

# Deciding between synchronous & asynchronous modes of teaching

## What is this resource?

Classes taught onground and in online learning environments can benefit from activities that are both synchronous (during scheduled class time in person or via Zoom) or asynchronous (completed individually on students’ own time). Faculty may wish to consider including asynchronous activities, along with synchronous activities, to accomplish many goals. Paring down synchronous (live) activities to those that make the most impact on student learning can lead to a more efficient use of time for both faculty and students. For instance, faculty and students with small children at home, unstable internet access, or who live in different time zones can accomplish the same teaching and learning goals by using asynchronous teaching strategies.

The considerations below inform your decision on when, why, and how course materials and activities should be accomplished asynchronously. After the considerations, the chart provides ideas for activities in both synchronous and asynchronous environments.

## How do I use it?

When planning course activities, or planning the best use of class time, review the considerations and select the approach that works best for your course and students. Review the chart to identify which activities best fit synchronous class sessions and which are best delivered asynchronously. The USC Keep Teaching site contain links to Blackboard and Zoom resources. For further assistance, please contact CET.

### When you might choose asynchronous instruction

Asynchronous instruction means students complete course work on their own time rather than live with the instructor present at the same time (synchronous). A Blackboard discussion board is an example of asynchronous work while a Zoom session is an example of synchronous work.

Below is a non-exhaustive list of common reasons why instructors choose asynchronous instruction.

* Course work is better completed asynchronously due to the nature or format of the work.
* The efficiency of completing work asynchronously helps save time during the synchronous live session that can be spent on other work.
* Asynchronous work helps students to be more prepared for the synchronous live session.
* Internet access or connection stability makes it challenging to have synchronous sessions.
* Caretaker and other family or job roles and responsibilities for the instructor and/or students make synchronous work hard or impossible.
* Students are in other time zones which makes attending synchronous difficult or a burden and viewing a recording of the session would not be a sufficient alternative.
* Students or the instructor become ill and are unable to maintain synchronous work.

### Why you might select asynchronous or synchronous instruction for certain course materials & activities

Below is a guide with considerations and recommendations for deciding whether and how to implement course components asynchronously. In general, it is recommended that work is accomplished asynchronously whenever possible, to reserve time during live sessions for engaging active-learning experiences. Note that deciding to make certain course materials and activities asynchronous rather than synchronous does not mean adding more to the student workload for the course.

#### The students need me present to complete this work

* Asynchronous: Examine your assumptions about whether an instructor needs to be present for the activities in your course. Students are capable of learning from a number of activities on their own.
* Synchronous: Save it for a synchronous activity during a live session where you can assist, coach, correct, guide, and evaluate them.

#### This is non-interactive lecture content

* Asynchronous: Consider recording it so it can become asynchronous viewing. Lecture content that works well when assigned as asynchronous viewing includes lecturing on theories, terms/definitions, historical facts or timelines, etc.
* Synchronous: If you do plan to lecture during a live session, consider pausing every 15 minutes and assigning active-learning activities so students have a chance to practice with and apply the content, as well as taking a cognitive break to process that content. Zoom tools that help accomplish active learning include breakout rooms, chat, polling, the whiteboard, and Google Docs.

#### This is reading or viewing material

* Asynchronous: It can likely be completed asynchronously.
* Synchronous: If you do bring new reading or viewing material during a live session, consider making it into an active-learning activity. For example, see the CET resource on how showing a video can be an active-learning event.

#### This is a task that requires students to engage with each other

* Asynchronous: Consider leveraging Blackboard's features like discussion boards, blogs, and journals to promote student interaction asynchronously. Common asynchronous student interactions includes peer critiques where they post work and have classmates give feedback, and strategic discussion questions that students or the instructor design for a given topic and students respond to each other.
* Synchronous: Work students do together asynchronously can be used during a synchronous class session as the foundation for the next learning step. For example, answers to discussion questions can indicate where students are in their understanding, and what topics still need instructor guidance.

#### The assignment or discussion requires students to reflect and interact with materials and concepts over time

* Asynchronous: Consider using reflection assignments and structured discussions asynchronously in Blackboard. Students will be able to master the material at their own pace and review materials as many times as they need.
* Synchronous: Synchronous sessions can be used to have students apply what they’ve learned in the presence of an expert (the instructor) who can guide their practice or application in real time.

### How you might organize your asynchronous and synchronous instruction

It can be helpful to think of asynchronous instruction as we think of the flipped course model. In “traditional” instruction, students attend a lecture and apply the new knowledge asynchronously as they complete homework. In a flipped course, students are introduced to new content in asynchronous activities before the class meeting, and apply the new knowledge during the live session. This maximizes the instructor’s expertise by allowing them to guide and correct students’ practice in real time, rather than spending time presenting content that students could absorb on their own. Below are common strategies for conducting a flipped course utilizing asynchronous and synchronous instruction. You may find It helpful to frame your course this way.

