THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF OUTSTANDING ONLINE COURSE DESIGN

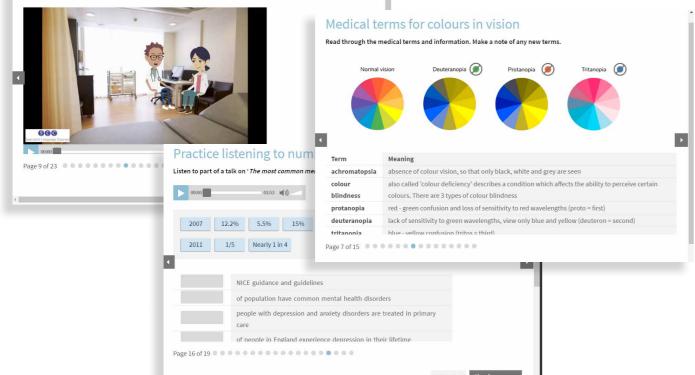**Chris Moore**

Introduction

Online courses with strong retention, high completion rates and consistently positive reviews are surprisingly rare. All too often online courses fail to engage. Obligatory courses on subjects such as compliance or safety encourage bored 'zombie clicking', while courses designed for a mass audience, such as MOOCs, video learning sites and language learning apps experience both early and high levels of dropouts.

Designing effective online courses is clearly not easy. It requires a very different approach to writing courses that are designed to be printed. It requires the application of several principles, each of which are not difficult in their own right, but only when applied together do their accumulated strengths play out.

Here are seven principles we apply to the courses we create and publish at SLC.

Explaining treatment
Watch the video again and select the correct option describing what the doctor says. When you have finished, read the transcript to check through your answers.

Page 9 of 23

Practice listening to num
Listen to part of a talk on 'The most common me

| 2007 | 12.2% | 5.5% | 15% |
| 2011 | 1/5 | Nearly 1 in 4 | |

Medical terms for colours in vision
Read through the medical terms and information. Make a note of any new terms.

Normal vision   Deuteranopia   Protanopia   Tritanopia

Term	Meaning
achromatopsia	absence of colour vision, so that only black, white and grey are seen
colour blindness	also called 'colour deficiency' describes a condition which affects the ability to perceive certain colours. There are 3 types of colour blindness
protanopia	red - green confusion and loss of sensitivity to red wavelengths (proto = first)
deuteranopia	lack of sensitivity to green wavelengths, view only blue and yellow (deuteron = second)
tritanopia	blue - yellow confusion (tritos = third)

Page 7 of 15

NICE guidance and guidelines

of population have common mental health disorders

people with depression and anxiety disorders are treated in primary care

of people in England experience depression in their lifetime

Page 16 of 19

1. Grab the learner's attention

People using screens are notoriously impatient. If the screen takes time to appear, they're off. If you're not on the first page of search results, forget it. If a video lasts more than a minute, no one watches the whole thing, right? Long texts? Yawn.

So, when it comes to designing online content, it's essential to grab the learner quickly and hold onto them. Video, audio, short texts with a strong opening line, grabby titles, strong or intriguing imagery all work.

2. Get them doing things

Once you have engaged your learners, keep holding onto their attention by getting them to do something. Test their understanding of the input. Mix it up, so multiple choice, drag and drop, gap-fill, label the image, categorise the words, highlight key points, and sort the ideas into the correct order, for example. Give immediate feedback, so learners submit their answers, receive a score and then get a chance to correct their mistakes.

When thinking about engagement, remember, the competition isn't other online courses. It's YouTube and Facebook.

3. Small is beautiful

If anything, screens are getting smaller. Laptops are replacing PCs. 14-inch screens are the norm. Mobile learning is very much on the rise as learners reach for their phones to access courses.

So, think short. Keep the content on one screen where possible. If a learner is dragging items for example, they probably don't want to scroll down from the draggable items box to a gap somewhere off the screen.
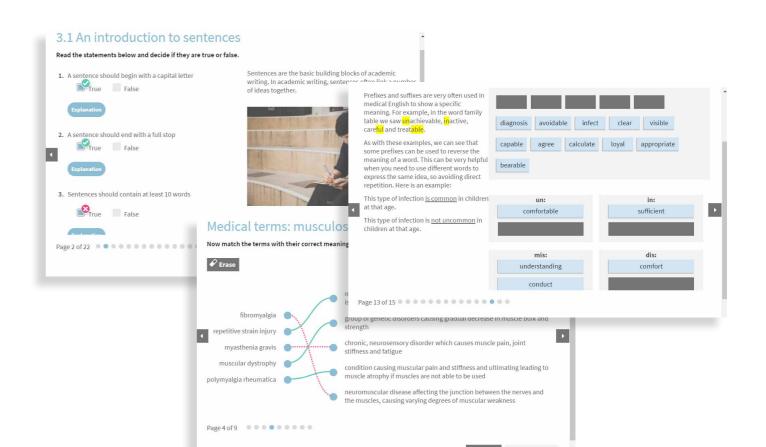
Think about format. Instead of a text with questions somewhere underneath, split the screen and line the text and questions up side by side, for example.

In a printed textbook, a double-page spread allows text, images and a variety of exercises to be displayed simultaneously. On the screen, you have much less freedom, so shorter activities and a simple approach is required. Focus on what's important. This is a good thing and imposes an excellent discipline.

4. Provide clarity and structure

When learning online, learners need a sense of direction, a sense that they are travelling down a clearly marked road with signposts and milestones on the way. There are no teachers to explain this, therefore the content must do the job instead.

So, share the outcomes, clarify what has been learnt as the course progresses, and refer back and forwards to key points throughout. Divide the course into manageable units with aims at the start and review points at the end. Title your screens clearly. In our courses, we typically structure the content into topics, each containing a number of units with 12 to 15 screens of content in each one.

