

Global Society of Online Literacy Educators

Online Literacy Instruction Principles and Tenets

As part of its mission to support educators who teach reading and writing in online settings, the Global Society of Online Literacy Educators offers this set of principles and tenets for online literacy education. The purpose of these principles is to establish a set of shared values related to the development of sound instruction. These principles are based on established research and shared experience across a range of disciplines, including traditional composition, online writing instruction, and digital rhetoric.

The document is written for multiple audiences and stakeholders, including teachers, tutors, program directors, and other administrators. The language of the principles is broad and general by design. We intend for the shared values articulated by these principles to inform conversations about the needs and circumstances of online literacy students and instructors at the local level.

Who We Are

The Global Society of Online Literacy Educators (GSOLE) is an international organization connecting those who teach reading, alphabetic writing, and multimodal composition as digital literacies in online educational settings. Dedicated to diversity, inclusivity, and access in literacy-based online education, GSOLE disseminates peer-reviewed research and information through its annual meeting, online conference, research support, educational and community-building webinars, website, and two open-access online journals, *Research in Online Literacy Education (ROLE)* and the *Online Literacy Open Resource (OLOR)*, as well as planned online literacy certification programs.

As an organization, GSOLE recognizes that online literacy instruction (OLI) in reading, alphabetic writing, and multimodal composition is taught in traditional and digital settings, engaging teachers and scholars of reading and composing across a range of disciplines. This document is intended for OLI educators, including both teachers and tutors, their program administrators, and other stakeholders. The purpose of these principles is to establish a set of shared values related to the development of sound instruction.

Organization

This document provides operational definitions followed by principles and tenets. We define a principle as a fundamental or foundational truth or proposition that is both desirable to follow and essential to the development of sound instruction. We define a tenet as a belief relevant to the broader principle.

Operational Definitions

- **Access and Inclusion:** GSOLE affirms inclusion and access as core components of any online literacy pedagogy, course, and setting, in accordance with the former Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Committee for Effective Practices in Online Writing Instruction’s 2013 “A Position Statement for Effective Practices in Online Writing Instruction” and the CCCC’s 2011 “A Policy on Disability.” Inclusion and access require providing proactive, equitable, and appropriate support to individuals with physical, mental, and emotional limitations and challenges; different learning approaches or preferences; multilingual, multicultural, and economically diverse backgrounds; as well as those who are geographically distributed and for whom a bricks-and-mortar campus is unavailable. Inclusion and access involve using multiple teaching and learning formats, engaging students’ choices, and welcoming all students in the course.
- **Educational environments:** OLI can occur in a fully online, hybrid online, or technology-enhanced setting using synchronous and/or asynchronous modalities and engaging a variety of electronic media, platforms, and technologies.
- **Literacy Studies:** The purview of those who consider themselves part of rhetoric and composition, reading and writing studies, English studies, discourse studies, technical and professional writing studies, writing across the disciplines/curriculum studies, and other literacy studies given the reading- and composition-heavy focus of OLI.
- **Online literacy:** Core literacies that occur in digital settings. Minimally, there are three of these literacies: (1) Reading-centered literacy: reading in digital and print-based settings that use alphabetic text, images, video, audio, and the like; (2) Composition-centered literacy: composing alphabetic text using various technologies that may primarily be read and/or composed in digital settings; and (3) Modality-centered literacy: composing multimodal texts that rely on digital technologies for production and/or consumption, to include images, video, audio, and the like.
- **Online literacy course (OLC):** A unit of study within a program that either focuses on core literacies or uses such literacies to convey content in a fully online, hybrid online, or technology enhanced setting using synchronous and/or asynchronous modalities and engaging a variety of electronic media, platforms, and technologies. OLC educators make use of core literacies to promote skill and/or knowledge development. OLCs promote critical thinking and communicative expression of that thinking; many such courses are writing-centric and may be called online writing courses (OWCs).
- **Online literacy instruction (OLI):** Instruction that occurs—at least partially if not fully—in a computer-based, Internet, or intranet instructional setting. It uses online/digital media to: provide instruction; talk about reading, alphabetic writing, and multimodal composition; or distribute, share, and/or collect reading and alphabetic/multimodal-related materials. Traditional onsite settings may be considered

digital or technologically enhanced when they engage an LMS or Google Suite, for example.

- **Online tutoring:** Support provided to students in an online setting, either asynchronous or synchronous, and using the institution's selected platform.
- **Stakeholders:** Institutional groups and individuals involved in OLI to include the institution, the programmatic or departmental administration or administrators, and instructors, tutors, and support staff.
- **Technology Environments**
 - Digital (i.e., using computer-based or other integrated technologies that can be accessed virtually anywhere and anytime),
 - Online (i.e., Internet- or Intranet-based), and
 - Distributed (i.e., linked through a computer network while being geographically dispersed)

OLI Principles and Tenets

OLI Principle 1: Online literacy instruction should be universally accessible and inclusive.

