

*The Insider's Guide To*

# Becoming a Rapid E-Learning Pro

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# The Insider's Guide To Becoming A Rapid E-Learning Pro

This ebook provides an insider's perspective on getting the results that make you a rapid e-learning pro. In it, I'll share with you the proven methods and techniques I've developed after 15 years of building e-learning courses.

## What Does It Mean To Be a Rapid E-Learning Pro?

One of the great benefits of rapid e-learning is it lets you create e-learning courses much faster and easier than ever before. However, going faster and making your job easier are not the only factors.

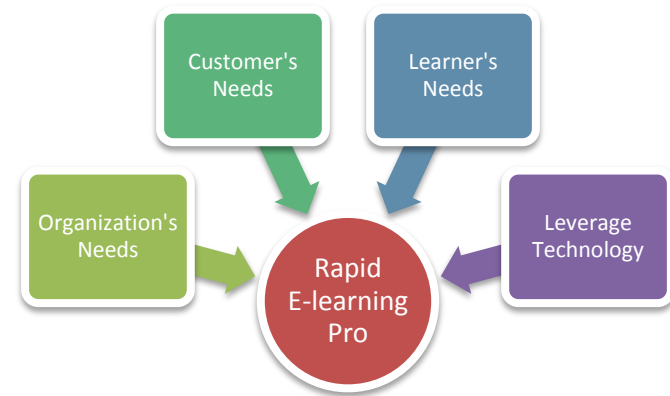
While many e-learning developers do a good job focusing their attention on the design process, they often neglect the real needs of the organization, customers, and learner. This means that the course might not deliver the results you want it to.

As a rapid e-learning pro, your job is to produce meaningful business results. You do this by balancing the needs of everyone involved--the organization, the customer, and the learner—by leveraging e-learning technology.

## How Do I Become a Rapid E-Learning Pro?

Reading this ebook is an excellent start. In it, we'll review four key questions to help guide the development of your e-learning courses.

1. What does my organization need?
2. What does my customer need?
3. What do the learners need?
4. How do I leverage the tools and technology?



*The Insider says:*

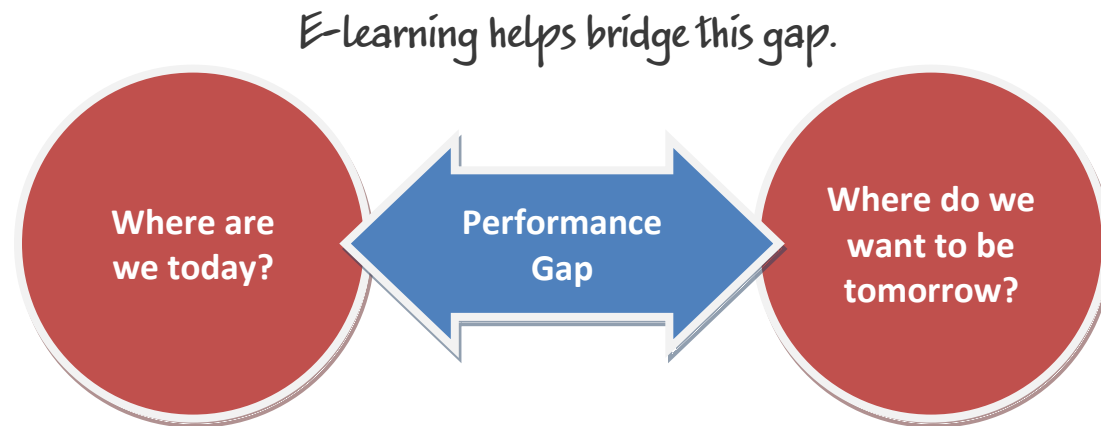
“A rapid e-learning pro delivers results by balancing the needs of the organization, customer, and learner.”

# What Does My Organization Need?

## It's All About Results

Identifying desired results and creating a course that helps you meet them is key. This sounds obvious, but you'd be surprised by how many courses fail to deliver valuable results because they are not aligned to the organization's real goals. Many go wrong by measuring success by the number of participants or the mere fact that the course was delivered.

You don't want to make that mistake. Instead, you want to measure your success by how you contribute to the organization's success. For example, if the organization measures success by increased sales, then you need to measure success by increased sales.



## Contribute To the Bottom Line

The difference between a novice and pro is that the pro knows how to contribute to the organization's bottom line. Remember, while training is important and e-learning is vital to effective training, the organization's true goal isn't to create more training. Instead, the goal is to meet performance objectives. E-learning is just a means to an end, and performance results are the pot of gold at the end of the e-learning rainbow.

Going back to the increased sales example, in order to increase sales your organization must build training that is directly linked to that goal. If you do that, your success is measured by sales volume, not fuzzy e-learning objectives.

## Measure the Right Things

I had a conversation with a performance consultant in charge of rolling out leadership training. I helped him develop the metrics for his training course. Before we started, his measurement for success was 5,000 frontline managers completing the four-hour course.

What does his client organization glean from this goal? Basically, that he is going to waste the time of 5,000 frontline managers. Here's why.

Four hours times 5,000 managers is 20,000 hours. At a low estimate of \$50 per hour, the course is costing the organization over \$1 million. You had better be prepared to tell the organization how that \$1 million investment is going to pay off.

