EBOOK

How to build your first online course using principles of instructional design

LearnDash

GOALS

1 Teach current or prospective users of LearnDash how to effectively design an online course.

2 Introduce the reasoning and theory behind learning strategies to empower course creators to make the right decisions.

3 Demystify online course creation so that the process seems exciting, not daunting.

4 Try out LearnDash's demo to make a course following the principles of this ebook.

CHAPTER 1

Getting Started

How to determine and write a course outcome. Outcomes should be measurable in some sort of way. Every unit needs to be designed to lead to the outcome. You do this through scaffolding. Scaffolding right will make sure you can get to the hard stuff by the last unit.
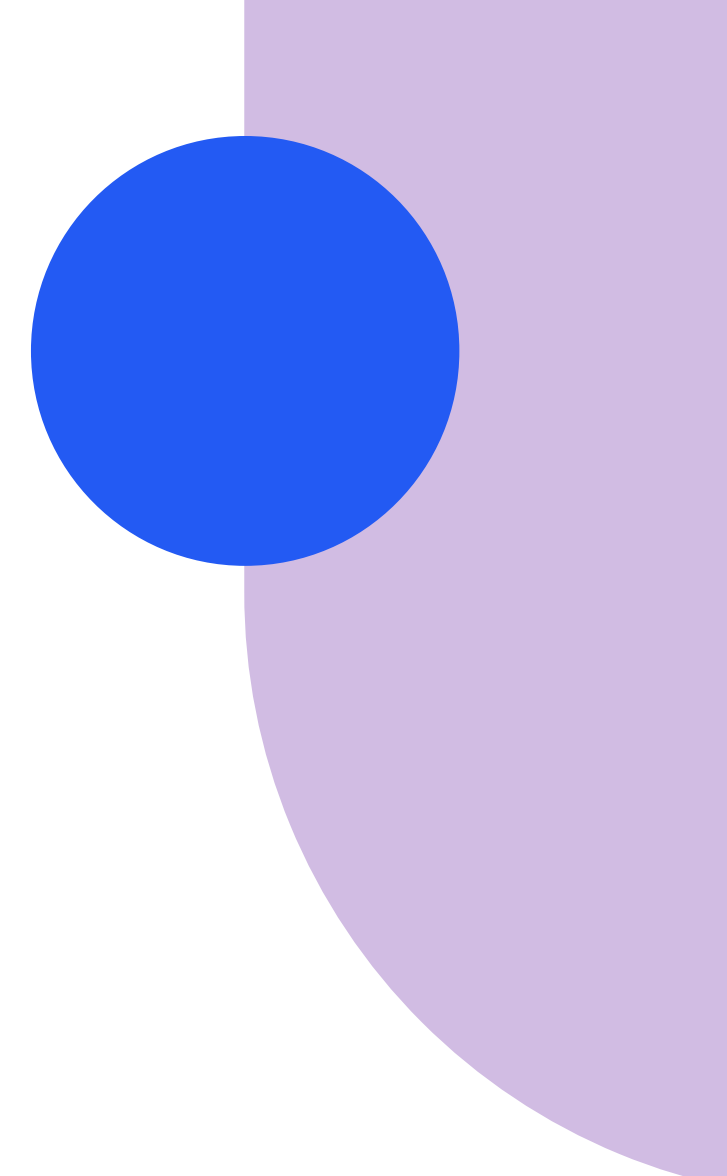
CHAPTER 2

Setting Up Your Course

Follow scaffolding methodology to set up a course. Use an outline to guide the course. Make sure the mapping of outcomes to units will work. Keep attention spans in mind and online distractions. Make sure check ins happen appropriately. Make lectures less than 15 minutes.

CHAPTER 3

Work Smart

Strategies to make your life as an instructor easier: peer grading, self-assessment, group work, automated quizzes and notifications, and more. Use rubrics to make grading faster. Use triggers to let notifications happen on their own. Keep in contact enough so they hear from you, but not checking every move.

CHAPTER 4

Reward Your Learner

How to reward learners with certificates, recognition, CEUs, and/or the next sequence of courses. Make sure you have a second course lined up to capture folks who loved the first one. Exit surveys and final reflections can capture feedback on their way out.

INTRODUCTION

There's an entire school of thought behind creating effective course materials. Instructional design is the term that refers to the theory and rationale behind course creation. Instructional design is rooted in cognitive and behavioral psychology. Its goal is to help learners grasp material in a way that better matches how our brains process and organize information.

It's important for online course creators to learn about instructional design. Without understanding key principles, they may struggle to create courses that are useful and engaging to learners. In the worst-case scenario, they may see their learners struggling to keep up with a course and not know why.

In this ebook, we'll outline the best instructional design strategies to help you design your first course. With this guide, you'll be able to take your ideas from concept to execution with your own successful online course.
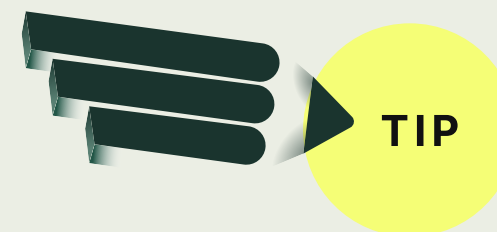
Writing course outcomes

The first step when creating an online course is to determine your course outcome. This is what you want your learner to leave your course knowing or understanding about your content.

