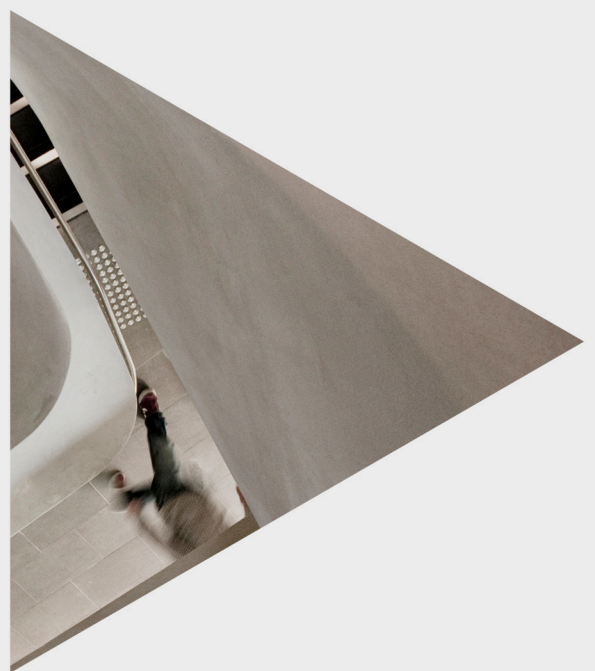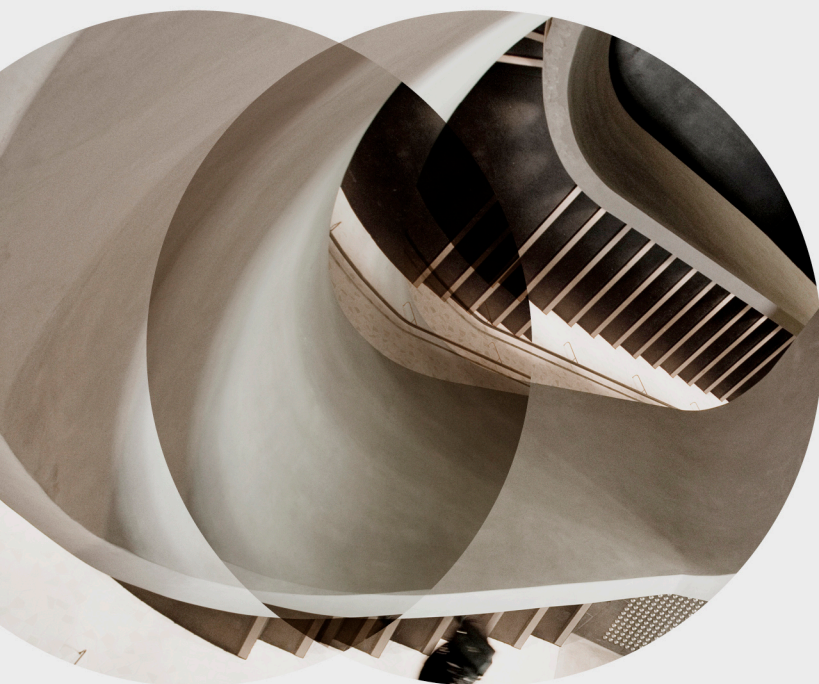# Making Your Canvas Site Clear to All Students

An LXT Guide for Subject Coordinators

Making your Canvas site clear to all students

UTS is an inclusive university, which aims to give all students the opportunity to be successful. With our culturally, linguistically and ability diverse students in mind, the LX team has produced this guide to making your Canvas subject sites as clear as possible.

Using clear language

When writing materials for students, it's vital that you are sensitive to the fact that your students may not be expert users of English. You must therefore use language that is direct and easy to understand.

Some simple ways to make your language clear are:

- Aim to keep sentences short by using a maximum of around 25 words if possible.

- Avoid culture-specific slang, idioms, and colloquialisms.

- Address students directly by using personal pronouns (e.g., "you").

- Include words like "then", "a", "the", "to", "if", "by" and "that", even if they could be deleted deleted (e.g., Less clear: Had I seen the announcement, I would have brought a notebook and pen. Clearer: **If** I had seen the announcement, **then** I would have brought a notebook and **a** pen).

