POCR: Subsection "A"

Unit-Level Objectives

The three items that comprise Subsection A "Unit-Level Objectives" address the placement, clarity, and alignment of unit-level objectives. Unlike SLOs, which serve departmental and institutional purposes, unit-level objectives are written for students to help them better understand the purpose of the work they are doing in a particular unit of the course.

A1: Placement

Finally, no matter how clearly written or well-aligned the objectives are if they are not placed where students can find them, they are not productive. While the ideal placement for unit-level objectives may vary by course, reviewers can look for them at the beginning of modules or units, either on a page of their own or as part of an initial page in the module. Exemplary courses offer unit objectives in a consistent location that is easy to find.

A2: Clarity

In addition to aligned objectives, students will benefit when the unit-level objectives are clearly written. For aligned courses, this means objectives should use language that is measurable and clearly indicates the learning outcome. For instance, learning objectives that note students should *understand* X, Y, or Z do not clearly indicate how understanding may be measured. Instead, the learning objective should be rewritten to indicate how understanding will be demonstrated. Using Bloom's Taxonomy as a starting point, here are several learning verbs that can be used to "demonstrate" understanding:

Measurable Verbs					
Knowledge	**Comprehension**	**Application**	**Analysis**	**Synthesis**	**Evaluation**
Define	Discuss	Complete	Categorize	Develop	Assess
List	Explain	Construct	Critique	Create	Investigate
Recognize	Translate	Perform	Debate	Design	Compare

A3: Alignment

Let's start from A3, alignment, and work our way back. The concept of alignment supports the idea that the content within a unit should contribute to the knowledge and skills the students will need to successfully learn and apply the material and to meet the outcomes of the unit. Careful alignment ensures students have the material they need, and that their time is spent wisely. This is especially important in an online course, where we may fall into two traps--either offering limited instructional material to support learning or stuffing our units full of extraneous material that is difficult for students to wade through to find the pertinent information.

POCR: Subsection "A"

To check for alignment, reviewers should look at the content within a unit and determine if the connection between the content and the unit objectives is reasonably clear. Remember, the goal is to enhance student learning, so if it is not reasonably clear to you, it most likely is not clear to the students, either. In fact, exemplary courses make the connection between content and unit objectives *explicit.*

A4: Course Navigation

Though having a common course management system (CMS) will help with navigation, the reality is that instructors will use the CMS tools in different ways. Each course will have its own unique personality. To help students "adjust" to our individual courses, instructors need to ensure they are designing their courses in ways that will make sense--not always an easy task!

For reviewers, assessing the clarity of the navigation may be a difficult task, as well. The best advice for reviewing course navigation is to view the course from the student's perspective.

When reviewing a course, enter the course through the Canvas course card on the dashboard, and first assess the home page. Ask the following questions:

- Does the home page provide basic information about the course, or does it provide a welcome to the course?
- Are there clear directions about what a student should do first, or must the student guess?
- If you knew nothing about online courses or Canvas, where does the home page guide you to start?
- Does the course navigation include links students don't need?

Navigate the course as if you were a student, which means following any directions provided by the instructor, and noting if there are not instructions. How many "clicks" before you get to useful information that tells you what you need to do in week 1?

Next, look at the overall structure of the modules. Do they follow a similar pattern? If a student were starting from the Modules page, are the modules well-named? Can you navigate using the module page as a sort of index or table of contents?

Once in a module, do the pieces fit together? As you move from one item to the next, using the Canvas Next button, does the chronology of the module make sense?

Finally, note that exemplary courses have not only a logical structure, but also ample tutorials that help students navigate the course. These could include a welcome video that offers insight or suggestions for navigating the course, links to Canvas guides where appropriate, and/or explicit directions for navigating.

A5: Unit-Level Chunking

Unit-level chunking works hand-in-hand with clear navigation. Each instructor may define what constitutes a unit differently, but it should be clear to students where one unit ends and another begins. This likely involves chunking the work of the class into distinct modules. Module and page names can help to make the organizational strategy clear.

POCR: Subsection "A"

In addition, consistency between the modules is a crucial dimension of exemplary courses. Consistency allows students to measure and predict the workload, develop study patterns and habits, and allot the correct amount of time to their studies.

A6: Page-Level Chunking

The benefit of chunking includes not only the units, but also individual pages. Long, text-heavy content pages are difficult to read and impede review. Students studying for a test or searching for specific information will be frustrated if they have to wade through long paragraphs. Well-placed and descriptive headings allow students to engage in active reading, which includes skimming a page before diving into deep reading, noting key words, and looking at graphs, charts, and images to help predict and assimilate content.

