AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

INSTITUTE FOR ACADEMIC INNOVATION AND DEVELOPEMENT

Alternative Assessment in Online Teaching: Guidance for Faculty Members

Key Takeaways

Faculty members do not need to redesign their courses to adapt assessments for online teaching. Several small adjustments can help ensure that assessments continue to evaluate student learning effectively.

Common approaches include:

- structuring exams with the expectation that students may consult course materials
- using several shorter assessments rather than a single high-stakes exam
- asking students to briefly explain the reasoning behind selected answers
- asking students to interpret or evaluate solutions or examples discussed in class

These approaches can often be implemented within existing assessments and remain feasible even in large classes.

Introduction

This document provides faculty members with benchmarked practices and practical ideas for alternative assessment in online teaching in the age of generative AI, with the goal of supporting the evaluation of student learning and reasoning.

While not designed specifically for academic continuity, the suggestions may be useful in the current context where many courses have pivoted rapidly to online delivery. Several of the approaches below allow instructors to adapt existing assessments without redesigning their courses and, in some cases, without adding significant grading workload. *Note: Instructors are reminded of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education's March 2026 guidance that requires final exams to be conducted in person.

The guidance draws on practices adopted at other universities (see references below) and complements AUB's Guidelines for the Use of Generative AI Tools in Courses, which encourage instructors to establish a clear course-specific policy regarding the use of generative AI tools.

I. Principles for Alternative Assessment in Online Teaching

When designing or adapting assessments for online teaching, the following considerations may be helpful.

a. Align assessment with course learning outcomes

Assessments should evaluate the knowledge and skills that the course is intended to develop. When designing or adapting assessments for online teaching, instructors may find it helpful to revisit course learning outcomes and consider which forms of assessment, such as exams, written analysis, or applied tasks, provide the most appropriate evidence of those outcomes. Importantly, assessments should also serve as opportunities for further learning, supporting students' continued engagement with course material.

b. Assess reasoning and conceptual understanding

Assessment tasks that require students to explain how they reached a conclusion, interpret evidence, or justify analytical steps provide stronger evidence of learning than tasks based primarily on recall. In online environments where students may have access to course materials and external resources, questions that emphasize interpretation, synthesis, and application of concepts are generally more effective indicators of understanding.

c. Use authentic and applied forms of assessment

Assignments and exams that ask students to apply course concepts to problems, cases, data, or real-world scenarios can provide meaningful evidence of learning. Such tasks mirror the kinds of reasoning and analytical work students are expected to perform within their disciplines.

d. Make students' thinking visible

Assessments that require students to explain their reasoning, through written justifications, analytical explanations, brief recordings, or discussion, allow instructors to observe students' thinking more clearly. These approaches can provide credible evidence of learning in online environments and in the presence of generative AI tools.

II. Practical Adjustments for Assessments in Online Teaching

The following approaches illustrate ways instructors may adapt existing exams or assignments for online or digitally enhanced teaching environments. Many of these adjustments can be implemented without redesigning the overall structure of a course and can be adapted to different class sizes and disciplinary practices.

a. Structure online exams for openresource conditions

When exams are administered online, students may have access to notes or other resources. Rather than relying primarily on memorization, questions can *emphasize interpretation, application of concepts, or analysis of evidence.*

Possible adjustments include:

- using timelimited exams
- including questions that require interpretation or application
- retaining MCQs that test conceptual distinctions rather than factual recall

These approaches allow instructors to maintain familiar exam formats while adapting them to online conditions.

b. Ask students to explain or interpret reasoning

Assessments can require students to explain how they arrived at an answer or interpret the reasoning behind a proposed solution.

Examples include asking students to:

- justify the reasoning behind their answer
- interpret the steps in a provided solution
- identify errors in a proposed argument or analysis

These explanations help instructors evaluate students' conceptual understanding rather than simply the correctness of an answer. They may be implemented through *short written responses, brief recorded explanations, or short oral exchanges* depending on the course format and class size.

An illustrative example

Instead of asking students to reproduce a method or definition, instructors may ask them to explain how a known solution changes under new conditions.

Example:
In class we solved a problem using Method X to analyze situation Y.
Suppose that parameter A in that example changes to parameter B.
Explain how this change affects the reasoning used to reach the solution and whether the same method would still apply.

Because the question builds directly on material discussed in class, students must demonstrate understanding of the underlying concepts rather than reproduce information.

c. Use course-specific or applied questions

Another approach is to design questions that ask students to apply concepts to examples, problems, or scenarios discussed during the course.

For example, instructors may:

- modify parameters from a problem solved in class
- ask students to interpret data or cases discussed in the course
- ask students to explain how a known method applies to a new situation

Because these questions build directly on course material and the specific approaches used in the course, they require students to demonstrate deeper understanding of concepts and methods rather than relying on more general or standardized responses such as that LLMs or other Generative AI tools usually provide.

d. Use multiple assessment points where appropriate

In some courses, a single high-stakes exam may be supplemented by several shorter assessments distributed across the semester.

Examples include:

- short quizzes
- brief written responses
- analytical questions
- problem-solving tasks

Multiple assessment points provide more frequent evidence of student learning and reduce reliance on a single high-stakes evaluation.

Example: Designing an Online Exam for a Large Class

When in-person exams are not feasible, online exams can still be used effectively in large classes if they emphasize conceptual understanding and limit the time available for searching or prompting AI tools.

Possible approaches include:

- using time-limited exams
- referring to course-specific examples discussed in class
- modifying parameters of previously solved problems
- combining conceptual MCQs with a small number of short explanation questions

Because students must interpret course-specific material and respond within a limited time window, success depends more on understanding the concepts, methods, and course-specific approaches developed during the semester than on simply locating or generating answers.

III. A Note on AI Detection Tools

Some faculty have asked whether AI detection software can reliably identify the use of generative AI in student work.

AI detection tools remain unreliable and should not be used as the primary basis for determining academic misconduct. Detection systems may produce inaccurate results and cannot reliably distinguish between AI-generated and human-written text.

For this reason, many universities recommend focusing on assessment design, clear expectations, and academic integrity policies, rather than relying on automated detection tools.

At AUB, instructors are encouraged to establish and communicate a course-specific policy regarding the use of generative AI tools, including whether such tools are prohibited, permitted with restrictions, or integrated into the course. Expectations regarding AI use may therefore vary across courses depending on the learning objectives and pedagogical goals of the course. Clear communication of these expectations helps ensure that students understand how the use of AI tools relates to course learning goals and academic integrity standards.

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