

MIDDLE GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY STANDARDS FOR ONLINE COURSES

In addition to addressing the requirements of institutional accreditation and federal regulations (see appendix), this document provides the minimum standards for all courses offered partially or wholly online at MGA. Within these regulations and standards, Schools and Academic Departments might choose to adopt more specific guidelines that align with the unique needs of their students.

Note: As part of its services, MGA's Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (cetl@mga.edu) provides support for faculty development and in-depth training for applying any of these standards. Consult with one of the CETL team for assistance or to discuss options for course-specific challenges and opportunities.

✓	1. The “Start Here” Module: In the preloaded MGA Online module, add course-specific information with which students need to be familiar as the course begins.	Tips & Examples
☐	1.1 Personalized Introduction: Record a brief introductory video or audio message to create an atmosphere of welcome and interaction in online learning.	YuJa is MGA’s best option for this purpose because it is integrated into D2L and has many capabilities. D2L’s Video Note or Audio Note will work for simple recordings but still require captions and/or transcripts.
☐	1.1.1 Post the recorded introduction at least one day prior to the official start date of the course, along with a welcome announcement.	To affirm your online presence for students, consider adding a recent picture of yourself and including your contact info in your D2L profile. Include tips on how to succeed in your course.
☐	1.2 Course Schedule: List at least the major assignments and assessments students must complete throughout the semester, along with due dates.	Creating an HTML page for the course schedule makes for easier updating during the semester. If not, post the schedule as an accessible Word document.
☐	1.3 Student Support: Provide a “What to Do When Stuck” page.	This info should be short and course-specific, answering queries like these: • How much time should they expect to spend weekly? • What is the weekly rhythm? • What should they do if they fall behind? • How should they contact the instructor? • What institutional/course resources should they use before they are in crisis?

✓	2. Course Design: Intentional course structure with clear navigation minimizes barriers to participation and supports a more consistent learning experience.	Tips & Examples
☐	2.1 Post all mandatory course content in D2L or an approved D2L-integrated system/platform.	Supplemental/optional resources can be uploaded to D2L or linked clearly.
☐	2.2 Ensure that the Syllabus link is in the course navbar.	For help with editing the navbar, contact the CETL team.
☐	2.3 Include a clear learning path in each module.	To reduce extraneous cognitive load, students should be able to easily identify what to read or watch, what to practice, what to submit, and when each item is due.
☐	2.4 Ensure that each gradable assignment in the course has a corresponding gradebook item and that any old or unused grade items are removed.	Using grade categories in the D2L gradebook creates a more organized grade structure. Specify if numerical scores will be rounded up/down and to what decimal place.
☐	2.5 Match the distribution of gradebook points or percentages with the distribution outlined in the syllabus exactly.	If the syllabus refers to a points system, mirror the system in the D2L gradebook—same with percentages, which should always add up to 100%.
☐	2.6 Include grading rubrics with assignment instructions.	Consider applying the Transparency in Learning & Teaching assignment framework for instructions and design by explicitly stating the assignment's purpose, steps to be completed, and criteria for success.
☐	2.7 Conduct an anonymous mid-semester student survey.	Ask students about 1) what is helping their learning in the course, 2) what is getting in the way of their learning, and 3) what the instructor could do differently to support learning. Consider incorporating feedback trends into the course and announcing when doing so to bolster the importance of student feedback.

✓	3. Course Delivery: Strategies that enhance engagement are vital to student success in online learning environments.	Tips & Examples
☐	3.1 Prior to the start of the semester, send a short email inside D2L or from your MGA email address, welcoming students to the course and providing them with a syllabus excerpt that includes, at a minimum, the official start date of the course, instructor contact information, and required course materials.	This email could also contain the D2L hyperlink to the course and a reminder about the official start date for the semester.
☐	3.2 Respond to emails from students within 48 hours of receipt on weekdays and 72 hours of receipt on weekends.	If a response to a student's email is going to take longer, consider sending a quick message to the student, letting them know when to expect a detailed reply.
☐	3.3 Access the course regularly—i.e., at least three times per week—to check for emails or messages sent through and also to confirm error-free course content.	D2L's Brightspace Pulse app is intended primarily for student use and is not recommended for faculty use to modify course content.
☐	3.4 Post course announcements at least weekly that include vital information, such as to-do lists, upcoming deadlines, study tips, and, importantly, encouragement.	Consider including a link to a checklist for the module to help students move through content more effectively.
☐	3.5 Record lectures rather than posting only presentation slides or assigning readings; break longer recordings into shorter chunks.	YuJa has editing capabilities for breaking longer recordings into shorter sections. Consider adding an in-video quiz and index points through YuJa to encourage student engagement with videos and to check knowledge acquisition. Use YuJa's analytics to identify students' trends of viewing.
☐	3.6 Contribute to all introductory discussion board postings, if applicable.	Create other opportunities to engage with students in real-time interactions throughout the semester, such as scheduling online hours, study/review sessions, etc. Selectively posting to