When writing course outcomes, don't try to lure people in with generic promises to make them better. You also don't want to scare away students by being too specific and intimidating. Aim to offer a balanced, accurate assessment of what students will know after finishing the course.

TIP Here's an easy formula for writing a course outcome: "By the end of this course, learners will learn x by accomplishing y."

Be reasonable in what your course can achieve in a set amount of time. For example, your students aren't going to become accomplished nuclear scientists after one course. But there should be some small transformation or takeaway that changes the learner by the end.

REMEMBER Outcomes are achieved at the end of your course, and you don't need to cover everything in unit one. However, each unit should lead to the overall course outcome. You can accomplish this through a principle called scaffolding.
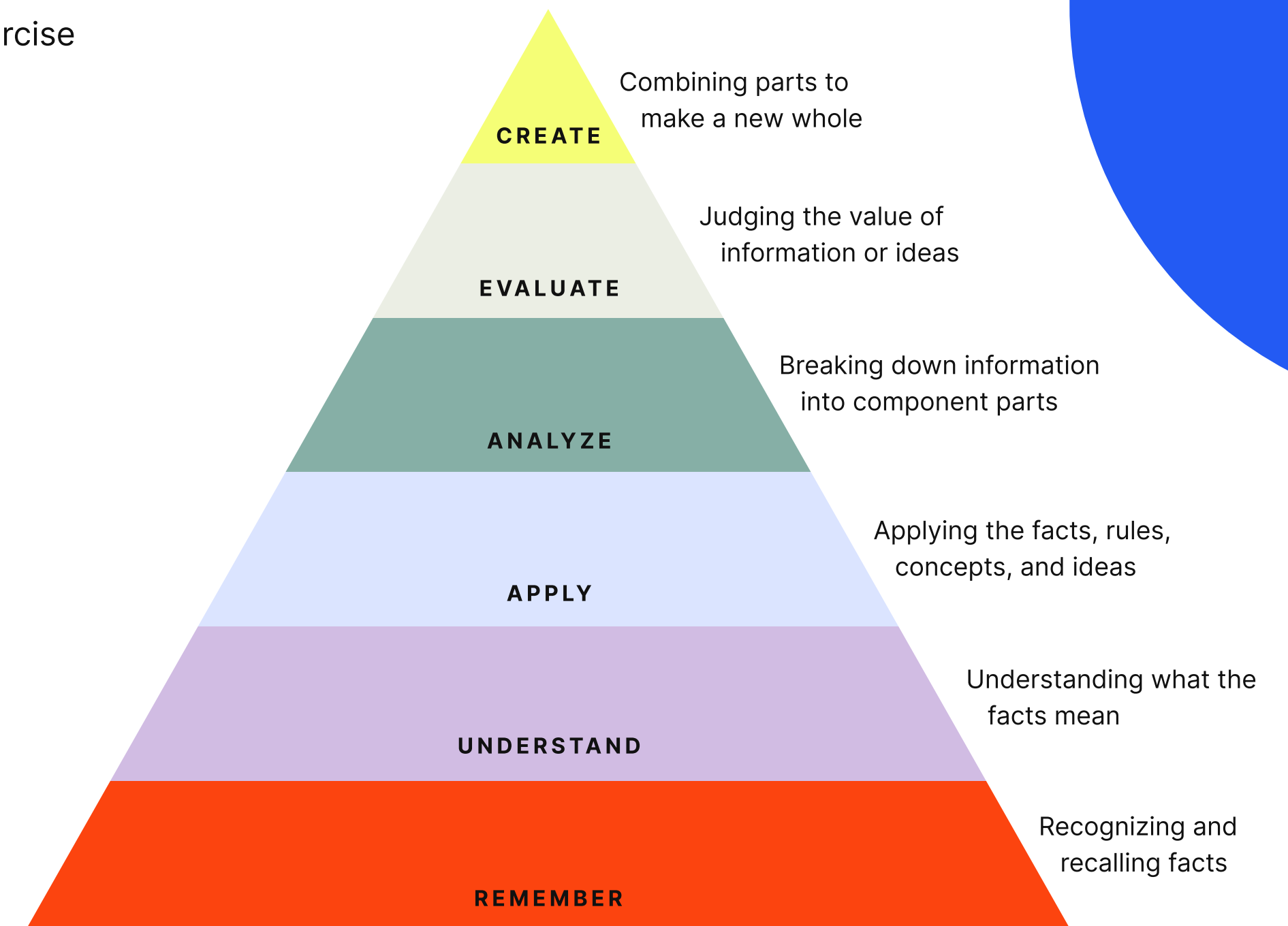
Scaffolding and Bloom's Taxonomy

A good course doesn't cover a topic once and then leaves it unaddressed until the final test. Instead, it reviews and builds upon previous principles so that learners can exercise their newfound knowledge and skills.