If all you can say is that 5,000 managers took the course and passed a quiz, then you're probably better off not even having the course in the first place. At a minimum, you save the organization \$1 million.

This example is typical of how we report training success by measuring the wrong things. "We delivered 50 courses and had 10,000 participants," we proudly state. If we get creative, we'll say something like "The courses were delivered online so we saved the company tons of money by not having face to face sessions."

While there is some value to this information, your best bet is to align the courses to real business goals. After all, the goals of the business are the reasons why the managers are there.

In the earlier example about leadership training, the performance consultant and I worked together to determine the training goals. He recognized that what the business wants isn't training courses. Instead, training is a tool used to meet a business need.

In the case above, one of the identified needs was increased employee retention. Many people were leaving because of poor manager-employee relationships. Through some research, we were able to build a training program specifically focused on retention issues, rather than just generic leadership training.

After the course is rolled out, the report won't be that "5,000 employees took the leadership training." Instead, it will be something like this. "We have fewer employees leaving because we focused training on retention-related issues and equipped the managers to effectively manage their relationships with their employees. The retention rate improved by 25%."

## Measuring Training Is Not Always Easy

Since your goal is to meet the organization's needs, you need to be prepared to tell the organization how your efforts have influenced the bottom line. Sometimes it's difficult to get the information you need to prove the value of your course, so here are a 5 tips to help you report your contribution and success in those circumstances.

### 1. REPORT YOUR CONTRIBUTION

I'm surprised at how often people forget to report their results. Let me share a lesson I learned a while back. I don't want to sound cynical, but business reality dictates that it's all about the money. When it all comes down to it, you're a line item on a spreadsheet.

Talk to any training industry veteran and they will tell you that when it comes time to make cuts, the training group is usually one of the first to go. Given that scary scenario, you want to ensure that your organization knows your true value.

Don't be afraid to report the work you do. I usually do a post-project report in which I collect the available data and do a quick satisfaction survey. Then I forward that on to my boss.

### 2. BUILD YOUR E-LEARNING COURSES TO REFLECT THE REAL WORLD

Step away from information delivery and make the course performance-based. Make it as pragmatic as possible so that the learners can utilize the skills you're teaching them.

If you expect increased sales, then build the course so that the learners get the information they need to make more sales. Plus, give them an opportunity to practice so that you can provide feedback relevant to their skill level.

If you build your training to mimic real world interactions you can report that “based on our training, 500 employees were able to close a deal and increase sales.” However, if they don’t get to practice using the information you give them, you cannot verify that they know how to use it when they get back to work.

### **3. USE PERFORMANCE METRICS THAT ARE AVAILABLE TO YOU**

Ideally, your customer is going to measure before-and-after performance for the course. They start with metrics corresponding to the need for training, and then compare those to the post training numbers. You want to tie your report to those numbers.

From my experience, it's difficult to obtain this information. If that's the case, use the data that you're tracking. Most likely, you'll have some sort of assessment as part of the course. If you designed the course to mimic real world scenarios, it's valid to suggest that the users will have similar success at work.

If you cannot track all course participants, then pull a handful of users and just track them. It's better than nothing. Personally, I think it's reasonable to assume that if your sample group has a certain rate of success, it will translate to the entire population. If someone wants to challenge it as a “scientifically sound” number, then he can hire a statistician or analyst to provide a more detailed report.



#### **4. TIE INTO THE CUSTOMER'S SUCCESS**

If the customer reports success, make sure that information appears in your own report. If you provide training to a business unit that meets its goals, it's fair to assert that your efforts contributed to that success. You can't take full credit, but you can mention that you “contributed to the marketing department's sales increase by providing relevant training for their sales staff.”

#### **5. IT'S ALL ABOUT THE MONEY**

Since this about being a rapid e-learning pro, I need to throw in that one of the great benefits to using a rapid e-learning tool is that you can quickly build e-learning courses and deliver them at a great cost, which enhances the value of the achieved organizational goals.

Rapid authoring tools are easy to use and allow for automation of much of the multimedia production process. This saves time and money—two things that are always aligned with the organization's goals. In that case, you can report that you delivered X number of courses at Y value. You can also state that the courses were delivered ahead of schedule if that's the case.

Here are some ballpark figures. When pricing e-learning courses for one of my customers, we looked at a number of vendors and settled on three of the bigger ones. Here's what those vendors offered.

Most e-learning costs for this project were from \$25,000 to \$45,000 per hour of instruction. The vendors didn't build a custom course from scratch. Instead, they created the course using a templated, XML-driven product. This was a pre-built player template with pre-built flash animations and interactions (such as animated graphics, text, and drag-and-drop activities). Unless we paid more for a custom-built template, they simply dropped the content into their pre-built e-learning environment.

I compared this to what we had with the player that comes with the rapid e-learning software my employer sells. They were very similar. Of course, some superficial elements differed, but from a learning perspective, these small differences didn't provide additional value worthy of the extra cost and delay. In addition, we owned what we made, while the vendors only provided production files (and only if we paid them extra). Imagine the extra value when you want to make edits to the content down the road.

