

# Flexible LEARNING

Saint Paul University

## Integrating Online Assignments into Your Course

Many types of assignments can be done online. Some options are outlined below as well as decision-making criteria for using online assignments in a course and course design questions to consider as you start to integrate online assignments into your course. By thinking about the reasons for using them and answering the design questions, you will be able to integrate these engaging tools in a meaningful way with the rest of your course.

### What are some possible online assignments?

It is often difficult to imagine what kinds of assignments can be put online if you have never used technology in your teaching. Basically, technology can be used to put almost any assignment online. The key, though, is to have a clear rationale for doing so. Below are some examples of online assignments, but they certainly do not represent all of the possibilities.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Online discussions</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Case studies</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Online tests/quizzes</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Practice exercises</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Virtual tutorials or labs</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Essays (submit online)</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Online literature searches</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Simulations</li></ul>

### Decision-Making Criteria

Why should we put assignments online? As mentioned above, with the use of any tools or methods in our courses, there should be a clear pedagogical reason for using them. The following are some of the reasons for putting an assignment online.

- **Allow for new types of assignments.** Some assignments simply cannot be done on paper. For example, you can have students work with a simulation (in two or three dimensions) to see what happens when they change one element. Or they can see full colour pictures or artwork to analyze or critique. Allow yourself to think beyond the limitations of paper-based assignments to create new ways to enhance your students' learning.
- **Refocus classroom time.** As with traditional assignments, you can have students cover content and do activities outside of class time so you can spend your in-class time in other ways. For example, students

can engage in an online discussion and then be able to bring that knowledge to class for a more in-depth discussion. Or a pre-class quiz can highlight problem areas for you to focus on in your lecture. You may also be able to reduce inclass hours if your online activities are well-planned.

- **Allow for collaboration.** Research has shown that one way to increase student learning is to promote collaboration where groups of students can interact with each other to solve a problem or discuss an issue together. Assignments which allow for such collaboration are often more effective at positively affecting student learning than individually-done assignments.
- **Encourage reluctant participants.** Online assignments, particularly discussions, can allow even the most reluctant participants to join in a discussion. The online (often asynchronous) nature of such assignments gives students an opportunity to reflect and generate a response to a particular question – time not necessarily allowed in a face-toface, synchronous discussion.
- **Accommodate different learning styles and levels.** Beyond encouraging participation from reluctant students, online assignments can have a multi-modal design (i.e., graphics, text, audio, virtual hands-on activities) and, if designed appropriately, can also help students reach new learning levels or think more deeply or critically about a given concept.
- **Give instant feedback to students.** One of the real benefits to students of online assignments is the possibility for instant feedback on their work. Many tools used to create such assignments can be configured to provide such feedback, instead of having students wait for assignments to be graded and returned. This way, they know immediately what concepts they need to work on, and which they already understand. This can also help instructors to identify unclear concepts or students who may need remedial assistance.
- **Archive course information.** Online assignments also allow for an archive to be created of relevant course information and discussions. This information can be used by students at a later date while studying for a test/exam, or by the instructor to create a Frequently Asked Questions page or to measure students' understanding of key concepts.
- **Deliver online or Distance Education courses.** If a course is being offered online or at a distance, then online assignments are a natural extension of this.
- **Provide students with transferable skills for other courses and in their careers.** Some instructors are interested in integrating key skills into their courses that students can use in other courses or take out into the “real-world” upon completion of their degrees. If this is a goal for your courses, then providing some familiarity with certain technologies through the use of online assignments may be a good way to introduce students to skills they can use elsewhere.
- **Be environmentally friendly.** Paperless assignments are a good way to save environmental resources.

## Creating Your Own Online Assignment

Now that you have some ideas about possible assignments and have reviewed the decisionmaking criteria, you should answer the following questions to consider how to integrate your online assignment into your course.

1. Briefly describe the assignment. (Write 2-4 sentences)
2. Explain how well your assignment fits with the online assignment decision-making criteria and consider how it will impact your overall course design. Consider using the following focusing questions to help you.

Type of Issue	Focusing Questions
<b>Goals/Objectives</b>	What do I most want students to learn from this assignment?
<b>Contextual</b>	Who are my students? Do they know how to use the technology I've chosen for my assignment? Do they have access to a computer?
<b>Content</b>	What about the assignment content or goal lends itself to being an online assignment?
<b>Teaching Methods</b>	How do I need to teach so my students can do this online assignment?
<b>Assessment</b>	Why would I use an online assignment? How will I grade this assignment? What kind of feedback do I need to provide to the students on their completed work or work in progress?

3. Students may need a rationale for having online assignments to help foster their motivation. What will you say to “sell” the assignment to your students? (Write 3-5 sentences)