To reach alignment, pages should be of manageable length, and headings need to be included. Exemplary courses further this by incorporating meaningful descriptive headings to help students navigate the material, and to provide semantic structure.

While We're on the Subject of Design. . .

We'll be talking more specifically about Section D later in the course but, as we look at the elements of Section A, we wanted to mention the connection between Section A and Section D. Being aware of accessibility is an integral part of successful content presentation. At least one person on your campus team should have a strong familiarity with accessibility considerations and, hopefully, your entire team (and ultimately your entire campus) will eventually gain proficiency.

Content Pages

In particular, the Rich Content Editor and Accessibility Checker tools in Canvas make formatting content within the Canvas environment for accessibility pretty simple. We feel it's not at all unreasonable to expect that instructors know how to use those tools effectively. @ONE offers the 4-week [Creating Accessible Course Content](#) course to support your (and your faculty's) learning. And we encourage everyone to check out the free, self-paced [Accessibility Essentials micro-courses](#), too!

We use the Rich Content Editor in Canvas to add content to pages, assignments, discussions, announcements, and quizzes. Learning how to use the editor correctly is essential when teaching online. The formatting elements that are especially helpful to students with visual, hearing, or cognitive impairments are headings, lists, alternative text for images, meaningful link text, and color contrast.

Canvas provides a tool that allows faculty to do a quick accessibility check whenever they are using the Rich Content Editor, but it is not comprehensive. Also, of course, a tool is only useful if faculty know when to use it and what they are looking for. As you develop a review community on your campus, be thinking about ways to support professional development around accessibility. Who are the accessibility experts on your campus? What could they add to the conversation?   **And now, back to our exploration of Section A guidelines**. . .

POCR: Subsection "A"

A7: Effective Use of CMS Tools

This item is such an important part of Content Presentation that we're going to tackle it all on its own. Over the last two decades, our ability to teach online has been transformed by the technology tools embedded in our course management systems. Canvas is no exception--it offers a variety of tools for instructors to use. But a choice of tools does not mean that the tools were used wisely! When you're applying this part of the rubric, you want to look at the appropriateness of the tool for the task.

In particular, pay close attention to these features in Canvas, all tools that help students access materials can be seen in the "CMS Tools Table."

In addition to the features listed in the CMS Tools Table, well-designed courses utilize web-based technology, such as hyperlinks, to provide streamlined access to materials. Be sure to look through several modules before making your assessment. As with all aspects of the rubric, these are general guidelines. There are unique and innovative courses that will seemingly break these design rules and still provide excellent, streamlined access to course material. Be sure you don't penalize innovation.

A8: Effective Use of Multimedia

This item is grounded in the notion that different people are engaged by different modalities, and that varied material may need to be presented using a variety of modalities. Aligned courses should use a variety of text, audio, video, images, graphics, charts, and tables, as appropriate, to engage learners.

The rubric does not stipulate how much variety a course needs, but it does say that aligned courses use a variety of media throughout the course. If a course is dominated by a single media type, take advantage of this subsection to provide feedback to the instructor and help them strengthen their course.

As we noted in A7, students need instructions for working with course materials. In our face-to-face courses, we would never simply hand out a worksheet without explaining why, when, and how students should use it, yet in online courses, we often provide vast archives of material, link to outside resources, and even show films or videos without ever providing instructions to our students.

Aligned courses *explicitly* include instructions for working with content, and exemplary courses provide these instructions with the activity or resource (at the "point of need")**.**

When reviewing, look for instructions in the syllabus, in unit introductions, and alongside the content, but remember you're viewing the course as if you were a student, and students may not have the persistence or wherewithal to look under every stone in the course, so you shouldn't either. If you can't find the instructions fairly easily, chances are a student won't either.

POCR: Subsection "A"

A10: Learning Support

In our face-to-face courses, students ask questions, and we interact with them during class and read their body language to ascertain when students need help, or we can do quick activities to assess student learning. In an online class, however, the student who needs to ask a question may get left behind, and, at the other end of the spectrum, advanced or highly motivated students may not get enough stimulation. Aligned courses, however, use the power of the asynchronous environment to provide additional resources across the spectrum.

Look for links to tutorials, formative assessments that can be repeated with no penalty, extra resources for further study, and opportunities for advanced projects. These could be embedded in assignments and activities, included in unit summaries, or provided in the syllabus, to name just a few.