This building-upon-skills approach is called scaffolding. Scaffolding also includes demonstrations and examples to help learners understand new concepts slowly.

One of the best ways to scaffold learning is by following a concept called Bloom's Taxonomy. The idea originated in 1956 with educator Benjamin Bloom. With collaborators, he published a framework for categorizing educational goals.

The framework consists of six major categories, from lowest difficulty to highest:
1. Remember
2. Understand
3. Apply
4. Analyze
5. Evaluate
6. Create

CREATE — Combining parts to make a new whole

EVALUATE — Judging the value of information or ideas

ANALYZE — Breaking down information into component parts

APPLY — Applying the facts, rules, concepts, and ideas

UNDERSTAND — Understanding what the facts mean

REMEMBER — Recognizing and recalling facts

Bloom's taxonomy is a helpful framework for setting course objectives and objectives for individual lessons. For example, your early units are likely to focus on activities that help learners understand concepts, while later units will introduce analyzing, evaluating, and creating, such as in a final project or paper.

The framework also helps course creators write actionable directions for learners. For example, your directions for completing an activity can clearly begin with "identify, locate, select, or describe" if you are trying to help a learner understand a concept. This will ensure that your individual assessments and assignments are aligned with scaffolding principles.

TIP
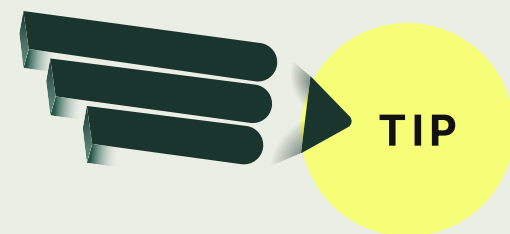
Scaffold the end of a lesson towards a higher-order skill. Begin with tasks such as asking learners to drag and drop information to appear in the appropriate sequence. Then, end the unit with a discussion forum so learners can apply and analyze the same information in group conversations.

Planning your course

When developing new courses, it can be difficult to know how to plan every single lesson so that it builds towards your objectives.

Here are some tips to help you plan your course before you get into the nitty gritty of each lesson plan or unit:

1 **Find your niche.**
You can't cover every aspect of your topic in one course. Instead, find your niche within a broader topic. Zeroing in on a niche helps you build authority and gain the trust of your learners. Think: How do you stand out from other experts? What are your credentials or experience in this topic? What special and specific knowledge do you have that others will want to know?

2 **Write a learner persona.**
Ask yourself who your ideal student is. If you were teaching a course on organic gardening, you might write your course to appeal to homeowners who live in the suburbs or rural areas with space for a garden. The more clearly you write your persona, the easier it is to target them in your messaging.

3 Establish major course milestones.

Think of your milestones as your major projects, tests, or achievements that will be completed in the course. If your course won't offer traditional grading, then brainstorm ways for students to mark their progress, such as a review unit halfway through or a completion certificate at the end of the course.

4 Create an outline.

Use your objectives, milestones, and Bloom's Taxonomy to create a course outline. Here, you can write down how many lessons you'll have, what you'll cover in each lesson, and what the learners will do to achieve the desired outcome. Start thinking now about which videos, graphs, charts, and images you're planning to use.

The more planning you do during this stage, the easier creating your course will be.

SUPPLEMENTAL READING   8 Types of Motivation for Online Learning

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CHAPTER 2: SETTING UP YOUR COURSE

With a foundation in place for how to write outcomes and scaffold to those outcomes, you can start setting up your content pages.

With a well-written course outline, your course set-up should go smoothly, and may even be fun!
In this chapter, we'll focus on how to build engaging content and learn how to optimize lessons to keep learners actively part of your course.

Online versus live courses

For many learners, not having to show up at a physical location at an assigned time is the primary benefit of online learning. It gives them a chance to take courses according to whatever schedule is convenient for them.

However, the lack of a schedule can also make it difficult for learners to dedicate the time they need to the course. They may be overly optimistic about what they can do. They may end up struggling to fit in a lesson between other tasks demanding their attention.

Finding ways to keep your content bite-sized will make it easier for learners to stay engaged and complete your course while navigating their busy schedules.

Keep content tight

You don't need 3,000 words of text, a 50-minute video, and a 20-question interactive quiz to deliver a robust and engaging lesson. A lesson with too much content will look overwhelming and deter your learners from getting started. You'll need to thoughtfully "chunk," or break up, your lesson content in a digestible way.

To help with chunking, think of how your learners will complete your course. Many will return to your course during their moments of free time—on a lunch break, during a morning commute, in the evening. Each lesson needs to be consumable in small pieces with easy exit points when they need to take a breather.

TIP

If each lesson can be completed in ten to fifteen minutes, then learners are better able to pace themselves, which avoids burnout.

SUPPLEMENTAL READING

How to Design a Mobile-First Online Course

Optimize your lessons

It takes more than a good subject to make lessons enjoyable. Here are some tips for optimizing your content to ensure learners stay with your course.

