

# National Standards of Quality for Online Courses



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## Introduction

The mission of the North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL) is to increase educational opportunities and enhance learning by providing collegial expertise and leadership in K-12 online teaching and learning.

*National Standards for Online Course Quality* is designed to provide states, districts, online programs, and other organizations with a set of quality guidelines for online course content, instructional design, technology, student assessment, and course management. The initiative began with a thorough literature review of existing online course quality standards followed by a survey offered to representatives of the NACOL network to ensure the efficacy of the standards adopted. These guidelines should be implemented and monitored by each district or organization, as they reserve the right to apply the guidelines according to the best interest of the population for which they serve.

As a result of the research review, NACOL has chosen to fully endorse the work of the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) *Quality Online Course Standards* as a comprehensive set of criteria.\* The standards as identified by SREB, already in use by sixteen SREB states, proved to be the most comprehensive and included guidelines set forth in the other criteria from the literature review. A full cross-reference of standards is available, including the NACOL-endorsed *NEA Guide to Teaching Online Courses*, which included the key fundamental criteria. We are grateful for SREB's work and for their permission to distribute these standards on a national scale.

In partnership with the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), NACOL is adopting the *Standards for Quality Online Courses* as a primary source, with an additional rubric for inclusion of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, with reference to the *Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills*.

*The National Standards of Quality for Online Courses* are identified on the following pages.

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\*NACOL conducted a comprehensive review of course standards available. Based on this review, the SREB *Standards for Quality Online Courses*, Southern Regional Education Board, Atlanta, Georgia, 2006 is adopted as the source for the NACOL *National Standards for Quality for Online Courses*. NACOL added a standard to include 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills.

## Rating Scale

- 0 Absent—component is missing
- 1 Unsatisfactory—needs significant improvement
- 2 Somewhat satisfactory—needs targeted improvements
- 3 Satisfactory—discretionary improvement needed
- 4 Very satisfactory—no improvement needed

A	Content	Score
✓	The course goals and objectives are measurable and clearly state what the participants will know or be able to do at the end of the course.	
✓	The course content and assignments are aligned with state’s content standards or nationally accepted content standards set for Advanced Placement courses, technology, computer science, or other courses whose content is not included in state standards.	
✓	Course tasks and assessments align with the required local, state, and national assessments that are associated with the course.	
✓	The course content and assignments are of sufficient rigor, depth, and breadth to teach the standards being addressed.	
✓	Information literacy and communication skills are incorporated and taught as an integral part of the curriculum.	
✓	Sufficient learning resources and materials to increase student success are available to students before the course begins.	
✓	A clear, complete course overview and syllabus are included in the course.	
✓	Course requirements are consistent with course goals, representative of the scope of the course, and clearly stated.	
✓	Information is provided to students, parents and mentors on how to communicate with the online teacher and course provider, including information on the process for these communications.	
✓	Issues associated with the use of copyrighted materials are addressed.	
✓	Academic integrity and netiquette (Internet etiquette) expectations regarding lesson activities, discussions, e-mail communications and plagiarism are clearly stated.	

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✓	Privacy policies are clearly stated.	
✓	Instructor resources and notes are included.	
✓	Assessment and assignment answers and explanations are included.	

<b>B</b>	<b>Instructional Design</b>	<b>Score</b>
✓	Course design reflects a clear understanding of student needs, and incorporates varied ways to learn and multiple levels of mastery of the curriculum.	
✓	The course is organized into units and lessons.	
✓	The course unit overview describes the objectives, activities and resources that frame the unit. It includes a description of the activities and assignments that are central to the unit.	
✓	Each lesson includes a lesson overview, content and activities, assignments, and assessments to provide multiple learning opportunities for students to master the content.	
✓	The course is designed to teach concepts and skills that students will retain over time.	
✓	The course instruction includes activities that engage students in active learning.	
✓	Instruction provides students with multiple learning paths to master the content, based on student needs.	
✓	The teacher engages students in learning activities that address a variety of learning styles and preferences.	
✓	The course provides opportunities for students to engage in higher-order thinking, critical-reasoning activities and thinking in increasingly complex ways.	
✓	The course reflects multicultural education and is accurate, current and free of bias.	
✓	The teacher can adapt learning activities to accommodate students' needs.	

