

10 WAYS to Ruin Your e-Learning

by Following Commonly-Held Practices

INTRODUCTION

In many professional areas, it is usually a good strategy to look to common practices in the field as a guide — maybe not for the most cutting-edge ideas but at least for reliable models to follow.

Unfortunately, in e-learning this can often be a recipe for disaster. Here are ten very common design practices, that, if followed, are a sure way to ruin your e-learning.

Create your e-learning by converting PowerPoint files from existing ILT courses.

The role of the learner in an instructor-led class is entirely different than in an individualized e-learning environment. The learner has to be [engaged through meaningful context](#) and almost immediate opportunities to perform. PowerPoint presentations are generally built as a tool to help the teacher, not the learner.



Record verbatim the words that are on the screen.

While there are important ways that voice audio can enhance a learning experience, rarely is it a useful way to deliver large bodies of content. Learners have no control of pacing and little flexibility in review or any kind of non-linear access to content. Listening to boring content is just as off-putting as reading boring content.





Add navigation buttons, but never let the learner back up or move forward until the audio stops.

Exposure to content does not equal learning. Designers think that preventing learners from “skipping” content will guarantee learning. In truth, learners are more creative in circumventing such strategies than the designer will ever be in implementing them.



Write e-learning to be an exhaustive treatment of the content.

In truth, people [don't actually read all that well online](#) (unless they are [highly-motivated](#) for some specific outcome). Too much content just makes it harder for the learner to identify and focus on the specific sections of content to be mastered. You may want to include supplementary information as a reference source, but the “critical path” should clearly highlight only the content related specifically to the desired learning outcomes.

Welcome the learner with formal statement of learning objectives.

Learners need to know what the intent and purpose of the training is, but the formal objective statements that guide our work as instructional designers are rarely an effective means of communication. They are so often written in language that makes them meaningless unless you already know what they are talking about. They are almost always skipped without comprehension. Instead, use conversational introductory statements before each task to clearly let the learner know what to expect.





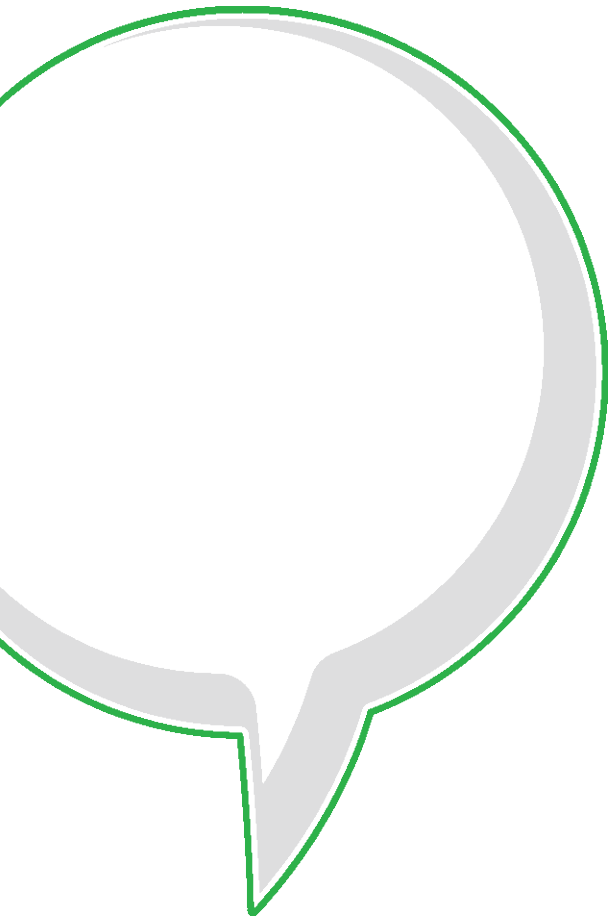
Limit your interactions severely to accommodate the LMS data standards set by your IT department.

The LMS is a tool to serve the needs of your training, not the other way around. IT departments rarely understand training when they prescribe LMS standards. The LMS data requirements need to be set based on actual instructional needs, not technical idiosyncrasies of the LMS that was purchased.

Score and record every action the user takes.

Too many lessons only use interactivity as a form of testing—with the automatic assumption for the learner that mistakes are bad. In truth, most learning occurs when learners have the chance to fail, either authentically or on purpose to test various hypotheses, and then benefit from customized, individualized feedback related to the specific mistakes.





Use a photo of a person and a speech bubble to introduce all textual statements. It's even better if the lips can move.

It's unclear what this common practice accomplishes. There may be some value when the "host" is a person of significance (e.g., CEO, manager, celebrity) or if the pictured individual is demonstrating a particular value or activity. But, attaching your content to an unknown stock photography image or random avatar that does nothing more than pretend to be the source of the information becomes more tedious than helpful.

Use the standard “C-shell” template for screen layout.

The “C-shell” is a screen layout roughly in the shape of a letter “C”—with a title bar across the top of the screen (often with prominent company logo), a menu bar down the left side listing all the sections and allowing perpetual jumping to any section, and a message bar across the bottom often housing navigation buttons.

This is a layout that was developed as an efficient layout for websites—with two key advantages:

prominent brand identity and easy, immediate information access. In a designed learning experience, the ability to branch anywhere at anytime is actually not a benefit. You want the learner to be engrossed in the content, not contemplating jumping around randomly in the lesson. Also, the constant presence of the company logo does not have the same information value to your own employees as it does to the general public. The cost of these designs is the sacrifice of a great deal of screen space for no particular benefit.

Explain every function and nuance of the interface before letting the learner begin.

Just as it is with the content you are teaching, learners will not master the options and controls simply by reading about them, and to describe all interface features at once is a recipe for failure. Just point out the controls that are absolutely necessary or particularly complex, and let them figure out the rest. A good technique is to make the first challenge somewhat straightforward. This allows the learner some freedom to explore the interface without also being overly stressed about the content expectations.



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Ethan Edwards draws on more than 25 years of industry experience as an e-learning instructional designer and developer. He is responsible for the delivery of the internal and external training and communications that reflect Allen Interactions' unique perspective on designing and developing meaningful and memorable e-learning programs.

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