We wound up building the course ourselves; many for less than \$1,000, and not one exceeded \$4,000. Since we did not need to spend the time and money to build the player navigation, we were able to get our flash developers to build custom interactions (like drag and drop activities) that we could also use again in the future.

Some "e-learning pundits" dismiss rapid authoring tools; but I suggest that it should be your primary e-learning strategy unless you can prove that the extra expense and increased sophistication in a custom solution provides better business results. This does not mean that custom solutions have no value. It simply means that you allocate your resources to solutions that deliver the most value at the best cost. If you need to go beyond rapid authoring, then you do so only because it brings greater value.

Think of this way, if my goal is to drive ten miles, does it matter if I'm in a Nissan Sentra or in a Lamborghini? Sure, one is slicker and has better features, but does it really bring any extra value, especially considering the increased cost?

## Rapid E-Learning Is More than Bullet Points or Simple Screen Captures

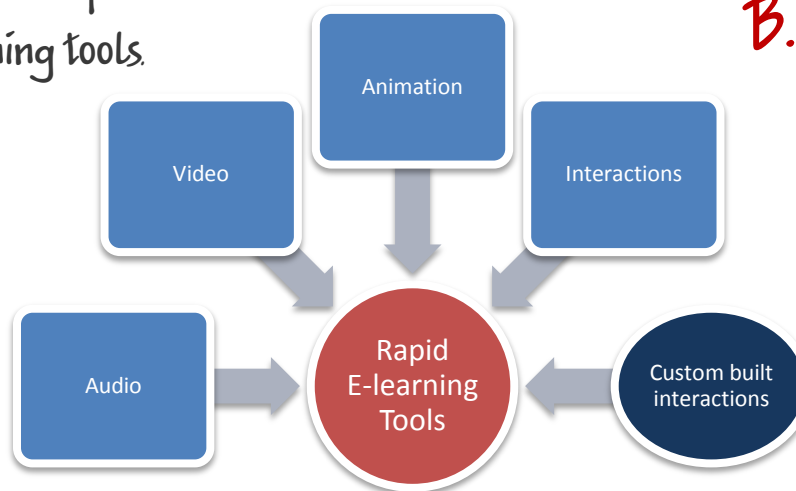
Today, rapid authoring tools allow you to create sophisticated courses utilizing all types of media. With these tools, you can mimic much of what you see in more expensive custom-built courses without the need for programming...and it's only getting easier and better.

Don't get me wrong--it's not an either-or situation. Rapid e-learning complements other authoring solutions. By starting with a rapid authoring tool, you save a lot of time on user interface and navigation design. If you need custom work done, you can have specific pieces built that can be dropped into the authoring tool. This saves time and money since there's no need to start from scratch. Those expensive e-learning vendors don't, so why should you?

Some courses are basic, some more advanced. By default, rapid authoring tools are ideal for basic courses. This frees up your multimedia developers to work on the courses that require more sophistication and programming. This way, you're not wasting resources on things you can easily do with a rapid e-learning tool. If you find that the rapid authoring tool doesn't provide the type of learning environment you need and you can justify the additional cost in terms of bottom-line value to the organization, then and only then build a custom course.

The key point is that e-learning needs to meet your organization's objectives. If you want to distinguish your work and be recognized as a pro, then do your best to align your goals to the organization's goals. You'll never go wrong showing that you boosted the bottom line by saving time, cutting costs and increasing performance.

**A.** Start with rapid e-learning tools.



**B.** Optionally, build custom pieces that you can drop in.

**C.** Build custom course only if it makes business sense and brings increased performance.



*The Insider says:*

“E-learning pros design training to impact the bottom line.”

# What Does My Customer Need?

Most e-learning professionals want to build exciting, fun, and engaging courses. Accordingly, this next statement might be considered blasphemous to many people who design e-learning.

Don't start your project focused on the learner's needs. Your primary goal is to satisfy your customer. In an ideal world, you build e-learning courses that are perfectly aligned with the customer AND learner needs. However, when push comes to shove, you need to focus on pleasing your customer first. Your customer is trying to meet specific objectives. Your goal is to help them design a course that meets those objectives. Once you know what the customer needs, you'll be able to build a course that engages the learner.

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## Who Are Your Customers

Your customers are the ones who pay you to design the e-learning course. If you work for an organization and all of your development is internal, then your customers are other people in the organization. They can range from your manager to other departments. If you work for an e-learning development company, your paying customers are clear.

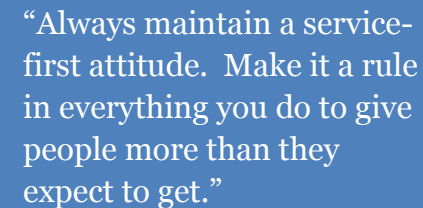
## Look At Customer Needs from Two Perspectives: Perception & Practice

You might think the work you do and your level of customer service is excellent, and this may be true. However, what your customer thinks is what counts. Take garage sales for example. To one person the stuff is junk, yet to another it's a great deal. Your work is like the stuff at the garage sale. One person thinks it's great, another doesn't.

An e-learning pro knows that success goes beyond designing a great course. It means managing the customer relationship; and part of that entails managing the customer's expectations and perceptions.

