



10 Tips for Building Your First Online Course

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I remember the first time I took an online course. It was in 2007, around the time I decided to learn to drive (of all the things that should be taught online). The course was an audio stream. The instructor lectured for an hour every week. Four lectures and the course was over. There was no feedback from the instructor. There was no interaction with my classmates. There were no questions to answer. And I certainly didn't learn how to drive by the time it was done.

The Commission's Online Courses

We've come a long way with online learning in the last ten years. As we mentioned in our last [blog post](#) on the topic, over 2.8 million students are taking courses online. And that number should now include those taking the Commission on Professionalism's very own online course.

In April 2016, the Commission on Professionalism launched our first free online course, [Talking About My Generation: Learning Conversations in the Legal Workplace](#). The response has been tremendous. In just over two months, over 700 attorneys have completed our online course. Attorneys have given us enormously positive feedback, complimenting the delivery method, the content, and the accessibility of the course.

Now we're doing it again. We've just launched our second free online course, [The Buck Stops Here: Ethics and Professionalism for In-House Counsel](#). The genesis of this course is the new [Illinois Supreme Court Rule 716\(c\)](#) concerning limited admission of foreign in-house counsel. However the course is for everyone, law firm lawyers, government lawyers, non-profit lawyers, solo practitioners, and yes, in-house counsel as well. What are the ethics rules that all lawyers should follow, and the professionalism standards that all lawyers should rise to meet? Take our online course to find out.

Building Your Own Online Course

In addition to bringing free online CLE to the lawyers of Illinois, we had a secondary goal for our online course journey. We wanted to demonstrate to lawyers and non-lawyers alike that quality asynchronous e-learning for lawyers was a very real possibility. Now, after nine months of designing these two courses, we want to share a few of the lessons we've learned along the way. This is for those of you starting out on your own and not outsourcing the entire process to an e-learning firm. While everyone's design journey will be different, we sincerely hope that sharing our journey will help you with yours.

1. What Do People Need To Know?

This may sound intuitive, but it's the first rule of designing any course—live or online. In the instructional design world, this is called the "training needs assessment" phase. Someone has given you the go-ahead to build an online course. Go back to that someone and drill down what is it that they want achieved. What is the problem that needs to be solved? What tasks do people need to do after the course



is complete? What skills or knowledge should they take away? Make sure you have a full grasp on the “need-to-know” before you even start out.

2. Get a Subject-Matter Expert.

You may be designing the course. But that doesn’t necessarily mean you know the subject backwards and forwards. So go ask someone who does. These are your subject-matter experts, or SMEs. Need a course on product liability theories? Go interview your best products attorneys. Business development? Chat with your partners and see what they suggest. Deposition techniques for young lawyers? Your experienced litigators would be happy to impart their knowledge. Provide your SMEs with guided, specific questions about the subject matter. Better yet, interview them yourself. Then when they’re finished answering, use their expert information to design your online course.

3. Know What Software You Will Use.

While your subject-matter experts are busy doing content research, it’s time for you to do software research. After learning that we were going to do an online course, we decided to research what our online course options were. We came across [Articulate Storyline 2](#), a very user-friendly e-learning software program. We learned Storyline, got involved in the e-learning community, and worked to develop a basic version of our online course. Which is where step 4 quickly came in.

4. Hire A Great Developer.

We hired an excellent e-learning developer. If you need her contact information, please let us know. She didn’t write any of the content or the questions or the interactives. We still had to actually build the course. Her job however was to take everything we wrote and put it into a visual e-learning experience. Could we have done it without her help? Possibly. We would have built a very basic, very buggy, online course that would have just gotten the essentials done. Our developer however was able to create layers, and interactives, and graphics, and take it to the high quality that anyone taking an online course would expect.

5. Tell A Story.

So you have your expert research, you have an idea of what software you’re using, and you’ve engaged your developer. Now you’re writing up your course outline. This is the design document you will give your developer to allow her to put on screen what you have only written on paper. As you write that outline, remember to tell a story. Use characters and story arcs and narratives. For our first online course, we used four people in one law firm. For our second online course, we used three in-house counsel at three different companies. Each of them had a storyline that engage our learners right from the beginning.

6. Make It Interactive.

The best learning is interactive learning. For our online courses, we used multiple choice and free answer questions. We had our users click on virtual Outlook inboxes, review pleadings and documents, check voicemails, send text messages, and watch video screens from different eras of history. And most importantly, we ensured that the interaction wasn’t just for fun, but was actively tied to the learning process.



7. Invest In Some Professional Upgrades.

At this point, you're full-on invested in your online course. If you have the budget, it's worth spending a little extra to upgrade the quality of the work. There might be people in your workplace who've longed to act. Ask them to volunteer their time for a chance at e-learning immortality. For us, we had neither the time nor budget for actors. So we bought high-quality stock pictures online. Then we used voiceovers to make those pictures come to life. We used a company called [VoiceBunny](#) out of Silicon Valley to provide us with excellent character voiceover work at a very low cost. We also invested in a portable voiceover booth so all the narration for both our online courses could be done, for free, by yours truly. The cost difference between a DIY course and a DIY+ course is minimal, but the quality difference is huge.

8. Keep It Short.

Now that you're getting toward the end, your course might be dragging a bit. So remember, particularly with online courses, no one wants to sit in the same spot for three hours watching a course on their screen. If possible, consider shorter bite-sized courses that, if needed, can be taken at different times. Or allow your learner to exit the online course when they're halfway done, and continue it again at a different time.

9. Test, Test And Test Again.

You've finished designing your online course. Now comes the crucial part, the beta testing phase. Get as many diverse people as possible – attorneys, non-attorneys, your subject matter experts – to test your course. That includes the people back in Tip #1 who tasked you to do this course in the first place. Ask them to try to do everything, go backward, forward, answer incorrectly, exit and retry, use Chrome, use Firefox, use an iPhone and an Android. Once they test it, have them tell you everything that went wrong, then work with your developer to make it better.

10. Release and Recharge.

Congratulations! You've released your first online course! People will love your course. Online education that's well done is exciting to those familiar with only traditional lecture-based courses. If you do it well, you'll get great feedback and be asked to do even more. So release your course, recharge your batteries, and get ready for the next one. It only gets better from here.