✓	Readability levels, written language assignments and mathematical requirements are appropriate for the course content and the students.	
✓	The course design provides opportunities for appropriate instructor-student interaction, including timely and frequent feedback about student progress.	
✓	The course provides opportunities for appropriate instructor-student and student-student interaction to foster mastery and application of the material and a plan for monitoring that interaction.	
✓	The course provides opportunities for appropriate student interaction with the content to foster mastery and application of the material.	
✓	Students have access to resources that enrich the course content.	

C	Student Assessment	Score
✓	Student evaluation strategies are consistent with course goals and objectives, representative of the scope of the course and clearly stated.	
✓	The course structure includes adequate and appropriate methods and procedures to assess students' mastery of content.	
✓	Ongoing and frequent assessments are conducted to verify each student's readiness for the next lesson.	
✓	Assessment strategies and tools make the student continuously aware of his/her progress in class and mastery of the content beyond letter grades.	
✓	Assessment materials provide the teacher with the flexibility to assess students in a variety of ways.	
✓	Grading rubrics and models of partially to fully completed assignments are provided to the teacher.	
✓	Grading policy and practices are easy to understand.	

D	Technology	Score
✓	The course architecture permits the online teacher to add content, activities and assessments to extend learning opportunities.	
✓	The course accommodates multiple school calendars; e.g., block, 4X4 and traditional schedules	
✓	The course is easy to navigate.	
✓	The course makes maximum use of the capabilities of the online medium and makes resources available by alternative means; e.g., video, CDs and pod casts.	
✓	Hardware, Web browser and software requirements are specified.	
✓	Prerequisite skills in the use of technology are identified.	
✓	The course utilizes appropriate content-specific tools and software.	
✓	Interoperability technical standards allow sharing content among different learning management systems.	
✓	Interoperability technical standards ensure sharing of questions, assessments and results with others.	
✓	The course meets universal design principles, Section 508 standards and W3C guidelines to ensure access for all students.	
✓	Online textbooks used in a course meet nationally endorsed standards (NIMAS) for publishers to ensure distribution of accessible, alternative versions of textbooks and other instructional materials.	
✓	The course provider offers the course teacher, school coordinator assistance with technical support and course management.	
✓	The course provider offers orientation training.	



E	Course Evaluation and Management	Score
✓	The results of peer review and student evaluations of courses are available.	
✓	Course provider uses multiple ways of assessing course effectiveness.	
✓	The course is evaluated regularly for effectiveness, and the findings are used as a basis for improvement.	
✓	The course is updated periodically to ensure timeliness.	
✓	The course provider is authorized to operate in the state in which the course is offered.	
✓	The teacher meets the professional teaching standard established by a state licensing agency or the teacher has academic credentials in the field in which he or she is teaching and has been trained to teach online and to use the course.	
✓	Student information remains confidential, as required by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).	

F	21 <sup>st</sup> Century Skills	Score
✓	The course intentionally emphasizes 21st century skills in the course, including using 21st century skills in the core subjects, 21st century content, learning and thinking skills, ICT literacy, self-directed learning, global awareness, and includes 21st century assessments, as identified by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills.	

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## References

- Achtemeier, S., Morris, L., & C. Finnegan. (2003). Considerations for Developing Evaluations of Online Courses. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, a publication of the Sloan Consortium*, 7(1). Retrieved from [http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/jaln/v7n1/v7n1\\_achtemeier.asp](http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/jaln/v7n1/v7n1_achtemeier.asp)  
This study was conducted to provide a “rubric for assessing and informing other instruments used to evaluate online course instruction.” The question addressed in this study was “what constitutes quality in an online course and do we presently evaluate the indicators of quality specific to this environment?”  
Once the questions were identified, a comprehensive and thorough literature review was conducted. The literature review focused on areas such as “good” assessments; course evaluation summaries; and principals for evaluation of online learning.
- Chao, T., Saj, T., & F. Tessier. (2006). Establishing and Online Review for Quality Courses. *Educause Quarterly*, 29(3). Retrieved from <http://www.educause.edu/apps/eq/eqm06/eqm0635.asp>  
This article describes a pilot project conducted by the Centre for Teaching and Educational Technologies (CTET) at Royal Roads University (RRU). The focus of this project was to establish and conduct “a quality review based on a proposed framework for examining all aspects of the quality of an online course.” The project attempted to identify how online courses of CTET meet and maintain quality standards.
- Distance Education. Guidelines for Good Practice. (2000). *Higher Education Program and Policy Council of the American Federation of Teachers*. Retrieved from [http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/higher\\_ed/distance.pdf](http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/higher_ed/distance.pdf)  
This report offers guidelines for implementing quality in distance education courses based on a survey conducted involving 200 members of the American Federation of Teachers who are practitioners of distance education.
- Evaluating Course-Equivalent Online Learning Products. (2002). *North Central Regional Education Laboratory*. Retrieved from [http://www.projectsocrates.org/elearning/downloads/eval\\_online\\_products.pdf](http://www.projectsocrates.org/elearning/downloads/eval_online_products.pdf)  
This rubric was designed to “assist districts in their attempts to choose online course materials for their students.” Included in the rubric are elements such as alignment with Minnesota’s Graduation Standards, and “student interaction with the online learning environment.” This rubric was intended to provide flexibility and guidance for school districts in developing courses.
- Guide to Online High School Courses. (2002-2006). *National Education Association*. Retrieved from <http://www.nea.org/technology/onlinecourseguide.html>  
The *Guide to Online High School Courses* addresses the need for quality high school courses by providing criteria for which constituents “in the online education process (policymakers, administrators, teachers, parents, and students) must consider a number of important issues when contemplating creating, adopting, administering, or participating in online courses.”
- Guide to Teaching Online Courses. (2002-2006). *National Education Association*. Retrieved from <http://www.nea.org/technology/onlinecourseguide.html>  
This guide was produced as an effort to ensure secondary students with quality online content as it focuses on teaching skills, professional development, and the overall improvement of online teaching.



