Washington University in St. Louis
Center for Teaching and Learning

Tips for Translating Your Exams Online

Below are strategies, tips & resources to help translate your in-person exams to an online format.

1) Start with the basics

- *Examine your existing exams*: It's likely that there will have to be *some* changes to your existing exams to make them optimal for an online environment. Now's an opportunity to reflect on what you've done in the past, consider what's worked well and brainstorm what could be improved.
- *Learning goals*: Start by thinking about or clearly defining your students' learning goals (aka learning outcomes, objectives, etc.). What learning goals is the exam supposed to measure? Does it actually do so? Are the goals it measures aligned with the instruction in the course?
- Consider differences between your traditional exam format and what's possible online.
    - *In-person exam*: monitored and controlled; often paper exams; usually taken at same time
    - *Online*: unmonitored and no control over student behaviors; many submission formats (Canvas quiz, file upload, third-party tools (e.g. Gradescope), etc.); might be taken at different times
- *Is an "exam" the right assessment*? A traditional exam may or may not be the best strategy to measure and meet the student learning goals in your course. Could the learning goals be achieved just as well or better through an alternative assessment such as a presentation, paper, detailed problem set, etc.? These forms may translate to an online format easier than an exam.

2) General Tips for Online Exams

- *Open book*: For practical reasons, closed-book, no-notes exams are difficult to recreate in an online environment. The preferred solution is to adapt the exam to an open-note / open-book format.
- *It's out in the open*: By giving an exam online it is reasonable to assume that future students will have access to the questions. If you reuse exam questions year-to-year, consider either using different questions this year or writing new questions next year.
- *Randomize question order*: this makes collusion between students more difficult.
- *Budget time*: Online exams can take a lot of time to prepare, both in writing questions and transferring them to a platform like Canvas.
- *Communicate with your students*: Make the exact format, time allowed, resources allowed, and other expectations crystal clear to help your students prepare for the exam. If you are using an online platform (ie Canvas) to give an exam for the first time, consider giving a low-stakes quiz first to allow both you and the students to practice with the format.

3) Writing / Adapting Questions

Multiple Choice and Fill-in the Blank

- *Avoid questions that can be directly Googled*. Avoid pure definition questions. Instead, ask questions that encourage your students to apply or analyze knowledge rather than simply remember it. Don't pull questions directly from testing banks that are readily available online.
- *Write complex questions that require students to apply knowledge*. Consider scenario-based questions that require students to apply knowledge to a novel scenario. This allows students to rely on any materials they have on hand while still assessing their understanding of the content. This can come from designing a question stem that relies on application or an understanding of multiple concepts covered in the course. It can also be done by providing answer choices that require a high level of understanding to discriminate between them. Also keep in mind that grading fill-in the blank questions can be semi-automated through Canvas.

Short Answer & Essay Questions

- *Write questions that are clear and concise*. Make it clear to students your expectations for length and detail of their response.
- *Write questions that probe higher order thinking*. Short answer questions lend themselves well to an open-note situation because they often ask students to provide reasoning, articulate understanding or apply

knowledge to a novel scenario. Lean on these kinds of questions to ensure that even students with access to notes will be required to demonstrate knowledge they have learned throughout your course.

- *Answer the questions yourself* and (if possible) have a colleague answer them. It's important for you to have a clear understanding of what you want students to provide as an answer. Having a colleague, Assistant in Instruction or Undergraduate TA provide answers will also give you insight into the complexity and clarity of the question.
- *Create a grading guideline*. Think through how you will assign credit for these questions. Create some sort of grading scheme that you will use and share with any other graders. This could be a rubric or simply a list of expectations for correct answers. This will help you streamline grading and ensure consistency.
- *Consider how you want students to respond*. Canvas allows students to either type in a response or upload a file. If you teach a course that relies heavily on math-based problem solving asking students to write out answers and upload a photo will be less cumbersome than trying to use the equation writing tool. This could also be helpful if you want students to be able to draw diagrams to indication relationships. Tools such as Gradescope are designed for making and collecting handwritten exams submitted online. Gradescope is integrated into Canvas and available at WashU to faculty in Arts & Sciences and Engineering.

4) Canvas Quizzes: Strategies and Settings

These Canvas quiz options 1) reduce reliance on notes during the exam to encourage studying and preparation, 2) reduce cheating such as sharing answers with classmates, and 3) make the exam as fair as possible.

- Randomize order of questions using question groups.
- Randomize order of answer options.
- Set a time limit on the exam. Too long might discourage adequate preparation and studying, or may even encourage cheating between students; too short may not provide an accurate assessment and add unneeded stress.
- Consider showing only 1 question at a time. Be aware, however, that this can be frustrating for some students.
- Limit students seeing their answers and the correct answers until after everyone has taken the exam. Also, in "Grades" (your gradebook in Canvas, outside of the Quiz options), set the exam to the manual posting option so that scores are not released until you are ready.
- Remember to give students who require accommodations extra time to complete the assessment, if needed.
- Use the rubric function in Canvas to grade short answer and essay questions. This can save time and help ensure fair, valid and reliable grading across students.

5) Academic Honesty

- *Gold standard*: The best strategy to promote academic honesty is to design your exam to minimize the ease of cheating by using the strategies above.
- *What about remote proctoring?* We do not recommend the use of proctoring services because of their limited effectiveness, student privacy concerns and the need for students to install additional software. WashU does, however, subscribe to Respondus LockDown Browser and Monitor which provides an automated proctoring system if you decide that a proctored exam is necessary to meet your students' learning goals.
- *What about plagiarism detection software?* If using the Assignments function in Canvas, you can enable the plagiarism detection software TurnItIn. There are, however, some arguments the use of such software.

Further Resources: Best Practices for Offering Exams Online / Online Assessment Strategies / Video Workshop: Assessing Learning Online / Case against Remote Proctoring Tools / WashPost article on Remote Proctoring / Tips to Reduce the Impact of Cheating in Online Assessment