Online education provides the opportunity for students to learn from anywhere at any time. By incorporating multimedia and interactive tools like wikis and podcasts, an online course can offer an enriching and collaborative learning experience. But for students with disabilities who have difficulty with reading, viewing, or hearing the content, accessing the course material can prove to be a challenging and often frustrating experience.

According to the US Government Accountability Office, 11% of U.S. students in higher education identified themselves as having a disability in 2008. At some point you may have a student in your own course with a disability. How would a student navigate through your course?

This module will introduce you to some best practices and universal techniques in making your online course more accessible for all students.

Let’s take a look at an online course from a student’s perspective. Imagine you are a student logging into NU Online on your first day of your course. When you click on Course Materials, this is what you see. What are some potential issues that would make these materials inaccessible to some students?

- What if a student had a hearing disability and needed to be able to read the Welcome announcement instead of listening to it? What if a student with a visual disability could not distinguish colors or was reading the text using magnification or screen reading software?
Now let’s take a look at the same course utilizing the same material, but this time reworked for better access using basic Blackboard tools.

- The Welcome podcast now has a print transcript for those who need to or would like to read the text.
- The learning objectives are consistently formatted and easier to read.
- The lecture is presented in both a multimedia and text format.
What makes an online course accessible?
An accessible online course is one that provides course materials that are fully usable for all students, regardless of disability or impairment.

Building your course with accessibility in mind is beneficial not only for students, but it also saves time for you, the instructor. Creating accessible course materials during the development stage means you avoid having to retrofit materials once the course begins, and you avoid delays in getting course material to students.

So what are some ways you can be proactive and create a more accessible learning environment for your students?
Here are five key best practices that will improve universal accessibility in your online course.

[Diagram of Accessible Course]

- Provide consistent course navigation
- Use descriptive links
- Include alternative formats
- Use notes with PowerPoint slides
- Format documents
Organization is a crucial part of an online, hybrid, or blended course. Providing a consistent course layout is beneficial for all students and ensures that they will not have to spend time searching for items. Students with a visual or learning disability may be especially overwhelmed by a course that is cluttered and may require extra time to become familiar with the layout.

Ensure that students will be able to easily navigate through your course by posting materials in the same area and folder each week. For example, place all reading materials consistently in the Reading/Viewing folder each week rather than placing them outside the folder.
You may be using PowerPoint or some type of presentation software for your lecture materials. Use the notes section with your PowerPoint slides. The Notes pane in PowerPoint below the main slide window allows you to add more context and information to the slides. It also acts as a script for your lecture if you are recording in Camtasia Relay and as a print transcript for those students who need a text version of the lecture. Notes can also be copied into captioning tools to save you time in having to retype the information.

Click on the link shown to access the NU Online PowerPoint template.
Adding structure by properly formatting your text documents, such as those in Microsoft Word and PowerPoint, improves usability for all students, making for easier readability and navigation. Rather than bolding or highlighting to indicate a title or heading, use the templates that are already provided in these programs—these were designed to make documents more accessible by providing structure. For those students using assistive technology like screen reading software, they rely on a structured document to navigate through the text. PowerPoint provides a slide layout that will ensure that your presentation has correctly formatted headings, bulleted lists, and reading order. Using the slide layout will help you organize your lecture and provide a logical structure for students to navigate through the presentation.
As we discussed earlier, students in your course may have different needs. Meeting the needs of a student with a visual disability won’t provide the same assistance for a student with an auditory disability. For this reason, it’s important to provide multiple formats of course materials so that students can have access to a format that works best for them.

As an instructor, you can provide alternative formats in various areas of your course. For example:

- When using multimedia such as a video or audio podcast in your course, make sure you are also providing the text equivalent as well. For example, if you recorded your lecture as a video in Camtasia Relay, include the text equivalent through captioning or a print transcript. This ensures that not only will all students be able to access the information, but also allows students to have the text reinforcement for better learning. See the NU Online Instructor Resource Center for more information on including captioning with Camtasia Relay or contact your instructional designer for help.

Also consider using other tools that offer opportunities for multiple formats such as Blackboard Collaborate VoiceBoard, which provides an accessible discussion board when both text and audio formats are presented.
When including links to other websites in your course materials, make sure you are providing descriptive text in the hyperlinks. Descriptive link text provides a clear description of the page that will load when following a link. Hyperlinks are more useful if they can be understood out of context. For students with visual disabilities accessing your course using assistive technology like screen reading software, these links will be presented to them in a list format. A link that does not provide any information as to where they will be directed to, such as instructions to “just “Click here,”” will not be effective for students and will slow down their navigation of the course page.
This presentation outlines a baseline of strategies for proactively building an accessible course.

Using these strategies along with the features and tools in Blackboard will help you to create a more accessible online course. Use the NU Online course shell as a guide for organizing your course material links, items, and folders. The template provides consistency across courses and makes it easy for your students to navigate around your course site.

Now that you have become familiar with some best practices for an accessible online course, visit the Instructor Resource Center for more how-to information or contact your instructional designer for more suggestions for including accessible tools in your course.
To review, NU Online recommends the following best practices for constructing accessible online course materials.

• Use a consistent course layout. Make sure your assignments, lecture materials, and reading and supplemental materials are always clearly labeled and located in the same content area week to week.
• When creating a lecture in PowerPoint, use the notes section with your slides.
• Format your documents by using the heading and style templates already provided in Word and PowerPoint so that you are providing clean, easy-to-navigate documents for students.
• When using multimedia like a video or audio clip in your course, make sure you are also providing the text equivalent. This ensures that not only will all students be able to access the information, but also allows students to have the text reinforcement for better learning.
• Provide descriptive text in your website links so that students will have information on where the link will take them, instead of a link that says “Click here.”

For more information on maximizing your course accessibility, contact your instructional designer.