

Does this Course Make My Content Look Big: The Skinny on Chunking Content

Have you ever started to read an article, book, or instructional material that seemed to go on forever? You get to the end of the page and realize that you have no idea what the author just talked about, and then have to start reading from the beginning! By chunking your course material, you are able to captivate your students from beginning to end.

A short, squat history of chunking

Chunking (yes, that is the actual, educational term) starts with human memory. George Miller from Harvard University in 1956 found that when looking at unrelated items on a list, we can remember five to nine of those items. Fast forward forty years and Garrison, Anderson, and Archer discovered that by chunking information, exhaustion and feeling overwhelmed decreased, and students were better able to understand the material (Smith, 2009). Through organization, emphasis on important information, and no “walls of text”, we are more effective in helping our students learn.

So what IS chunking?

“Chunking is grouping pieces of information into meaningful segments. If your content is chunked, it is divided into short segments of passive learning, followed by an opportunity for active learning on those same concepts to reinforce the principle just introduced” (Smith, 2009).

Let’s try that again.

“Chunking is **grouping** pieces of information into **meaningful segments**. If your content is chunked, it is divided into **short** segments of **passive learning**, followed by an opportunity for **active learning** on those same concepts to **reinforce** the principle just introduced.”

By physically pulling out and emphasizing the important parts of that quote through the use of font adjustments, I’m indicating to you, the reader, what is important.

I like big chunks and I cannot lie

There are many benefits of chunking for both students and instructors. For students, chunking material means that they don’t need a large block of time and are able to make better use of that time. Subsequently, students are engaging in their classes and course material more frequently and stay better connected. Additionally, a course that is

chunked provides better organization for students and increases their confidence while decreasing confusion (Smith, 2009).

Instructors also benefit from chunking. Chunking on the file level provides a logical way to organize the content that makes it easy to find and easy to use. Chunking lesson content increases material retention and comprehension from your students and you are able to cover more material with less time spent reviewing old material (Smith, 2009).

How else do you see instructors benefiting from chunking?

How do I chunk thee? Let me count the ways

Chunking should be applied at every level: total course organization, module structure, and lesson delivery. To chunk your total course, think about how you order your material and assignments. Is it by week? Chapter? Topic? Competency? Whatever you choose for each of those chunks (chapter 1 or week 1) becomes its own module. As you progress through the course, you open up a new module to the students so they aren't overwhelmed on the first week of class with everything they are expected to learn and complete throughout the semester.

What chunking scheme do you use?

Each module should be presented in the same way to provide consistency and clear expectations for students. When a student enters a new module, he or she should be able to identify where the lesson is, where the activities will be, and how to progress through the module. This is best achieved through the use of headings in a table of contents. These headings provide direction and chunk out material by category. This module structure also directs learners to engage in the passive learning (LESSON) followed by active learning (EXAM #2).

Finally, and most importantly, you should chunk your lesson content. This can be as subtle or dramatic as you like, but should

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Think about the stories you've read recently. Sometimes the hard and fast facts of the story are more difficult to remember than what happened to people in the story, or what those people had to say. When you take the time to write a story, you not only want people to read the information you present, you want them to remember that information afterwards. So, keep in mind this phrase:

People remember people.

The most effective stories involve interviews of some sort. In today's media world, a lot of information is available on the Internet as press releases, company bulletins, survey results, etc. But it is still necessary to do interviews so you can hear how the story involves people to get the color and impact of the story.

There are two kinds of sources for interviews: Primary sources and secondary sources.

There was a fire this morning at Big Cart, a local grocery store. Several customers and workers were in the store when the alarm went off. The alarm went off at 9:00am. When emergency crews arrived, the building was evacuated. The store re-opened at noon.

Are the sources on the cards primary sources or secondary sources?

Primary Source	Secondary Source
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

always contain segments as well as passive learning followed by active learning. Physical emphasis and separation can come from headings and images (as used here) and active learning can take the form of self-check questions and activities.

Through chunking materials in your overall course, in modules, and especially in your lesson content, students will have better retention, comprehension, and more engagement in your course. Using modules, headers, images, and of course, active learning, instructors can build an environment that will best enable students to learn.

This article is a summary of a well-regarded mini-session delivered on February 24, 2012. You can access the full resources at cpdeconnect.pbworks.com. You can find a full list of mini-sessions [here](#).

Smith, Robin M. (2009-05-18). *Conquering the Content: A Step-by-Step Guide to Online Course Design*. John Wiley and Sons. Kindle Edition.