

“Where Do I Start?”

Creating Your First e-Learning Course

Creating your first e-learning course can seem like a daunting, if not impossible, task. Some of the most common questions are: How do you come up with the appropriate content? How do you organize your material? How can you tell when your course is ready? Where do you even start?

Below is some solid, time-tested, advice that has worked for countless educators. After all, writing e-learning courses is not rocket science (except if you're writing rocket-science courses, in which case it is).

Begin at the beginning

Writers call it “fear of the blank page.” In an online case, it's more like fear of a blank screen, but the fear remains the same: how to even begin to fill all this empty space?

Best advice: Begin at the beginning. Don't feel pressed to complete the entire course or even the first chapter/lesson at your first sitting. Simply writing the first paragraph of the first chapter or lesson is a great way to overcome your fear. More often than not you'll find that the next chapter or lesson will come by itself. And then the next, and so on.

Create a high level outline

If forcing yourself to write the first chapter or lesson of your course worked to get you started, then you could go on and continue linearly until you finish a first rough draft. A lot of writers work this way.

If you're a more conceptual kind of person, however, you can start by creating a high level outline of your content. List its chapters and, if you can, its sub-chapters. Try various arrangements of the chapters to see what works best. If you get any ideas about the contents of a chapter, scribble them down too.

This overview and any notes you keep, can serve you as the basic skeleton of your course. Don't wait until you got it perfectly right. You can always add new chapters, remove existing ones, and re-arrange them to your heart's content later.

Stick to a routine

Now that you've hit the ground running, so to speak, it's important not to lose any momentum. That doesn't mean that you have to write for long hours every day until you're dead from exhaustion — in fact that can be downright counterproductive and burn you out.

What you need to do is stick to a specific writing routine. Set some hours aside every day for writing. Also, try to set a specific, attainable goal, like 300 words per day. If you set a much higher goal, you'll inevitably get tired at some point, and give up on the whole venture. If, on the other hand, you keep a steady pace, you'll have a thick book worth of material in six months or so.

Borrow, copy and adapt

“Lesser artists borrow”, says the old adage, “great artists steal”. Of course you’ll want to avoid a lawsuit and a lengthy trial, but that doesn’t mean you can’t learn and adapt content from other people and services.

Check books with the same or similar subject matter. Check the work of your competitors and colleagues. How are their classes structured? What are the advantages in what and how they teach? What are the disadvantages? Do they have something good you can use in your own material?

Getting some inspiration is OK, copying verbatim is not. Tell your story, your way. If you do quote an original author, that author has the copyright and the moral right to his content – make sure that people know where the quote comes from.

Move fast, fill-in details later

Whatever you do, don’t spend all your time belaboring some specific chapter or content, even if it’s a particularly tricky one. Move fast, continue to write page after page. In the first stages, keeping your momentum and pace are more important than filling in all the details.

Start with a rough sketch. You can always come back later and add anything you missed the first time. After several revisions on your content, your course will start to shape up to its final form.

Revise, Revise, Revise

The secret to creating a polished end result is not some magical ability to conceive it in its perfect final form, but rather constant revisions and refinement. Write a first draft, then a second one, change things here and there, flesh out generic outlines, etc., until you are satisfied with the final results.

It also helps to ask around. Try to collect feedback with surveys, plan for improvements, have some students take your course for a test drive, analyze their test and learning statistics, optimize whatever needs optimizing, etc.

When you’re done, you’ll know it. Plus, even if you don’t, “where do I stop” is a much better problem to have than “where do I start.”