1 **Use topics.**
Break lessons into smaller segments with discrete endpoints. For example, a photography class with a lesson on camera mechanics can have individual topics on lenses, shutters, flashes, and so on. Make use of these natural divisions to allow students to take a break.

2 **Drip-feed content.**
Sometimes a new learner will sign up for a course and burn through several lessons, only to fall off the map after a week. They've consumed content faster than they've mastered it. Instead, release content on a schedule, otherwise known as drip-feeding. By drip-feeding, you can control how quickly learners advance through the material and avoid binge learners who don't take the time to digest.

3 **Embrace micro content.**
Incremental learning means you will need to move away from long lecture videos or lessons that take more than fifteen minutes to complete. Micro content, which is an activity or topic that can be completed in a matter of minutes, can be drip-fed to learners every day—or even a few times a day. This helps learners build a pattern of checking in and refreshing their knowledge.

4 **Accessibility first.**
Ditch the flashy graphics or long videos. Make sure that your course can be read and understood easily by learners of all backgrounds. Add captions to images and downloadable transcripts for videos. Make fonts clean and colors minimal. Too much clutter only adds to the mental fatigue of learning and alienates some learners trying to access your course.

**SUPPLEMENTAL READING** Use H5P for Engaging Courses

Make it engaging

The key to creating engaging content online is to remember that your learners will need to connect with your course content in different ways. Engagement can come through quizzes, community, or gamification (among other things), but a variety of interactivity options is essential for learners to not feel fatigued or bored.

Here are two quick ways to make your content more engaging.

Relate to the real world.

The best course content relates to real-life scenarios. If the content is too theoretical, it is harder to retain. Demonstrate why the content matters to the learner by applying it to a real-life scenario.

TIP
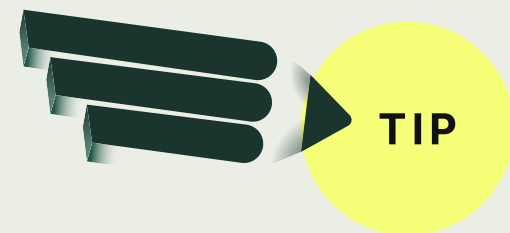
Create a **series of scenarios** that a learner is likely to encounter in the real world and ask them to tie the course material to that scenario. For a gardening course, this could mean asking learners to solve a problem of overwatered plants. This not only makes the material more relevant to them but also strengthens learners' mental connection to the subject, which helps with future recall.

Demonstrate why the content matters to the learner by applying it to a real-life scenario.

Varied quizzes and assignments.

Avoid using only multiple-choice and true-or-false questions in your quizzes, as these question types only enforce one method of content recall. Embrace micro quizzes as low-stakes check-ins after topics or micro lessons. Ask learners to complete a variety of short answer assessments, games, or worksheets after your lessons.

TIP
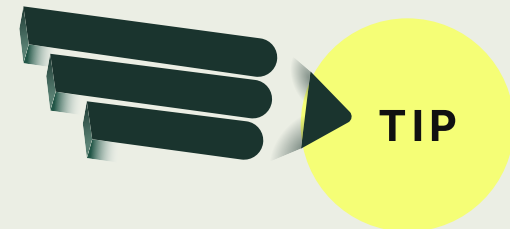
Micro quizzes immediately reinforce concepts covered in the material and flag mistakes before the learner mislearns them. Put a micro quiz at the end of each lesson break, and then drip feed micro quizzes throughout the week to keep learners engaged.

SUPPLEMENTAL READING   How Gamification Helps Learners Achieve Flow

Cognitive Performance and Online Distractions

Online learning introduces a new problem into education: the rest of the internet is just a browser tab away. Sidebars, menus, and buttons beg for attention, and it may be hard to resist these temptations. Plus, the willpower it takes to avoid clicking away becomes a drain. Learners may leave faster if they feel mentally fatigued by a busy screen. This constant battle can lower cognitive performance, including attention span, memory, and problem solving. Removing unnecessary distractions helps the learner keep their energy focused on the coursework.

Here are a few ways you can help keep learners focused in your course.

1 **Use visual cues to establish hierarchy and priority.**
When learners see several tasks to complete, they may put off doing any because they can't decide where to start. Help remove hesitations by creating task priorities. Arrange information by numbers or difficulty level. Use headers to guide learners through blocks of text. Avoid using too many callout boxes with unnecessary information. Label important information that learners need to remember.

2 **Post a schedule and create reminders.**
When it comes to time management, support your learners by posting the course schedule and sending out reminders for due dates. Post time estimates for how long each step will take. This helps learners plan and can reduce procrastination if they see the next step will only take a few minutes.