National Primer for K-12 Online Learning. (2007). *North American Council for Online Learning*.

Retrieved from [http://www.nacol.org/docs/national\\_report.pdf](http://www.nacol.org/docs/national_report.pdf)

The National Primer for K-12 Online Learning addresses many of the issues and concerns related to K-12 online learning. Various aspects of learning online are explained in great detail including teaching, technology, evaluation, and the development of state policy framework.

The Online Course Evaluation Project. (2006). *Monterey Institute for Technology and Education*.

Retrieved from <http://www.montereyinstitute.org/ocep/>

The *Online Course Evaluation Project (OCEP)* identifies and evaluates existing online courses in higher education, Advanced Placement® and high school. OCEP's goal is to provide a criteria-based evaluation tool to assess and compare the quality of online courses while focusing on content presentation and pedagogy.

Quality Online Course Initiative. (1998-2006). *Illinois Online Network, University of Illinois*. Retrieved from <http://www.ion.uillinois.edu/initiatives/qoci/rubric.asp>

Illinois Online Network and the Illinois Virtual Campus have created a quality online course rubric and evaluation system in the state of Illinois. "The goal of this project is to help colleges and universities to improve accountability of their online courses."

Quality of Service Guidelines for Online Courses. (2001). *Texas Education Agency*. Retrieved from [http://www.tea.state.tx.us/technology/wbl/wbl\\_vsp.html](http://www.tea.state.tx.us/technology/wbl/wbl_vsp.html)

This study was a pilot project initiated for the development of a tool that could be used to improve the quality of internet-based courses for Texas's students by establishing "quality of service guidelines for online courses".

Roberts, G., Irani, T., Telg, R., & L. Lundy. (2005). The Development of an Instrument to Evaluate Distance Education Courses Using Student Attitudes. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 19(1). Retrieved from [http://www.ajde.com/Abstracts/abs19\\_1d.htm](http://www.ajde.com/Abstracts/abs19_1d.htm)

This study used Biner's process for developing an instrument to evaluate distance education courses by producing a course evaluation easily adaptable for multiple courses.

Standards for Quality Online Courses. (2006). *Southern Regional Education Board*. Retrieved from [http://www.sreb.org/programs/edtech/pubs/2006Pubs/06T05\\_Standards\\_quality\\_online\\_courses.pdf](http://www.sreb.org/programs/edtech/pubs/2006Pubs/06T05_Standards_quality_online_courses.pdf)

The *Standards for Quality Online Courses* "examines the essential components of quality online courses in the context of today's learners and the increased emphasis on accountability. It also addresses the need for state-level policies regarding online course quality."

Standards for Quality Online Teaching. (2006). Southern Regional Education Board. Retrieved from [http://www.sreb.org/programs/EdTech/pubs/PDF/06T0\\_Standards\\_Online\\_Teaching.pdf](http://www.sreb.org/programs/EdTech/pubs/PDF/06T0_Standards_Online_Teaching.pdf)

The *Standards for Quality Online Teaching* "examines what qualifications are needed to be a quality online teacher and outlines specific standards for academic preparation, content knowledge, online skills and delivery, and more."



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