		other discussions can promote continued engagement.
☐	3.7 Incorporate high-engagement practices such as interactive/video quizzes, projects, blogs, wikis, and group assignments in addition to, or in lieu of, traditional assessments.	For help with exploring options for asynchronous practices, reach out to the CETL team for a one-on-one consultation.
☐	3.8 Post, import, or sync grades in the D2L gradebook as soon as possible, even if they occur within a third-party platform (e.g., MindTap, ALEKS, publishers, etc.).	For integrated third-party vendors/platforms, consult with the CETL team for assistance with proper synchronizing of grades.
☐	3.9 Follow Departmental expectations for completing the timely grading of students' submissions.	Returning graded work quickly assists learning development. Consider indicating to students when they can expect the return of major assignments.
☐	3.10 Provide constructive, encouraging, and developmental feedback on all major assignments.	Consider audio or video feedback (e.g., through D2L's Audio Note or Video Note or through Turnitin's grading feature), and for more engagement, create structures for how students process and apply the feedback provided (e.g., small incentive for responding to assignment feedback).
☐	3.11 Monitor each student's progress (e.g., via D2L's Class Progress feature) and reach out to at-risk students to recommend appropriate student success resources.	Consider the use of D2L's Intelligent Agents for providing reminders or support to students.
☐	3.12 Provide students with an accurate indication of where they stand overall throughout the course as assignments are graded. Record zeros <i>only</i> for missed assignments prior to the Withdrawal date.	One method of doing so is to open final grades to students at the start of the term, although not wholly accurate until the end of the semester. D2L will then keep the overall grade updated as grades are posted throughout the semester. Alternatively, you might consider opening overall grades at specific intervals (e.g., every two weeks).

✓	4. Accessibility: All materials provided in the course must meet WCAG 2.1 Level AA standards.	Tips & Examples
☐	4.1 Organize course materials using a clear and consistent structure throughout the course.	Organize course materials using a logical structure (e.g., by module, week, or unit/chapter) and follow a consistent labeling scheme. All pages should have clear, descriptive titles to help students easily locate and navigate course content.
☐	4.2 Use color and visual elements to support readability and ensure that meaning is not conveyed by color alone.	Color-coded charts, table cells, rows, and columns should also include labels, patterns, text, or other indicators that communicate the same information. Use readable fonts and color combinations with sufficient contrast. Avoid flashing content or visual effects that may create barriers for learners.
☐	4.3 Format all documents and pages in the course using styles.	Use built-in heading styles for headings and the application's standard body-text or paragraph style for regular content. Use built-in bullet or numbering tools for lists, and ensure tables include defined header rows.
☐	4.4 Format tables and lists in ways that support accessibility and readability.	Tables should include defined row and column headers and should not be used solely for layout purposes. Lists should be created using built-in bullet or numbering tools rather than manually formatting text.
☐	4.5 Use descriptive and functional hyperlinks.	Use meaningful link text rather than generic phrases such as "click here." Confirm that hyperlinks are active and functional. Check hyperlinks at least once per semester to ensure continued availability. If a permalink is available, use that in D2L instead of the webpage's URL.

□	4.6 Ensure that all documents are text-based and searchable.	Documents should not be scanned as images. PDF documents should also contain accessibility tags. To check for searchability, open the document and press Ctrl + F (or Cmd + F on Macs) and search for a known word in the document. Note: For externally located materials, vendors and publishers are expected to follow federal accessibility standards.
□	4.7 Ensure all meaningful images (charts, icons, etc.) have descriptive alt text.	All images that provide information should include descriptive alt text. Images that do not contribute additional meaning should be marked as decorative. Note: For externally located materials, vendors and publishers are expected to follow federal accessibility standards.
□	4.8 Include transcripts for audio recordings in D2L.	YuJa provides transcriptions of audio files uploaded to the platform. Review automatically generated transcripts and correct errors before making them available to students.
□	4.9 Include captions or transcripts for videos in D2L.	YuJa is MGA's best option for automatic captioning and transcriptions. The instructor, as the subject-matter expert, should confirm the accuracy of captions and transcripts. For discipline-specific terminology, there is a built-in "Find and Replace" tool that allows users to correct misspelled terms quickly.

These online course standards articulate the basis for high-quality digital learning experiences for any online, blended, and hybrid course at Middle Georgia State University. When applied cohesively, they provide students with consistency of navigability and course structure in D2L, thus reducing extraneous cognitive load and minimizing frustration or confusion.

Appendix: Regulatory Background

These standards support the University's compliance with Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Regular and Substantive Interaction (RSI) Rule from the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE). The RSI Rule separates online or distance education from correspondence education. A summary of what constitutes effective distance education for the USDOE follows:

- The institution's online instruction is delivered through an appropriate form of media;
- The instructors with whom students regularly and substantively interact meet the requirements of the institution's accrediting agency for subject instruction;
- Instructors meet the RSI regulatory requirements for the course by engaging in **at least two forms of substantive interaction**:
 - providing direct instruction,
 - assessing or providing feedback on a student's coursework,
 - providing information or responding to questions about course-related contents or competencies,
 - facilitating a group discussion regarding course-related contents or competencies, and/or
 - other instructional activities approved by the institution's or program's accrediting agency.
- The institution has 1) established **scheduled and predictable** opportunities for substantive interaction between students and instructors and 2) created expectations for instructors to **monitor each student's engagement and thus engage substantively** with students on the basis of that monitoring; and
- Instructors are responsive to students' requests for instructional support.

According to the RSI Rule, online courses must meet the criteria outlined above and include frequent and consistent RSI activities; when they do not, they may be regarded as correspondence courses. If a course is considered a correspondence course, then it is not eligible for financial aid, and the institution could be made to pay back funds received from federal financial aid programs for all students who are enrolled in that particular course. As a result, many institutions have adopted online course policies that prepare for mandatory accreditation reporting and potential USDOE audits.

In addition to addressing the impact of ADA's Title II mandate for compliance with WCAG 2.1 Level AA and the RSI Rule, this document provides the minimum standards for all courses offered online, in whole or in part, at MGA. Except for approved D2L-integrated platforms, all materials and content for these courses must be hosted within D2L and, per [USG BOR Policy 3.4.4](#), must contain sufficient content and related coursework to equal 750 instruction minutes per course credit hour. Within federal policies, Schools and Academic Departments might choose to adopt more specific guidelines that align with the unique needs of their distance education students.