In my wallet, I carry a card that I've had for years. It says, "Always maintain a service-first attitude. Make it a rule in everything you do to give people more than they expect to get."

I've made that my life's motto. I always strive to give more than expected—and it's worked. I've found that by managing expectations, I can manage perception.



"Always maintain a service-first attitude. Make it a rule in everything you do to give people more than they expect to get."

## Perception Relates To Expectation

You can manage the customer's perception by managing expectations. You do this through your personal practice. The easiest thing to do is to follow the old rule to "under-promise and over-deliver."

Here's a strategy that always works for me. Part of the initial client meeting is to discuss and negotiate a project timeline. I use a generic project plan when I meet with my customers. It lays out all of the

general tasks required to build an e-learning course, from the initial meeting, to the final course implementation, and finally to evaluation. Part of the project process is to build the user interface and course infrastructure.

Keep this in mind—most customers don't know what type of authoring tool you use, and most really don't care. They just want you to be able to do the job and give them a finished product.

If you use a rapid e-learning tool, you won't need to build the interface or navigation. If you custom coded the interface in Flash or other authoring environment, it will certainly take you a lot longer. These are steps you won't need to do but can still keep in your project plan. The client doesn't need to know how much time you are saving. You just need to negotiate a timeline that works for you and your client. They don't care if you hand code the user interface or you use a template; they care that the result meets their needs.

Thus, when you plan your project, keep the interface design steps in it. Assuming you're not already in a crunch, you'll create a cushion because you won't need to spend a lot of development time on interface design, and you can strive to finish the project ahead of schedule. This has always worked for me, because customers are ecstatic when a project is finished ahead of schedule.

On the other hand, you might not let the client know how quickly you can produce the courses using the rapid authoring tool. Customers are notorious at making training development a last-minute priority. You don't want to be in a position where you are getting all of your requests with impossible deadlines attached.

## Be a One-Stop Shop for Your Customers

There is a lot that has to happen to build an e-learning course and get it online. Look at the image below. Who is going to fill all of those roles? Typically, your customer doesn't know much about instructional design and e-learning technology. They just want a training course.

The customer is looking to you to get the project done, so it helps to see yourself as an e-learning concierge. Take the initiative to steer the course to completion and provide one-stop service. If some of it is out of your control, then map out the process so that your customer can manage the project with confidence. Your efforts will be greatly appreciated.





Remember, your goal is to manage your customer's expectations. If you don't provide this level of service, it won't matter how good your course is if the details result in frustration for your customer.

There are other ways to manage your customer's expectations, such as keeping your promises, staying on top of project, etc. The key point is that what your customer "perceives" is more important than what is true. You can do a great job, but if your customer doesn't see it that way, all of your hard work fails to reflect well on you. On the other hand, you can execute on simple projects that require minimal effort and the customer is extremely satisfied.

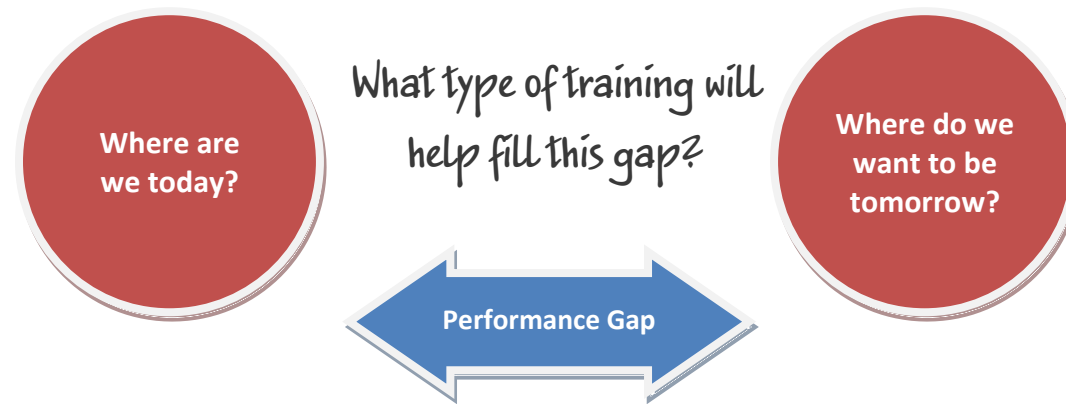
I've taken basic PowerPoint slides and converted them into a basic click-and-read e-learning course and the customer raved about how great it was. On the flip side, I've built some slick training that I would consider some of my best, and the customer was luke-warm about it. The happy customer wrote a letter to my director, which was passed on to the VP of our business unit, and I got a bonus. The other customer did nothing even though they got a much better product, and I ended up with nothing for my extra effort. It's all about perception.

## Build the Right Type of Training

Other than perception, another key to success is to focus on the organization's needs. You have an obligation to help your customer build e-learning courses that are aligned with the organization's needs.

**YOU ARE THE E-LEARNING EXPERT.** Put your performance consultant hat on and help the customer align training with real business needs.

## Understand Where the Business Is Going



Many times your clients will come to you with a training request that lacks alignment with real business goals. Since you want to build meaningful courses that contribute to the organization's success, it's your job to help them purchase e-learning that works.

It's not about badgering the client and making them comply with your insights and ideas. Instead, it's about asking the right type of questions and helping the customer establish clear learning objectives. If you play the role of performance consultant, typically one of three things happens.