- Repeat subjects and verbs (e.g., Unclear sentence: "Submit your essay via Turnitin, but not your presentation slides." Clear sentence: "You must submit your essay via Turnitin, but you do not have to submit your presentation slides via Turnitin."

- Avoid multi-word verbs (e.g., use "do" not "carry out", "explain" not "point out" "discover" not "find out"; they are slightly more formal, but they are also much easier to understand).

- Avoid words from other languages (e.g., use "genuine," not "bona fide").

- Avoid references to culture-specific TV shows, sports, 'famous' people, etc.

- Avoid double negatives, negative questions.

- Don't use a lot of different words for the same thing (e.g., "campaign," "newsletter," "bulletin"); pick one word and use it throughout your subject site.

- Be careful with words that can have multiple meanings. For example, "once" could mean "one time," "after," "in the past," or "when"; "right" could mean "correct," "the opposite of left," or "politically conservative"; and "since" could refer to a point in time, or mean "because".

Structuring your Canvas pages clearly

One of the easiest ways to help students understand what you have written on your subject site is to organise your pages clearly. To help you with this, the LX team will provide some page templates for you to use when building your subject sites.

Follow the LX templates in order to:

- Ensure that everyone in your course group is using consistent terms within modules to show how subjects are structured (e.g., Before class, On Campus, After class).

- Keep module, section-heading, activity and page names clear and consistent across subjects.

To make the information you include on a page as clear as possible:

- Keep headers short and clear (e.g., Watch, Discuss, Read).

- Keep paragraphs short—a maximum of 6 sentences if possible.

- Use bullet points for lists.

- Use **bold** to highlight important information.

- Break up text with pictures and/or white space.

Introducing discipline-specific vocabulary

When students come to university, they don't just learn new knowledge and skills. They also learn a new language to describe and explain what they are learning about.

To help students to learn the language of your discipline, you could:

- Highlight in **bold** specialist, technical and abstract vocabulary on each Canvas page (and on the PPT slides you use in lectures) – don't assume students will recognise key vocabulary without your help.

- Give definitions of key vocabulary as soon as it is introduced to students.

- Include hyperlinks to further definitions of key vocabulary.

- Create a glossary of key vocabulary in your subject for students to refer to throughout the course (the LX team can provide a Canvas template). N.b., always give example sentences to show **how** a word is used.

- Ask students to work collaboratively to complete a subject glossary by making a blank glossary page available for them to add to and edit.

- In the outline and summary of each Canvas module, make a list of the key vocabulary that you want students to be familiar with and to be able to use.

- Write out all acronyms in full the first time they are used on a Canvas page.

Making course expectations and assignments clear

Remember that the UTS approach to learning will be new to many students. Their role, the amount of work that they're expected to do and their assignment requirements must therefore be made very clear.

To ensure you are giving students a high chance to succeed in your subject:

- Complete the "How to be successful in this subject" page in your Canvas subject shell.

- On the 'Assessment Overview' page, list all assignments (formative and summative), and explicitly state the skills and knowledge that will be developed and assessed.

- In your subject's modules, follow the UTS Library naming conventions for textbooks, software, readings, etc.

    - '**Prescribed**' → Set texts, software, etc. that are needed for completion of a course.
      '**Essential**' → Readings, activities, etc. that students must complete in order to understand content and complete class activities and assessments.
      '**Recommended**' → Other learning materials that will help students gain a deeper understanding of a subject.

- Make all marking rubrics available to students online (e.g., through the Canvas SpeedGrader tool).

- Avoid references to Australian culture and geography in assignment descriptions unless they are absolutely necessary and they have been presented and discussed in class.

Using multimodal resources

One of the major benefits of creating an online subject site is that it allows you to provide students with access to videos, podcasts, infographics, etc. However, to give every student an equal chance of success, you need to make sure that these resources are as accessible as possible.

Some ways to ensure your multimodal resources are useful to all students include:

- Label pictures, diagrams, videos, etc. so that it is clear to students which concepts, processes or theories they are exemplifying or explaining.

- Ensure all of the videos you use on your subject site have closed captions or subtitles.

- Provide transcripts for all of the audio material that you include on your subject site, and if possible, provide transcripts for all videos as well.