3.1 An introduction to sentences

Read the statements below and decide if they are true or false.

1. A sentence should begin with a capital letter
   ☑ True ☐ False
   Explanation

2. A sentence should end with a full stop
   ☑ True ☐ False
   Explanation

3. Sentences should contain at least 10 words
   ☒ True ☐ False

Sentences are the basic building blocks of academic writing. In academic writing, sentences often link a number of ideas together.

Page 2 of 22

Medical terms: musculos

Now match the terms with their correct meaning

✏ **Erase**

fibromyalgia
repetitive strain injury
myasthenia gravis
muscular dystrophy
polymyalgia rheumatica

group of genetic disorders causing gradual decrease in muscle bulk and strength

chronic, neurosensory disorder which causes muscle pain, joint stiffness and fatigue

condition causing muscular pain and stiffness and ultimating leading to muscle atrophy if muscles are not able to be used

neuromuscular disease affecting the junction between the nerves and the muscles, causing varying degrees of muscular weakness

Page 4 of 9

Prefixes and suffixes are very often used in medical English to show a specific meaning. For example, in the word family table we saw unachievable, inactive, careful and treatable.

As with these examples, we can see that some prefixes can be used to reverse the meaning of a word. This can be very helpful when you need to use different words to express the same idea, so avoiding direct repetition. Here is an example:

This type of infection is common in children at that age.

This type of infection is not uncommon in children at that age.

diagnosis	avoidable	infect	clear	visible
capable	agree	calculate	loyal	appropriate
bearable				

un: comfortable
in: sufficient
mis: understanding
dis: comfort
conduct

Page 13 of 15

5. Learning by doing

Getting learners to interact with content allows a much stronger learning experience than is possible with printed courses.

Using multimedia inputs and getting learners clicking, moving content around, labelling, arranging and sorting creates strong learning experiences. In SLC's online language courses, learners can record themselves and compare with models.

So, exploit the variety available in course authoring tools. Keep it varied. Keep the learner active. Hold onto their attention.

6. Learning by exploring

Why limit the learner to what they see on the course screen? When I watch my kids looking for answers online, they jump from one resource to the next, using each one to build a picture of what they're looking for.
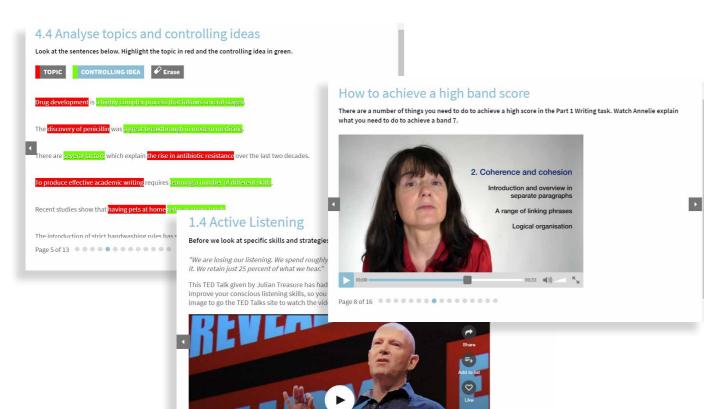
There is a ton of fantastic content online as well as some pretty dreadful stuff too. Help your learners by guiding them to the great stuff that will consolidate and extend what your courses teach. Take them on the occasional tangent if it'll intrigue, amuse or inspire.

So, add links to the course where relevant. And don't worry. If your course is any good, they'll be back. Perhaps set links to open a separate window to be on the safe side.

7. Add value

Give your learners some takeaways. Downloadable content such as key learning points, lexical and grammatical references or pronunciation guides, is easy to create and can be kept on learners' phones and laptops. More accessible than printed books and easier to look after. And easy to share with other potential learners.

If you have other courses, apps and content, give free or discounted access. If you have capacity to monitor them, create online forums or Facebook groups and give learners access so they can ask and answer each other's questions. If you have tutors in your organisation, offer mentoring and coaching.

4.4 Analyse topics and controlling ideas

Look at the sentences below. Highlight the topic in red and the controlling idea in green.

TOPIC   CONTROLLING IDEA   Erase

Drug development is a highly complex process that follows several stages.

The discovery of penicillin was a great breakthrough in modern medicine.

There are several factors which explain the rise in antibiotic resistance over the last two decades.

To produce effective academic writing requires learning a number of different skills.

Recent studies show that having pets at home reduces stress levels.

The introduction of strict handwashing rules has s

Page 5 of 13

How to achieve a high band score

There are a number of things you need to do to achieve a high score in the Part 1 Writing task. Watch Annelie explain what you need to do to achieve a band 7.

2. Coherence and cohesion

Introduction and overview in separate paragraphs

A range of linking phrases

Logical organisation

01:00   01:33

Page 8 of 16

1.4 Active Listening

Before we look at specific skills and strategies

"We are losing our listening. We spend roughly it. We retain just 25 percent of what we hear."

This TED Talk given by Julian Treasure has had improve your conscious listening skills, so you image to go the TED Talks site to watch the vid

Share

Add to list

Like

Page 6 of 6

To conclude

These, in our experience, are seven simple principles which when used together create powerful online courses. Engagement increases, dropout rates go down, completion levels are high, and feedback is strong.

Chris Moore is Managing Director of Specialist Language Courses (SLC). SLC publishes online Medical English, IELTS and OET test preparation courses, and is the UK's leading provider of online English language courses to the global healthcare sector.

For more information on SLC's courses, see www.specialistlanguagecourses.com.

To speak to us about your courses or about partnership and distribution deals, contact Chris on chris@specialistlanguagecourses.com.