**1. THE CUSTOMER CANCELS THE PROJECT.** I've found that many projects have no real alignment to the organization's needs. You'll typically have an apparent business need and the first inclination is to throw a training course at it. However, many times when you analyze the business need, you find that training isn't the appropriate solution.

If that's the case, you're wasting time and money with a training course. I've had a number of proposed projects die on the vine because the client saw early in the development process that the e-learning course wasn't going to meet their actual needs.

This is a good situation. You saved the client time and money while establishing your expertise and value to the organization. Make sure you report how you saved money by not implementing the training.

**2. THE CUSTOMER GETS A BETTER PROJECT.** Asking the right questions and mapping the desired performance goals to the training objectives helps you build a better course. I've had a number of projects change direction and improve because the customer was able to reassess the training goals and create more clarity around performance expectations. Customers never complain when they're delivered a better product, especially one that is linked to real performance goals.

**3. THE CUSTOMER IS ALWAYS RIGHT.** On some projects, it didn't matter what I thought or what expertise I offered. The customers were determined to proceed with the projects regardless of my input or concerns.

In those cases, my first impulse is to send a quick email to them detailing why they are wrong and how the project is doomed to failure. I instinctively want to make sure that the whole organization knows that they are about to waste time and money.

But I don't do that. Instead, I recognize that the customer is the one paying the bills. In the end, my job is to give them the best e-learning course I can within the parameters I'm given. If I have limited resources, I create the best course I can with what I've got.

There are times to stand your ground, and times to concede despite your misgivings. My personal philosophy is to go with what the client wants. Remember, there are many unemployed idealists.

## Your Expertise Provides Value

Customers are looking for your expertise to add value to the organization. Not only does your expertise provide value, you create extra value by using rapid e-learning tools, because they save time and money while increasing performance.

If you manage customer expectations and make a commitment to providing value, you'll always have happy customers who value your expertise and are pleased with your work.



*The Insider Says:*

**“A rapid e-learning pro creates happy customers by helping them succeed.”**

# What Does The Learner Need?

There is a lot of good information on learning styles and how to make courses fun and engaging for the learner. I'm not going to cover that type of material here. However, if I had to sum up the essence of all of that information it would be this: The more relevant the course is to the learners, the more engaged they would be, even if the course isn't "best in breed" multimedia.

While it's nice to have slick courses with cool graphics and interactions, if they're not relevant to the learner, it won't matter. On the other hand, you can get away with fewer bells and whistles if the course content is highly relevant. This is important to know because it can save you a lot of production time and money. Ideally, you have a course that is both relevant and leverages multimedia to engage the learner.

## Information versus Performance

Generally, there are two types of courses: information-based or performance-based. Knowing the difference will help you design the best course appropriate to the objectives that you're trying to meet.

**INFORMATION-BASED COURSES.** Many courses aren't really e-learning. Instead, they are e-information. The goal isn't to change performance as much as it is to share new information. How you approach this type of course is different from how you design a performance-based course.

Many e-learning courses are unavoidable. They are compliance-based or required by a regulatory group. They cover important information, but most of it is not relevant to the user in their daily work.

*So, what do you do if you have to deliver these information-based courses and yet there are no immediate performance requirements?*

I always try to be an advocate for the learner. If the training is information-based then I take it easy on the person who has to go through the course. Consider their time and potential frustration going through a course that they might find a waste of time.

I'm afraid many of my e-learning colleagues might not share my compassion for the learner.

I'm not going to cover the basics of e-learning design in this section. Instead, I am going to give you five of my pet peeves, and give you some ideas on how to avoid them so as to have mercy on the learner.

#### **PET PEEVE #1: COURSES ARE LOCKED DOWN AND THE USER CANNOT FREELY NAVIGATE THEM.**

Here's a common scenario. You're required to take the annual safety refresher course. It's 100 screens of every piece of safety information that could be remotely relevant to the organization. You work in an office environment, and yet have to sit through information about forklift safety.

Knowing that the information is irrelevant, you want to click past it, but you can't because the e-learning fascists have decided that they will force you to look at every screen. Not only that, every screen is animated, using the slowest animation possible. You cannot move forward until the animation is complete. There's a transcript for you to read the text, but you'll have to wait for the narrator to finish before you can move on. It's enough to induce road rage.

*"I have to lock the navigation on the course, or else they'll click right through."*

Duh! If the course is relevant to the learners, they'll be engaged and not just click through it. Since they do desire to skip through the course quickly, it speaks volumes about the content and how relevant it is to the learners.

Some courses may require locked navigation (see the next pet peeve). For those that don't, there are better ways to build the course that allow you to share information and still please the learner.

For example, allow the learners to **go to the final assessment first**. If they cannot answer a question, point them to the place in the course where they can get the information. This means they only get what they need.

Alternatively, rather than creating a course and a final quiz, integrate the quiz into the content so that you present information and then ask a question. This allows the learner to **go through the course and assessment at the same time**.

Better yet, **let them test out**. If a learner can prove that they know the information, let them move on. You have a record of completion and they demonstrated a specified level of competency.

