



Print in Distance Education

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Why Include Print?

Print is the foundation of distance education and the basis from which all other delivery systems have evolved. The first distance-delivered courses were offered by correspondence study, with print materials sent and returned to students by mail. While technological developments have added to the repertoire of tools available to the distance educator, print continues to be a significant component of all distance education programs.

Advantages of Print

- Spontaneous. Print materials can be used in any setting without the need for sophisticated presentation equipment.
- Instructionally transparent. The medium of delivery should enhance, not compete with, the content for the learner's attention. If the student reads well, the print medium is the most transparent instructional medium of all.
- Non-threatening. Reading is second nature to most students. As a result, they are easily able to focus on the content, without becoming mesmerized or frustrated by the process of reading itself.
- Easy to use. Given adequate light, print materials can be used any time and any place without the aid of supplemental resources such as electricity, viewing screen, and specially designed electronic classrooms. The portability of print is especially important for rural learners with limited access to advanced technology.
- Easily reviewed and referenced. Print materials are typically learner-controlled. As a result, the student rapidly moves through redundant sections, while focusing on areas demanding additional attention.
- Cost-effective. No instructional tool is less expensive to produce than print. In addition, facilities abound for the inexpensive duplication of these materials.
- Easily edited and revised. In comparison to technically sophisticated electronic software, print is both easy and inexpensive to edit and revise.
- Time-effective. When instructional print materials are created, the developer's primary focus remains on content concerns, not the technical requirements of the delivery system.

Limitations of Print

- Limited view of reality. Print, by its reliance on the written word, offers a vicarious view of reality. Despite the use of excellent sequential illustrations or photos, for example, it is impossible to adequately recreate motion in print.

- Passive and self-directed. Numerous studies have shown that higher learner motivation is required to successfully complete print-based courses. To a certain extent, the passive nature of print can be offset by systematic instructional design that seeks to stimulate the passive learner. Still, it takes more motivation to read a book or work through a written exercise than it does to watch a television program or participate in an audioconference with an instructor encouraging student participation and response.
- Feedback and interaction. Without feedback and interaction, instruction suffers, regardless of the delivery system in use. By nature, print materials are passive and self-directed. Even with print materials incorporating feedback mechanisms and interactive exercises, it is easy for learners to skip to the answer section.
- Dependent on reading skills. Thanks to television, most students have developed fairly good viewing skills by age four. These same children, however, often fail to develop adequate reading skills by age 12. Reading skills must often be improved. Lack of ability in this area cripples the effectiveness of even the most instructionally sound print material and must be overcome if print is to be used effectively.

Formats of Print Materials

Various print formats are available, including:

- Textbooks.** As in traditionally delivered courses, textbooks are the basis and primary source of content for the majority of distance-delivered courses. While textbooks should always be critically reviewed before adoption, this is especially critical when the learner and the instructor are not in daily contact.
- Study guides.** Typically, distance educators use study guides to reinforce points made during class and through the use of other delivery systems. They will often include exercises, related readings and additional resources available to the student.
- Workbooks.** In a distance education context workbooks are often used to provide course content in an interactive manner. A typical format might contain an overview, the content to be covered, one or more exercises or case studies to elaborate the points being made, and a quiz or test (with answer key) for self-assessment. In addition, there is typically some form of feedback, remediation, or "branching" loop to recycle students through the instruction as needed.
- Course syllabus.** A comprehensive and well-planned course syllabus is the foundation of many

distance-delivered courses. It provides course goals and objectives, performance expectations, descriptions of assignments, related readings (often by session), grading criteria, and a day-by-day overview of the material to be covered. The syllabus must be as complete as possible in order to guide the students through the course in the absence of daily contact with the instructor.

❑ **Case studies.** If written imaginatively, case studies are an extremely effective instructional tool. In fact, case studies are often designed around the limitations of print and intended to spark the students' imaginations as they place themselves in the particular case under consideration. Many case studies present a content-based scenario. They raise questions, pose alternative solutions, and then branch students to different sections of the text. There, the consequences of the selected alternative are described.

Designing Instruction for Print

Because print is largely a one-way communication medium, the challenge is to design instruction to maximize the amount of interaction in distance education print materials. Consider:

❑ **Writing style.** Misanchuk (1994) suggests that distance educators write instructional materials with language more like that used for speaking than for writing journal articles or books. His tips for writing instructional materials include:

- Use short sentences.
- Avoid compound sentences.
- Avoid excess information in a sentence.
- Use the active voice.
- Use personal pronouns.
- Keep equivalent items parallel.
- List conditions separately.
- Avoid multiple negatives.
- Use point form.
- Use familiar examples.
- Write as you would speak.
- Avoid unnecessary and difficult words.
- Avoid jargon; use technical terms only when necessary.
- Put sentences and paragraphs into a logical sequence: first things that affect many, then things that affect few; first the general, then the specific; first permanent provisions, then temporary ones.
- Avoid cultural and gender stereotyping.

❑ **Focusing on content organization before developing content.** Prior to content development, create an outline of the material to be covered. Print materials are often too wordy because the author is planning, organizing and writing at the same time. Instead, organize content based on the identified goals and objectives. At first, focus on systematically and creatively ordering the flow of topics, not polishing a finished product. The end result will be a well-organized content outline from which the written content will easily flow.

❑ **Developing a course introduction.** Misanchuk (1994) suggests developing a written course introduction that will be the very first thing a distant student sees. The course introduction can include biographical background information about the instructor, a course overview, course goals and aims, a listing of any textbooks or ancillary learning materials that will be needed, and information about assignments, examinations, and grading.

❑ **Staying with a consistent format.** Learner anxiety with the unknown can be reduced through consistency in instructional presentation. Develop an effective format and organizational scheme and stick with it. Use adequate headings and subheadings to visually guide the reader through the material.

❑ **Using advance organizers.** Advance organizers are a means to connect new material with a learner's prior knowledge and cognitive structure. They should be of a more general and abstract character than the learning matter that follows and help the learner to relate different parts and concepts of teaching material to each other. Place the most general and comprehensive ideas at the beginning of a lesson and progress to more structured and detailed information.

❑ **Using examples and analogies.** In a traditional classroom, teachers spontaneously provide examples and analogies to illustrate a point that students are having difficulty understanding. Because distant students and their teachers may not have this type of interaction, include lots of good examples and analogies in print-based materials. Be sure, however, that these examples address the various cultural groups, ages and experiences of the students.

❑ **Including questions.** Questions in print material can stimulate the learner to be more active and to deal more intensively with the learning matter. Use questions that aim at understanding rather than merely reproduction and memorization of facts.

❑ **Adding a table of contents.** A detailed table of contents can help the learner to quickly refer to the appropriate section.

❑ **Incorporating a glossary of terms.** A glossary summarizes all the new, often technical terminology encountered in a document. It may be helpful to delineate glossary entries in the instructional material by putting them in boldface type.

References

❑ Misanchuk, E.R. (1992). *Preparing instructional text: Document design using desktop publishing*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications.

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