A11: Learner Feedback

In a face-to-face course, we receive feedback from our students--whether we want it or not!--on a regular basis. Questions asking for clarification, looks of confusion, boredom, or distraction, or the student waiting patiently for you at the end of the class all provide feedback you can use to modify your teaching, including on-the-spot modifications, re-teaching an idea during the next class, or revising your course for the next semester. Item A11 suggests that online students ought to have the same opportunities to provide feedback.

Reviewers should look for anonymous surveys at the end of the course, and, for exemplary courses, anonymous surveys during the course.

The final three items of Section A also focus on supporting the learner, with a slight twist. Behind every great teacher is a network of resources that we use to support our students. Online students are best served when these resources are readily available to them from their classroom--their online classroom. These three items highlight that support, from clearly written policies to student services and tech support.

A12: Course Policies

Though online students may be off-campus, they are still protected by, and must adhere to, institutional policies. These should be clearly labeled and easy to find. Reviewers should look through the course to ensure institutional and instructor policies are provided in one or more of these locations: the syllabus (in a labeled section or sections), as part of an orientation module (with a specific page or two dedicated to policies), and, in the case of exemplary courses, in specific activities where the policies need to be addressed (e.g., plagiarism policy accompanying a term paper).

A13: Student Services

Again, though online students are off-campus, they have a right to the same services as on-campus students. Aligned courses provide links to students services such as the library, online counseling, disability services, online readiness, and tutoring services via links to web pages for those services.

POCR: Subsection "A"

As noted in A12, these links may be in the syllabus, an orientation module, and, for exemplary courses, embedded in relevant activities.

A14: Technology Support

Though there are huge benefits to having a common CMS, and Canvas is easy to use, students may have a variety of questions about logging in, tools being used in the course, and even Canvas. Strong online courses provide links, phone numbers, and explanations that help students figure out where they should go to get help with technology questions and issues. Exemplary courses provide information about tech support just where it may be needed.

CMS Tools Table

Tool	Design Benefits	Design Pitfalls
Home Page	A well-designed home page helps students access information. If the home page is intentionally chosen and used well, it's a great benefit to students. For instance, a well-designed content page can provide contact information, links to resources, and directions for getting started.	Canvas offers several home page options, including a custom content page and the Modules page. Without careful design, however, the home page can be a frustrating introduction to the class. A content page that is friendly and welcoming but contains few instructions for proceeding may lead to extra clicks as the student hunts for information. The module page may provide a table of contents to the material, but if the page or activity titles are not sufficiently descriptive, the student won't know where to start and what to access.
Syllabus	The Canvas Syllabus page is unique. At the top of the Syllabus is a text area for providing the course syllabus, and below is the "Course Summary"--a comprehensive list of graded activities. This is a great tool for helping students stay on track and monitor due dates.	The editable area in the Syllabus could be left blank, which will be confusing to students looking for an actual Syllabus, especially in the first days of class. On the other hand, the editable area could be **filled** with the entire text of a Syllabus, leading to a lot of scrolling, a poorly "chunked" page, and an assignment list that is buried at the bottom.
Page	Canvas pages are an amazing tool that allows you to build a web page using a simple content editor. When segmented properly (see A6) pages can be phenomenal ways to provide students with text, images, audio, and video.	Segmenting is critical. Pages can be poorly formatted, overly long, out of order in the module, or poorly written. There might also be examples where pages were used, but the power of building web-based material was not leveraged, such as linking students to resources that could be embedded (YouTube videos, for instance).
Modules	The chronological (Next/Previous) pattern of the Canvas modules allow instructors to group content, activities, and assessments into a cohesive pattern--first, then, next, finally.	When modules are created by grouping similar items together, the chronological pattern may not fit. If students need to bounce between modules to complete a unit, the inherent navigation within Canvas is bypassed, leading, *perhaps*, to confusion or "lost" students.
Add File to Module	Not recommended.	Canvas allows instructors to add files directly to the module. Although this may seem like a great way to add a pertinent article or handout, this method does not allow instructors to provide instructions for working with the content (see A9). Instead, files should be embedded in a content page.

POCR: Subsection "A"

Add URL to Module	Not recommended.	Like the Add File feature, adding a URL directly to a module creates a link to an outside source, but does not allow the instructor to include instructions for working with the resource (see A9). Instead, links to outside sources and activities should be embedded in a content page.