The screenshot shows a quiz interface titled "The Rapid E-Learning Blog". At the top right, it says "Point Value: 10". The main content area contains a text passage about blue whales and a question with multiple-choice answers. To the right of the text is an image of a blue whale with a "Zoom" button. Below the question, there are four radio button options. At the bottom, there is a "Submit" button and a score display.

**The Rapid E-Learning Blog**

Point Value: 10

Blue Whales were abundant in nearly all oceans until the beginning of the twentieth century. For over 40 years they were hunted almost to extinction by whalers until protected by the international community in 1966. A 2002 report estimated there were 5,000 to 12,000 Blue Whales worldwide located in at least five groups.

Blue whales were protected in what year?

- ☐ 1963
- ☐ 1965
- ☐ 1964
- ☐ 1966

Submit

Score so far: 0 points out of 0

Information

Assessment

## **PET PEEVE #2: IT'S REQUIRED BY LAW.**

This is usually the cause for the first pet peeve. I routinely hear that “this or that” is required by law. Funny thing is, in the fifteen years I’ve been involved in e-learning design, I’ve yet to see the required law on a piece of paper.

Of course there *are* legal requirements, but often they are misunderstood and this influences the course design. Instead of just committing to a specific design path because someone says it’s the law, check with your legal department and see what the true legal parameters are.

I know of a group that checked with their legal department and found they could offer a test-out option rather than force everyone through the entire course. Thirty percent of their learners were able to test out, which amounts to a big time savings. I bet those learners were relieved not to go through the entire course, too.

If the law states that you must make a boring 100 screen click-and-read e-learning course, then that’s what you have to do. However, most laws are nowhere near that specific.

Again, consider the learner. You’re pulling that person away from her job and forcing her to go through a course that is mostly irrelevant to her daily responsibilities. Build a course that gives her the required information and lets her get back to work.

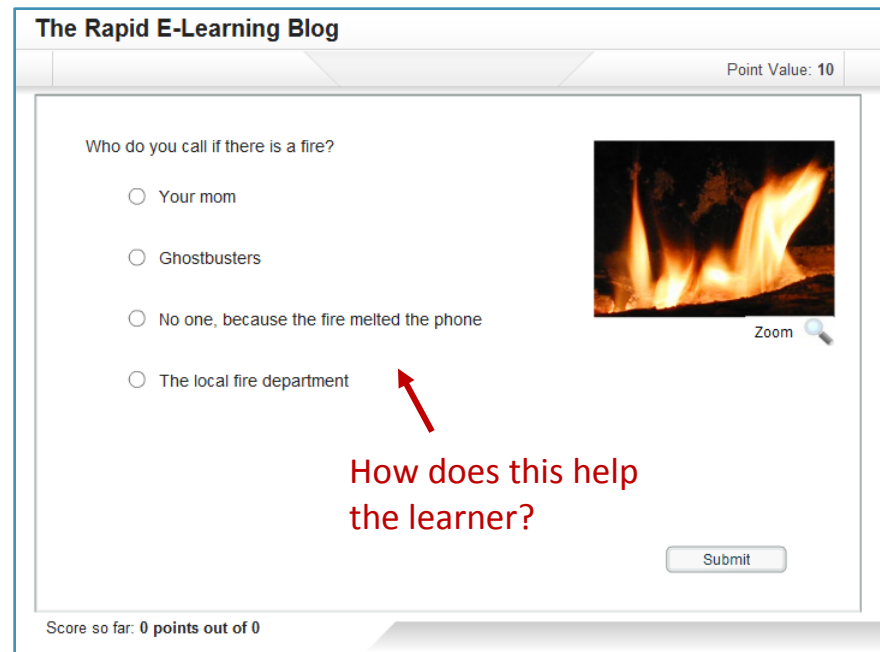


### PET PEEVE #3: I'M STUCK IN QUIZ HELL.

Quizzes are good, because assessing the learner's understanding is important. Quizzes also allow for feedback that is more specific. On the other hand, creating questions for the purpose of creating questions is not a good use of time and will frustrate the learner. Two things bug me when it comes to questions in e-learning courses. The first is creating questions where the correct answer is obvious and the others are a bunch of nonsense. You know what I am talking about, because we've all seen them. You might think this is cute or fun, but it's just a waste of time.

The other end of the spectrum is just as frustrating. This is where the question choices are so difficult you need a lawyer and an electron microscope to discern the differences.

The second thing that bugs me is when I see three screens of information and then a quiz question, followed by three more screens and a quiz question. What's next? You guessed it—three more screens and yet another quiz question.



How does this help the learner?

Look, if the questions serve a purpose because the information is complex and you're doing spot checks for comprehension, fine. But remember, we're still talking about information-based courses that are not performance-based. In the case of information delivery, all of those questions might be overkill.

I've seen courses where the instructional designer as a matter of routine, just arbitrarily inserted a question in between every 3-5 screens. Then to make it even more frustrating, the exact same questions were asked at the end of the course. Does this make sense?

If you do want to make sure learners "get it," ask a rhetorical question and then answer it on the next screen. It's easier to build, accomplishes the same thing, and is easier on the learner.

