Designing course sites
Help students find what they need

Before students can do anything useful online, they have to find the right resources and know what to do with them. The more time students spend finding things, the less time they spend learning. To make your site easy to use:

- welcome and orientate students
- use a consistent structure new students can understand
- chunk material so students can find the part they want faster

Site Structure

Start with a good default. We recommend a week-by-week structure. New students will be able to find materials, and the content will follow the logical structure you arranged for the rest of the course, grouping similar content together. The weakness of this approach is that during revision students might not remember when they covered an item, but a good activity plan identifying what is covered in which week can help. You may be able to find better options for your course and students (e.g. module based organisation), but this can also be difficult and time-consuming.

In menus use terminology students understand before the course begins: students need to be able to find their way around the course from the beginning and find their course content before they know it. Use the terminology of your discipline within the content.

Example: Options for organising section content

The option to the right might be a great structure for an expert to find information, but new students may be intimidated by the technical language and struggle to find the material they need in Week 1, making the option on the left a better structure for an introductory course site.

Keep your structure consistent. Use the same arrangement every week so students only have to work out where to find things once. Picking one consistent structure is important. Different options may be better depending on your course or students (as below), but changing the structure will make finding materials and activities harder.
Example: Two possible options for organising section content

**Introductions**

Introduce the course. Even the best structure won’t be obvious to all students – a brief introduction, and justification, can make your site easier to use, your students more comfortable and save time answering questions. The sites udacity.com and coursera.org offer excellent examples of introducing course staff, how the course is organised and why the course is important.

Welcome to PLNT1001!

I am excited about this course, were we get to explore the diversity of plant life.

This course is divided into an orientation to welcome you to studying plant science at UQ, then four sections exploring different types of plant life.

Each section contains materials from and about our lectures, tutorial problems (and eventual sample solutions), readings (some of which you will need to do before lectures, some are optional) and quizzes to provide feedback about where you are up to.

I have been studying plants for over two decades, and currently I’m researching plant diseases in commercial production, which I hope to be able to share with you in this course.

This is a large class and I hope to get to know many of you. If there is something personal you need to ask, please email me. I deal with emails on weekday afternoons for at most one hour, so I will get to your email, but it may take up to a week to get a response. The best way to get questions about this course answered is to post on the discussion board or ask your tutor. Most questions on the discussion boards get answered that day.

I look forward to seeing you all at our first lecture at 9am on Tuesday in Parnell (building 7) room 222.

Regards,

Dr Jeremy

Example: a course introduction