* Hold synchronous sessions that add value. During the live session, students practice and apply the course content they reviewed asynchronously while the expert (instructor) is present to assist, coach, correct, guide, and evaluate.
* Don't repeat asynchronous instruction during synchronous sessions. If you already assign students to watch a recorded lecture or read/view course material asynchronously, you don’t need to repeat, summarize, or re-lecture on it during the live session. Instead, go straight into tasks that require students to practice and apply what they've reviewed or prepared asynchronously. Of course, there will be questions about the asynchronous material to address, and that can be done in the context of explaining application or practice.
* The reason some instructors and students say this feels like "more work" is often because the instructor may be unnecessarily re-lecturing on (doubling) content or adding asynchronous homework tasks that are better completed together in live session.
* Create a regular time when you check in on asynchronous work. Maintain your "presence" while students complete asynchronous work by communicating the timeframe for when you will be checking items such as replying to discussion posts, and due dates by which students should complete asynchronous work. This helps students to feel their asynchronous activities are vital to their learning in the course, and avoids the perception that it is “busy work.” See the CET resource on organizing online discussions for examples.
* Synthesize common themes emerging from asynchronous work. Review either asynchronously or synchronously items of note in students' asynchronous work, which may include posting or addressing common errors, highlighting improvements or great answers, and summarizing themes. Assignments that assess asynchronous learning that can be used to guide synchronous teaching include quizzes and discussion posts.
* Structure, structure, and more structure. Because students work alone or with other students on their own time on asynchronous work, more than ever the instructions, directions, and steps need to be clear and specific. Using the CET Assignment Description Template may help reduce repeated questions and serve as a teachable moment where the instructor communicates to novices how they would approach a task.

### How you might test (assess) students asynchronously

It may be helpful to adopt the mindset that all tests (assessments) are open-book or take-home style in the online environment. When thinking this way, tests (assessments) can also be asynchronous work; students complete them on their own time. Asynchronous tests can be written to assess higher-order skills, while also minimizing the potential for academic dishonesty. If your test or assessment requires real-time interaction between instructor and students or between students, it is possible to hold synchronous (live) assessments in Zoom or use a combination of Blackboard and Zoom.

If you would like to explore USC resources for proctored exams, there are resources on ITS’s Keep Teaching page for the Respondus tool. CET advises instructors to keep in mind that proctoring technology does not prevent cheating, but makes cheating more challenging. There are methods students can use to circumvent any available remote-proctoring technologies.

Table Options for synchronous and asynchronous course activities

| Activity | Synchronous | Asynchronous |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Lecture | * Present lecture in real time (in-person or using Zoom), with breaks for review, questions, and discussion * Incorporate a guest speaker via Zoom. Hosts can grant guest speakers Co-Host privileges to monitor chat, monitor the participant panel, and share their screen. | * Record lecture using Zoom. The recording can be made available for students who are not able to attend class due to class time, health, or caregiving demands, and is important for students with accommodations. * Students engage with guest speaker’s materials posted to Blackboard prior to attending the synchronous session. * Possible activity or assessment submission required prior to the synchronous session. * Instructor provides link to video of pre-recorded guest’s speech in online course site |
| Group work | * Online, use the Zoom breakout room functions. * Share a Google document with your class, so they can co-create in real-time. | * Create groups in Blackboard. * Have students share in their group area using the Blackboard discussion forum, wiki, blog or file exchange tools. * Students can create a zoom meeting to meet with their peers synchronously outside of class. * Groups can submit their final project as a Blackboard assignment or post to a discussion board. |
| Peer- review writing | * Online, assign breakout rooms in Zoom. Students can share their screen with one another in the breakout room. | * Organize students into groups or pairs in Blackboard and have students communicate feedback through discussion boards. * Have students post to the general discussion board and require a specified number of peer reviews. * Have student groups create a shared Google doc for easy peer review and editing. |
| Discussions | * Facilitate discussion in your class (whole class or in breakout rooms). In Zoom, provide prompt questions in the chat function or verbally. Monitor the participants and encourage them to use the raise hand, chat, and/or unmute functions to contribute to the discussion. | * Create a prompt to which students respond by posting to a discussion board in Blackboard within a selected time period that would allow flexibility in time of day responses are posted. |
| Exams/Quizzes | * Schedule online exams or quizzes in Blackboard, Turnitin, or Respondus to be completed during class time. * Schedule oral or performance exams with students. * Group/individual presentations. | * Create online exams or quizzes using Blackboard to be completed within a selected time period that would allow flexibility in time of day responses are submitted. Depending on the type of assessment questions, Blackboard will automatically grade the assessment and include the grade in the gradebook. Additional settings include time restrictions and randomizing questions and answers. |
| Student presentations | * In Zoom, students share their PowerPoint window and narrate while progressing through slides. * Consider adding a peer/instructor critique to the assignment. | * Students record narrated PowerPoint in a video, post to YouTube, and provide link on course site * Consider adding a peer/instructor review component to the assignment. |
| Case studies | * Provide case description to students (share file in Blackboard, the Zoom chat function, a Google document, a PowerPoint slide, or video) * Students work in breakout rooms to analyze cases and report back to the class. * Students work individually to analyze cases and report back to the class. | * Provide case description to students in Blackboard (discussion forum, document, or video). * Students work in groups to analyze cases and prepare reports using discussion board, wiki, assignment submission, or Google doc. * Students work individually to analyze case and submit report through Blackboard assignment |
| Student questions | * Hold scheduled or drop-in office hours on Zoom. * Students can chat with the professor privately during a synchronous session. | * Students emails instructor * Have an area on the discussion forum for general student questions. Students can post anonymously if needed. |