Tenets of OLI Accessibility and Inclusivity

- A. All stakeholders and students should be aware of and be able to engage the unique literacy features of communicating, teaching, and learning in a primarily digital environment.
- B. Use of technology should support stated course objectives, thereby not presenting an undue burden for instructors and students.
- C. Multimodal composition and alphabetic writing may require different technologies; therefore, those involved should be appropriately prepared to use them.
- D. The student-user experience should be prioritized when designing online courses, which includes mobile-friendly content, interaction affordances, and economic needs.
- E. Institutions should provide all stakeholders and students with access to orientation and training for their institution's required technological components/aspects for OLI.
- F. Institutional support systems and programs (i.e., tutoring centers, student academic success centers, disabilities services) should be available minimally to all students in the same modality as their course and available maximally in additional, flexible ways.
- G. Professional development should be available to instructors and tutors in the same modality as the course to be taught.
- H. All stakeholders should be provided with equitable access to the resources, support, training, and compensation to teach literacy online effectively.

To make OLI universally accessible and inclusive, all administrators, instructors, tutors, and students should critically and rhetorically understand the unique literacy features of communicating, teaching, and learning in a primarily digital environment. Such understanding enables instructors and students to reach the pedagogical potential of that environment and take full advantage of what it has to offer. Further, part of understanding the digital environment is to recognize that learning the technical skills associated with using digital tools in an online literacy course should not supplant stated course objectives, whereby the “technology” can become an undue burden for instructors, students, or both. Specifically, students should not need to learn extraneous technology in order to meet the course objectives; teachers should not need to learn and teach extraneous technology when the LMS will suffice. While rhetorically grounded, multimodal projects are encouraged, both instructors and students need to be appropriately prepared to meet the expectations of these stated course goals; moreover, instructors and students should have or be given access to the technologies needed to design, develop, and complete these projects.

Another way of understanding accessibility is to understand that the user- or student-experience is at the heart of both teaching and learning. Therefore, to support the accessible development, design, and teaching of OLCs, all stakeholders must understand the technology use mandated by any particular institution (e.g., use of one particular LMS and/or certain features within that LMS) and be able to use it. Orientation and training for effective use of mandated technology (e.g., software, hardware, LMS, ancillary tools) must be equally accessible to all involved. As an extension of this professional support, all online literacy instructors should have access to equitable compensation, which includes, but is not necessarily limited to, remuneration, time off, paid professional development opportunities, and technology usage/purchase.

Another tenet of inclusive and accessible online literacy instruction requires that support systems for administrators, instructors, tutors, students, and OLI staff minimally be available in the same modality in which courses are offered. So, for example, if an institution offers a literacy course online, then students in that course should have access to tutoring that is online, while instructors should have access to professional development materials and opportunities online. For greater flexibility of choice, whenever possible, both asynchronous and synchronous support options should be available.

Issues of access and equity require a commitment to supporting instructors, students, and staff at all levels and are not solely course-level, compliance concerns. Equitable access to the resources, support, and training required to teach literacy online effectively is foundational to the principle of access and inclusivity taken in its broadest consideration.

OLI Principle 2: All program developers and institutional administrators should commit to supporting and implementing a regular, iterative process of professional development and course/program assessment for online literacy instruction.

Tenets of OLI Programmatic Development and Administration

- A. All sections of the same courses should have the same learning outcomes, resources, and support regardless of educational environment.
- B. Instructors should retain reasonable control over their own content and/or techniques for conveying, teaching, and assessing their students' writing in their courses in OLI-informed ways.
- C. Program administrators, including administrators of online writing and reading support centers and programs, should be proactive in finding support for and participating in ongoing OLI-focused training, professional development, and assessment, whether mandated by the institution or not.
- D. Administrators should cap OLCs responsibly at 20 students per course with 15 being a preferable number.
- E. Administrators should involve instructors and tutors with OLI expertise in the justification, design, and development of pedagogically sound online literacy programs, courses, and support systems.
- F. Administrators should ensure that instructors and tutors participate in and have support for ongoing OLI-focused training, professional development, and assessment as well as other institutionally mandated training.
- G. Administrators should develop and receive support for interpersonal, instructor-based and tutor-based networks and/or communities across modalities, including opportunities for mentorship.
- H. OLI programs and courses should be evaluated according to quality-based standards specific to OLI.

Ensuring the integrity of OLI courses and programs involves a number of facets. To facilitate instructor effectiveness and student success, OLCs should be capped at 20 students per course, with 15 being a preferable number. Those courses, delivered in an online and/or primarily digital setting, should then function as do all other courses of the same title insofar as course objectives, stated outcomes, and instructor autonomy are concerned. OLC instructors should maintain reasonable control over their course content and the techniques they choose to use for conveying, teaching, and assessing student work. Use of master courses and/or prescriptive, standardized course materials may have an adverse effect on both teaching and learning and can skew teaching evaluations if good instructors are mandated to use poor materials. Administrators should support instructor autonomy across delivery modes. Instructor autonomy may result in

wider variety of technique and course material, but that variety in technique and material choice must still be grounded in, and reflective of, stated course objectives, regardless of the educational environment.