Here's an example:

***Screen 1:*** *If there's a fire, who should you call first? (Click the next screen)*

***Screen 2:*** *In an emergency, the tendency is to get flustered. Some people will call home. Some will call their managers. The best course of action is to call the fire department so that they can respond as quickly as possible.*

*With this approach, you cover the required information, ask a question, and address common issues in the subsequent answer.*

#### **PET PEEVE #4: I WANT TO KNOW WHAT TIME IT IS, AND YOU'RE TEACHING ME TO BUILD A CLOCK.**

A while back, I was putting some crown molding in my living room. After measuring I cut the molding only to find that the angle was off, because I didn't account for the compound angle. Being a constructivist, I went back to the saw, guesstimated an angle, and made another cut.

No luck.

Knowing that I obviously had something to learn, I did a search on Google. The first site I went to had everything you could possibly know about crown molding. There was detailed information on all of the ornate designs and their history. The site could have easily been Crown Molding University.

For all of the good information on the site, I had a hard time finding what I needed. As I kept digging, I did find some instructions on cutting crown molding. Unfortunately, it might as well have been written in hieroglyphics. I think I would have had to take a calculus class to discern the mathematical formulas that were presented to me.

I continued my search. I found a site where someone gave a three-step process to cut crown molding. Line it up on the saw, flip it over, and then cut. That's it. In three simple lines, he accomplished what the other person tried to do with pages of mind-numbing complexity.

You want to create e-learning that mimics the three-step person rather than Crown Molding University. No one's going to remember all of the information anyway. Give them the essential information and teach them to locate additional resources when they need them.

### **PET PEEVE #5: WE HATE BRANCHING.**

Branched interactions are an important part of engaging e-learning content, so I certainly don't hate them. That's a quote from a manager who was discussing training with me. I was showing him a new training course in which I used branched interactions rather than click-and-read linear navigation.

His response shocked me. I anticipated that he would find the course more engaging. Instead, he said he wanted his people in and out of the course, and didn't want them following rabbit trails trying to figure out how to navigate the course.

"Give it to us simple and let us get it done," he told me.

I can see his point. The learners want to know what they're in for. If you can tell them in one sentence to call 911 in case of an emergency, you don't need to build a twenty-minute activity-based scenario that teaches them the same thing.

We often overcomplicate e-learning. Sure, a click-and-read is not the most engaging course, but from the learner's perspective it might be the *desired* course...especially if the information is not immediately relevant. In that case, they want to get through the material as fast as they can and get back to work.

## PERFORMANCE-BASED COURSES

The previous section focused on those courses that are information-based and perhaps lacking in relevancy for the learner as a performance-based course. Performance-based courses are designed so that the learner is able to make better decisions on the job. These courses require a different approach.

Here are two tips that can help you create better performance-based courses.

### 1. BUILD THE COURSE TO MIMIC REAL LIFE.

You want the learner making real-world decisions with observable consequences. The best way to accomplish this is to mimic the performance environment as much as possible. This allows you to provide valuable feedback based on the decisions the learner makes.

Let's say you're building a course on giving and receiving feedback in the workplace. Many rapid e-learning courses replicate the bullet-point approach made popular by presentation programs like PowerPoint. Thus, a course might amount to a series of click-and-read slides with a ten-question quiz at the end. That might work. It's definitely easy to build.

Here's another way to approach it. Create a scenario where the learner has to use all of the information that needs to be presented. Put the learner in a real-world situation and have them learn as they go. Most likely, they'll make both correct and incorrect decisions—just like in real life. This is much more engaging than simply sitting through an information dump.

For example, suppose an employee has issues with a co-worker and must learn the best way to give and receive feedback. The learner is presented with some dialogue and an issue, and then has to make

decisions based on two or three options. The learner gets relevant feedback regarding his choice and moves on to another issue, all while gaining information from the course and learning to apply it.

This type of course is not much more difficult to build than a click-and-read, but it's much more relevant to the learner. This makes delivery of the same information more engaging and memorable.

## **2. LEARNING IS ALSO ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS.**

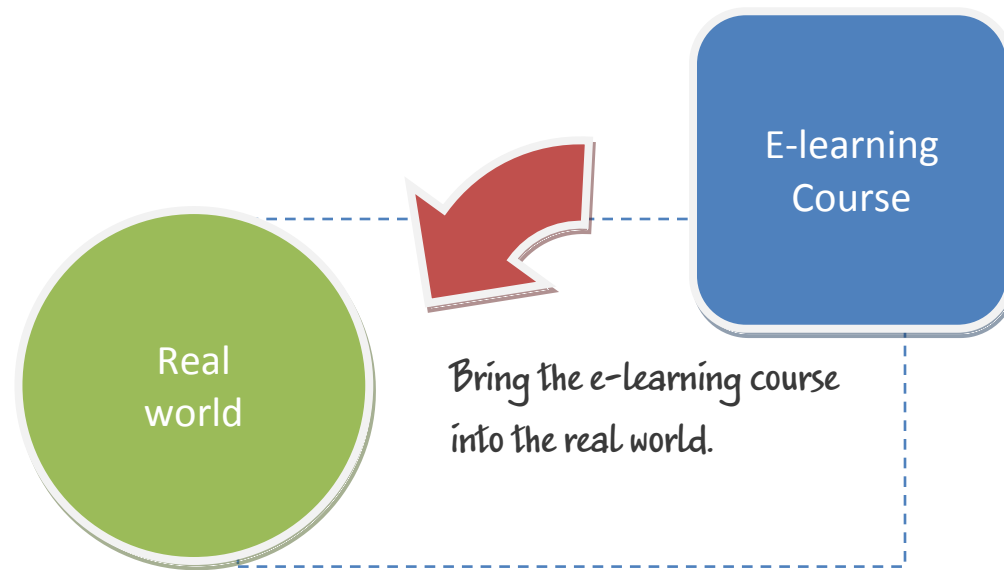
While this ebook is about rapid e-learning, true learning is much more complicated than simply going through an e-learning course. That's because a large part of learning is *relational*.