3 Use gamification to encourage task initiation.

Adding a game-like element to your course makes learning feel fun and lowers the barriers to initiating coursework. Add in a simple gaming element to capture attention and to minimize distractions. Think fun quizzes, leaderboards, badges, and completion bars.
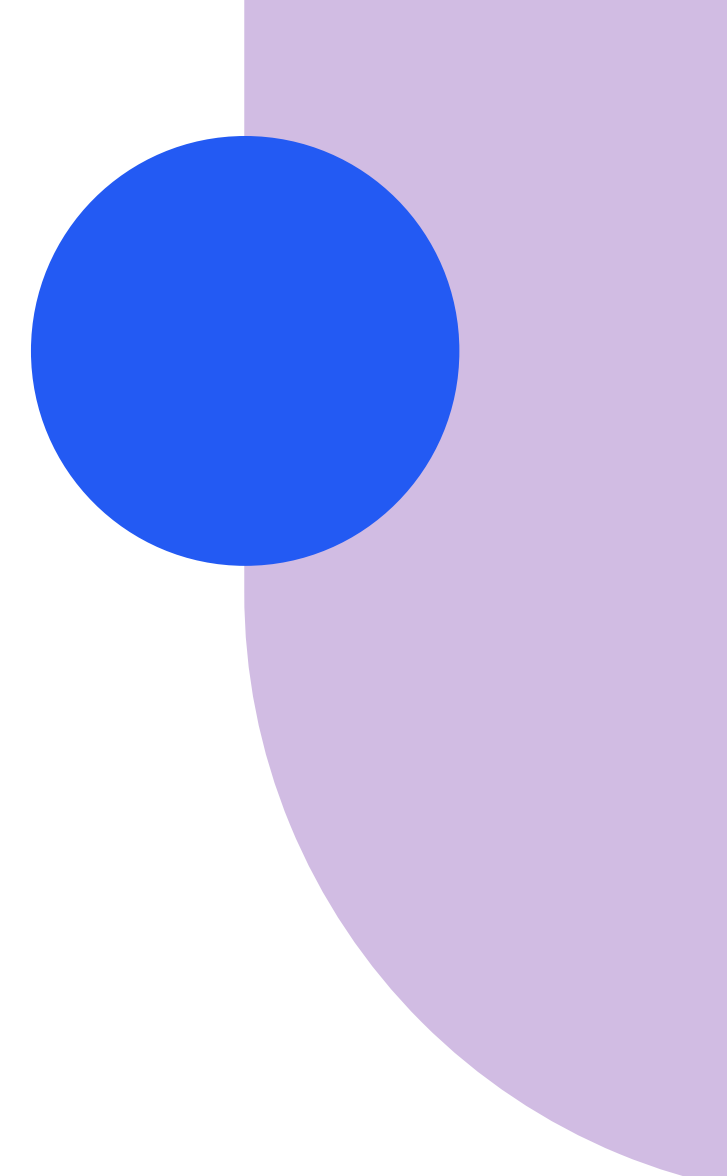
Designing a course that reduces distraction helps learners create priorities, engage more easily, and identify their priorities. With these tools, you'll come a long way toward helping your learners succeed.

TIP

LearnDash's built-in **Focus Mode** helps eliminate distractions by hiding sidebars, menus, footers, and other online elements that can distract a reader.

CHAPTER 3: WORK SMART

The nature of online learning makes some aspects of your course easier to set up, but some parts can be more difficult—including feedback for learners.

In this chapter, let's explore how you can benefit from the online space to ensure your learners receive important feedback without requiring loads of busy work on your end.

Peer grading

One strategy is to allow learners to peer review or peer grade some assignments. This means learners review each others' work and leave feedback. This works best on written assignments or in discussion forums. The online space is well-suited for asynchronous peer review. Learners can consider their peer's work at their own pace, perhaps wrestling with concepts and ideas more thoroughly to provide a comprehensive review.

Group discussions

Discussions via forums help learners connect with peers in a meaningful way. They are better able to tackle challenges, talk through content, and even share related articles or ideas. A strong community can also cut down on the amount of time you spend answering learner questions. With a dedicated peer base, learners can learn from each other more quickly than if they had to wait to talk with you. Often, learners are also more eager to work with each other—and demonstrate what they have learned—than to go directly to the instructor.

Self-assessment

Constantly ask learners to self-reflect during your course. Weekly or unit check-ins can help you assess how difficult or challenging your assignments are. Assigning a self-assessment at the end of the course can also help you with final grades. You can even ask learners to tell you what grade they think they deserve! Learners are often harder on themselves, which will give you guideposts for encouragement when leaving feedback.

Rubrics

Rubrics are an extremely valuable tool to speed up online grading. A rubric is a type of scoring guide that assesses and articulates expectations for an assignment. Rubrics can be used for a variety of assignments: research papers, group projects, portfolios, and presentations. Sharing a rubric with your assignment instructions can also help clarify expectations and components of an assignment. It may take time to build your first rubric, but once it's in place, it can be used any time you give that assignment. They are also useful tools to give learners for peer review and self-assessment.

Automated notifications

The more you can automate in your online course, the better. Consider automating weekly email check-ins, feedback after quiz scores, or reminders for due dates. You can also create automations that trigger based on how your user interacts with your content. For instance, if the majority of your learners log on in the evening, a trigger could adjust the schedule of your reminders to send in the evening. Or, you could time an email to go out a certain number of hours after each learner completes a lesson to individualize your emails.