Explicit administrative support is crucial to building new OLI courses and to improving existing ones. Administrators should actively provide ongoing OLI-focused training, professional development, and assessment. Further, they should ensure that instructors and tutors are seeking professional development opportunities. Additionally, administrators for OLI programs (e.g., online writing and reading support centers and programs) also should seek out, receive support for, and participate in ongoing OLI-focused training, professional development, and assessment, whether mandated by the institution or not. Some examples include:

- membership and active participation in relevant organizations (like GSOLE);
- conference attendance and participation;
- research and publication; and
- developing and participating in interpersonal, instructor-based networks, including mentorship programs and/or professional communities.

Finally, to ensure the ongoing integrity of OLI courses and programs, all OLI stakeholders should commit to regular, iterative processes of course and program assessment and improvement, based in quality standards that are specific to OLI, as opposed to relying solely on non-OLI-specific measures (e.g., Quality Matters, Open SUNY Course Quality Review) that address any online course. The non-OLI-specific measures may be ill suited to assessing the effectiveness and impact of OLI.

A commitment by all OLI stakeholders to actively support and pursue both ongoing professional development and course/program assessment and improvement requires an equally foundational commitment to involving stakeholders in the justification, design, and development of pedagogically sound online literacy programs, courses, and support systems.

OLI Principle 3: Instructors and tutors should commit to regular, iterative processes of course and instructional material design, development, assessment, and revision to ensure that online literacy instruction and student support reflect current effective practices.

Tenets of OLI Design and Pedagogy

- A. Instructors should be familiar with online instructional delivery practices to ensure the same level and hours of instruction across all OLI settings.

- B. Instructors and tutors should cultivate extra-institutional professional networks to enhance OLI course development and teaching/tutoring practices.
- C. Instructors and tutors should commit to ongoing professional development and training in appropriate OLI-focused reading, alphabetic writing, and multimodal composition theories for their instructional environment(s).
- D. Instructors and tutors should migrate and/or adapt appropriate reading, alphabetic writing, and multimodal composition theories from traditional instructional settings to their OLI environment(s).
- E. Instructors and tutors should research, develop, theorize, and apply appropriate reading, alphabetic writing, and multimodal composition theories to their OLI environment(s).

To work toward more effective, pedagogically sound OLI, both instructors and tutors should commit to regular, iterative processes that develop, revise, and refine all aspects of teaching and tutoring to include pedagogy. Online literacy tutoring and instruction should not occur in a vacuum or in discipline-specific institutional silos, but in the context of institutionally supported processes that include course and material development, implementation, assessment (including ample student feedback), and revision.

Effective OLI acknowledges that teaching in the primarily digital environment shares both important similarities with more traditional instructional delivery models and key differences and unique opportunities. So, while any section of a particular course should adhere to the same stated course or instructional objectives (for example, OLI instructors and tutors should research, develop, and apply appropriate reading, alphabetic writing, and multimodal composition theories to their instructional environment), there is no one-size-fits all approach, especially when it comes to working across various delivery formats.

OLI Principle 4: Educators and researchers should initiate, support, and sustain online literacy instruction-related conversations and research efforts within and across institutions and disciplinary boundaries.

Tenets of OLI-related Conversations and Research

- A. Educators and researchers should share responsibility for preparing OLI courses, instructors, support programs, tutors, and students for the unique literacy skills online courses require.
- B. Educators and researchers should insist that various OLI delivery models (including alternative, self-paced, and experimental) comply with the principles of sound pedagogy,

quality instructor/designer preparation, and appropriate oversight detailed in this document.

- C. Administrators, instructors, and tutors should be committed to ongoing research about, and exploration into, OLI.
- D. Researchers should conduct empirical and theoretical investigations of online literacy programs, online literacy courses, OLI stakeholders, and the principles in this document.

OLI-related conversations and research efforts are the province of all of those involved in OLI, whether these are occurring within or across institutions and/or disciplines. This broad and diverse group has a stake in advocating for the effective preparation and development of all OLI-related instructors, support programs, tutors, and students. In addition to recognizing, as a field, that there are unique literacy skills required in the primarily digital platform, OLI scholars should insist that various OLI delivery models (including alternative, self-paced, and experimental) comply with the principles of sound pedagogy, quality instructor/designer preparation, and appropriate oversight.

As a cornerstone to promoting and working to maintain the ultimate integrity of any OLI initiative (from course development, to program building, to the allocation of resources), OLI administrators, instructors, and tutors should be committed to ongoing study of, research about, and exploration into OLI.