

General support with digital education and using technology in learning and teaching:

- **Learning and Teaching Academy Hub** - <https://heriotwatt.sharepoint.com/sites/lta>
- **IS training** - <https://heriotwatt.sharepoint.com/sites/istraining>



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