TIP
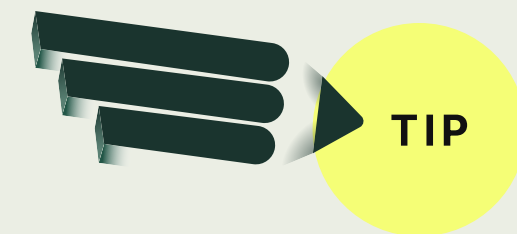
Keep learners in the know with LearnDash's **automated notifications** feature.
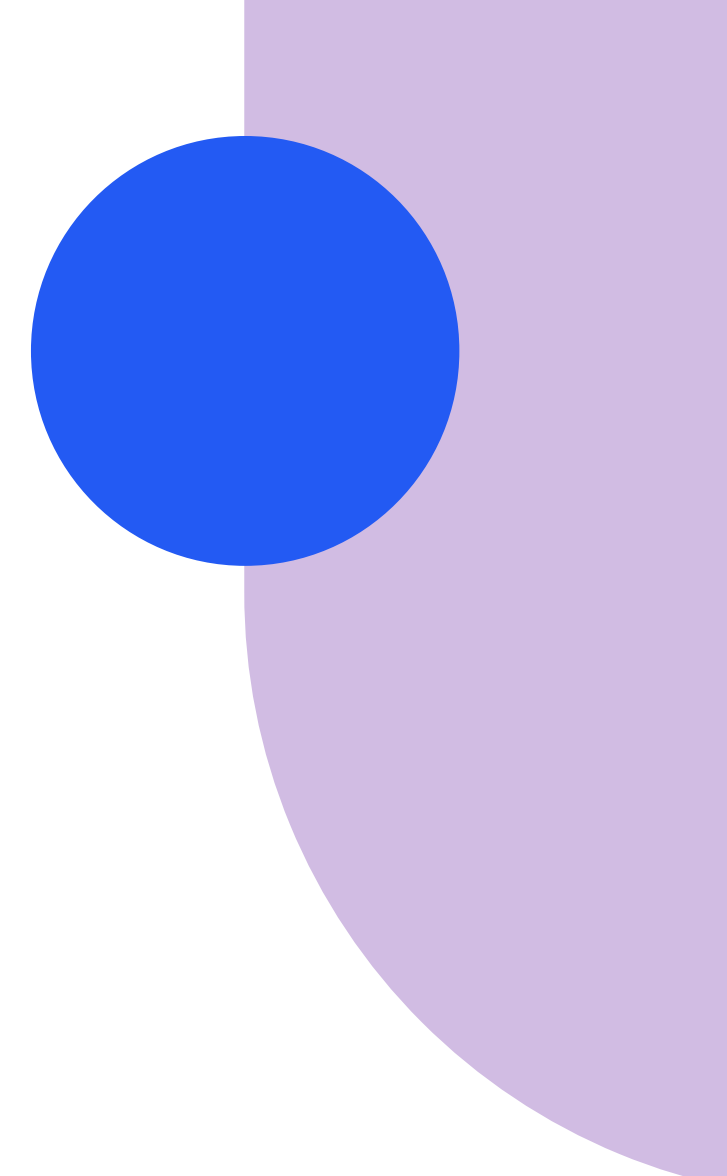
Offer quality feedback

The faster you can provide feedback, the better. Providing learners with immediate, relevant feedback is the best way to prevent an incorrect answer from getting lodged in their brains and to prevent bigger problems from forming later in your course.

It's easy to automate feedback with quizzes, but it can take more time with written responses that require individualized attention. But it's worth the effort: Feedback full of quality advice and guidance will keep your learners engaged in your course.

Here are some tips on how to improve and expedite your individualized feedback:

- Make sure your feedback refers explicitly to the work completed that week instead of a vague generalization of the learner's effort thus far.
- Acknowledge what the learner has done well before moving on to suggestions for improvements. Explain how to remedy faults with quick demonstrations. Give specifics on how to improve and model a skill, if needed.
- If you see an improvement the learner has made since the beginning of the course, point it out so that students can track their progress.
- If you are short on suggestions, challenge students to strengthen areas that are usually generalized, such as introductions and conclusions. Challenge them to think critically in the examples they use and the rationale they provide.
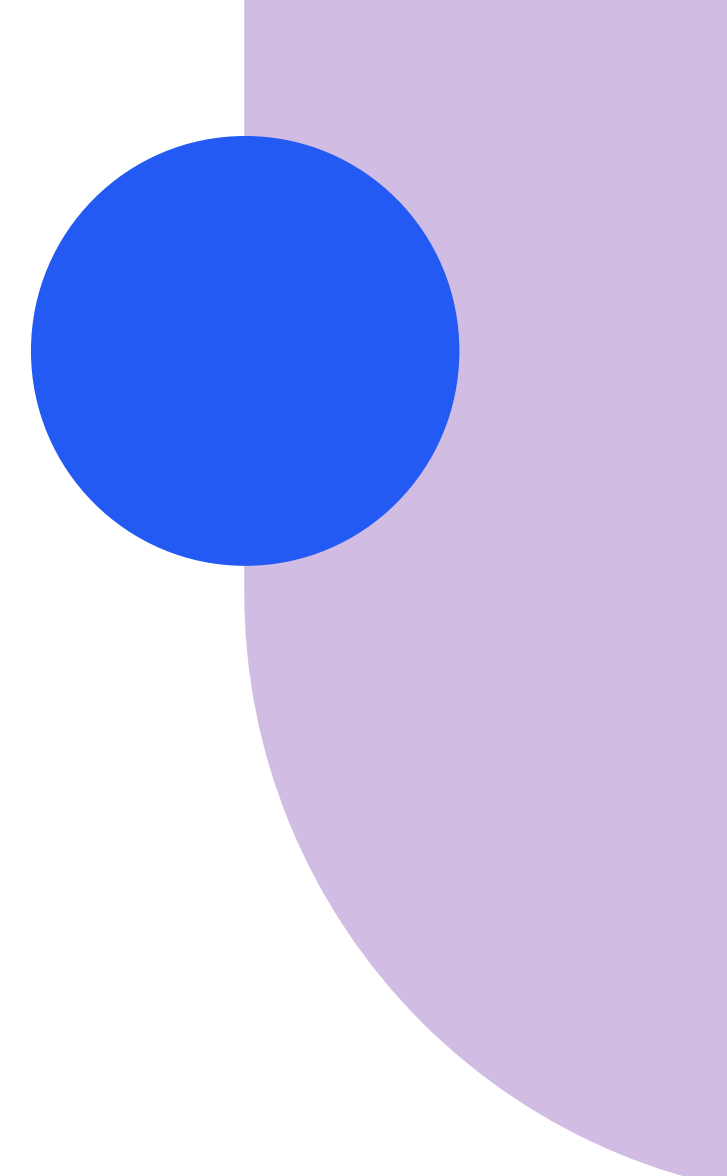
Embrace emergent design

Emergent design means that each course is unique and finds its shape as the course goes on.

This doesn't mean that you don't define goals or outcomes and stick to them. However, if you notice the entire class isn't grasping something, take time to shift the course and try new approaches to meet the demands of learners. This might mean offering additional one-on-one sessions you hadn't planned, a review unit, a shorter quiz, extra credit, and so on.

One-on-one coaching may seem to take more of your time, but it can actually cut down in the long run on questions, confusion, hang-ups, or addendums to the course. You can use the time to talk to learners about their goals, provide individual feedback, and guide them toward resources that might help them succeed.

Think about the specific needs and concerns of your learners, and be proactive and open-minded in addressing them. The more you think about your course from the perspective of your students, the stronger your instructional design will be.

CHAPTER FOUR: REWARDING YOUR LEARNER

When learners first sign on to your course, their enthusiasm may carry them through the first couple weeks. After that, learners may need encouragement to motivate them through to the end of your course.

To propel them towards the finish, make sure you're rewarding your learners during and after the course. Here are some tips and tools for rewarding learner's successes along the way.

Reward behaviors, not scores

1 **Set achievable goals and milestones.**
If a learner feels like they're not advancing, it can cause them to lose motivation quickly. Goals and milestones allow learners to celebrate their progress while also setting a standard for how quickly they can expect to keep moving forward.

2 **Celebrate your learners' small successes.**
Perhaps the most salient reward you can offer learners is a daily streak tracker. Habits build faster with daily repetition, so a reminder to your learners to make progress every day, even if only for a few minutes, can lead to great success.

3 Reinforce behaviors through practice.
Create a practice environment or <u>interactive scenarios</u> to help a learner practice behaviors. Make sure these practice areas have rewards at the end (not a grade) so the learner feels a sense of progress. Badges and leaderboards work well. Practice areas make the learner comfortable so that when they face the same situation or challenge later, they are already familiar with it.

While there's a lot you can do to help learners build habits, some will struggle in silence. Build a support community to help your learners motivate one another. Your course participants can give advice and cheer each other on when they reach their goals. Peer recognition can go a long way.

Ways to reward your learners

Continuing education units (CEUs)
Continuing education units provide a way of measuring a person's participation in a continuing education program. CEUs verify that a person has completed the required program, which in turn allows them to continue practicing.

Professionals can use CEUs to improve their skills and to stay current with new technology, laws, and regulations that apply to their field. Depending on the particular profession, CEUs may be required to earn a certificate or a license. Even if CEUs aren't required, some learners complete them voluntarily to demonstrate their commitment and to improve at their job.

The International Association of Continuing Education and Training has established the criteria for CEUs to make standard procedures for issuing these credits. Any business, organization, or academic institution must be willing to meet these standards in order to give out verified CEUs. This is one of the most valuable assets your course can provide, so make sure you can meet the requirements if this approach makes sense for your course topic.

Certificates

Promote a sense of accomplishment and reward your learners with a printable certificate. Knowing there will be tangible proof and verification of completion at the end of the course can compel learners to finish.

A certificate also provides social proof of competence and credibility. Folks like collecting and showcasing certificates because it helps promote their skills. It can create faith and trust from employers who are looking to hire for those skills.

Certificates can be homemade using a few options. Photoshop remains one of the most popular tools for creating unique graphics and images online. There are free templates to inspire ideas and speed up the process. If you'd like something simpler, Canva is a fan favorite for DIY graphic needs. The free drag-and-drop tool will allow you to create attractive certificates in a few minutes. Additionally, Google Slides has a standard Student Certificate template that's free to download and customize.

TIP
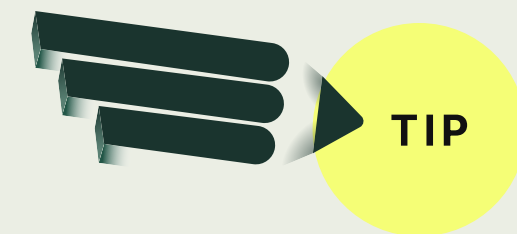
LearnDash's **Certificate Builder** lets you build certificates with a drag-and-drop builder in the WordPress Gutenberg editor.

Coupons

Coupons can cultivate loyalty among your customer base. You can offer learners who finish a course early access and a discount to new courses to retain their business. You can also create a loyalty system where customers unlock codes once they've taken a certain amount of courses. Or, invite your learners to share a special code with friends and coworkers who might be interested in taking the next course with them.

When setting coupons, remember the following:

- **Choose the right discount.** Try the rule of 100: Everything below $100 should receive a percentage discount, while everything above should be a money-off deal.
- **Set an expiration date.** Expiration dates create a sense of urgency and pressure to act, which can speed up purchasing behavior.
- **Limit usage.** This creates urgency and scarcity and can help you better monitor the effectiveness of each coupon.

TIP
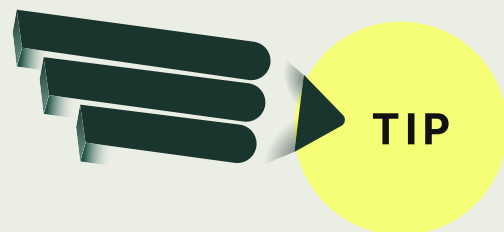
Setting up a **coupon** in LearnDash is simple. You can add, customize, and rename coupons right from your WordPress dashboard.

Another course

If you have more than one course ready to go, you may be interested in building a structured curriculum for learners to continue with you. Predetermined learning paths can keep learners engaged from course to course.

Here are a few ways you can offer learners supplemental courses:

- **Linear:** If one course is an introduction to high-level concepts, the second course takes those concepts and dives further. This is the approach most traditional education programs use, such as numbering their courses 100 level, 200 level, and so on.
- **Open:** You can offer a variety of courses for a learner to take next after completing your introduction course. Allow the learner to create their path and order for course completion.
- **Earned:** Allow learners to accumulate points in order to unlock access to another course. To use this option, simply assign a point value to your courses, then specify the minimum points a learner must earn in order to take the next one.

TIP
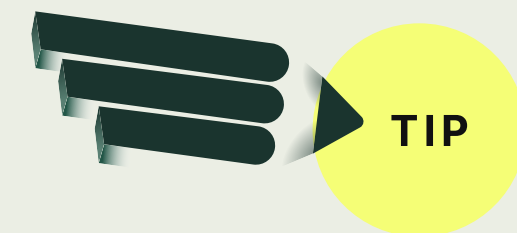
Unlock the ability to add bonus courses for learners who complete your LearnDash courses through WordPress **shortcodes**.

Exit surveys and final reflections

The final—and perhaps most important—measure of a course's success is learner satisfaction. Learners tend to be happiest with a course when they feel they achieved what they wanted to achieve.

Let learners reflect on your course by implementing exit surveys, polls, reflection assignments, and asking for recommendations.

- **Exit surveys or satisfaction polls.** Make sure that after the final assessment, learners have an opportunity to share feedback before completing the course or receiving scores. Use guided questions and ranking scales for a quick and easy way for learners to reflect.
- **Reflection assignments.** Consider offering a final open-ended question at the end of your course that lets learners reflect on their progress. If you've been giving valuable feedback throughout the course, this is where the learner gets the chance to reflect on all that growth. This can help the learner feel a sense of accomplishment while allowing you to see their growth.
- **Recommendations.** Learners may not want to tell you how they're feeling, but they may leave a review. You can ask them how likely they would be to recommend your course to a friend; make the form anonymous to allow for more honesty.

SUPPLEMENTAL READING   8 Metrics Every Course Creator Should Track

Use feedback to make your course better.

Feedback provides an opportunity for improvement. If you're hearing that lessons are too long, break them down into smaller segments. If learners are struggling to pass quizzes, offer shorter, more frequent review quizzes. If learners are dropping out at the same point in your course, you can use that as a time to check in with them personally and see what support they need to finish.

And if you are getting great feedback, listen to what your learners love and double down on what works. See how you can expand your market to appeal to more learners and grow your course business. There's always more to learn. The journey of course creation never ends.

With this guide, you should feel confident and ready to tackle your first course and make it the course you've been dreaming about!

TRY IT YOURSELF

Ready to give it a try? **Request a backend LearnDash demo** to map out your first course.