When building an e-learning course, help your client see the learner outside of the literal course environment. They are taking the course to become better employees, and that entails interacting with real people—building and maintaining relationships—rather than simply sitting in front of a computer.

## **Take a Two-Pronged Approach to E-Learning Courses**

**The first prong is content.** Provide consistent and relevant content in a timely manner that also serves as a resource for future use.

**The second prong is context.** How will the learner use the information in the real world? Try to build an environment where the course extends beyond the computer, and engages the learner in the workplace with her manager and peers.



An example of this is to have part of the course online and part as a facilitated team discussion. I've also built courses where the learner received the core information online, and then had to complete a case study offline that was reviewed by a manager.

This worked well because it not only helped the learner for the specific course, it also allowed the manager and employee to discuss expectations in the work place, which sometimes can differ from the "textbook" answer. This approach also allows the manager and employee to develop their relationship and the norms by which they work together.

In summary, performance-based courses engage the learner to make real-world decisions that extend the course beyond the computer. This marks the difference between courses that are only e-information and those that are true e-learning. Keep those differences in mind and build courses that meet both the organization's objectives and the learner's needs.



*The Insider says:*

**“If you want to engage learners, make courses that are relevant to their needs.”**



# How Do I Leverage The Tools & Technology?

## Is There Really Such A Thing As Rapid E-Learning?

Financial analysts aren't *rapid analysts* because they started using Excel. Architects aren't *rapid architects* because they use CAD. Technical writers aren't *rapid technical writers* because they use a word processing program.

In those industries, technology was developed to automate the production process and make life easier. Now those practitioners can focus on their core competencies and not on how to tweak the technology to get what they want.

The same is happening in the world of e-learning. A few years ago, you had to custom program most of your courses, which is expensive and time consuming. It also took much of the learning design out of the hands of the instructors and put it into the hands of programmers.

Today, the technology is automating the production process. Instead of being limited to one drag and drop interaction due to limited programming resources, simple software allows you easily edit and use multiple interactions. This software requires no programming knowledge and allows you to focus on building the best content and learning environment. The next generation tools are going to be even more powerful—giving you PowerPoint simplicity with Authorware capability.

## What's The Right Technology for Me

There are many rapid authoring tools to choose from, with some being more complete solutions than others. I'm not going to go into specifics on any software, but I will make a few points about how to choose what will work for you.

It makes sense at this point to make it clear that I am employed by Articulate, a company that creates rapid e-learning authoring tools. My reference to and recommendation of Articulate software can be viewed as biased, and frankly, I *am* biased. After 15 years of developing e-learning courses, I wouldn't have joined the Articulate team if I didn't believe that the tools were the best for rapid e-learning. So, it's fair to say that I'm biased, but my bias isn't caused by my employment. It's more accurate to say that my employment was caused by my bias.

**START WITH A TOOL THAT LEVERAGES POWERPOINT.** PowerPoint is a very flexible application and most people have access to it, and there are many products that leverage PowerPoint to create Flash-based e-learning. I would go with a more comprehensive product like Articulate Presenter, which gives you a complete authoring solution that allows you to add in audio, video, and flash.

The secret is to step away from the PowerPoint look. Treat it like a blank canvas and you can do some really nice things with it. In recent years, Microsoft has added nice animations and motion paths that allow you to mimic the types of animations you can create with Flash.

**GET A QUIZ TOOL.** Effective e-learning requires assessment, and there are many similar quizzing tools on the market. What I'd look for is SCORM compliance, ability to publish to flash, and ease of use.

**ADD SOME INTERACTIONS.** If you use Articulate Presenter, you can add in stand-alone flash files. There are complimentary applications that allow you to easily create and drop interactions into your course.

**PLAN ON BUYING MORE THAN ONE PRODUCT.** Think of it like a tool chest. You have a hammer, a screwdriver, a saw, and a wrench, and they all have specific jobs. Rapid authoring tools also have specific jobs. Some of the applications are packaged as studios or suites (such as Articulate Studio), which is great because you get the entire tool chest at one affordable price.

**IT'S ALL ABOUT QUALITY EASE OF USE.** When you evaluate the software, you also want to consider general ease of use, which is why I like PowerPoint-based tools. It's a lot easier to teach someone to use PowerPoint than to use Flash, but you also want to make sure that you end up with a quality e-learning course. Outside of the actual product, go by reputation and choose companies that offer outstanding customer service and an active user community.

In short, the software does a lot of the grunt work for you. However, you still need to develop basic end-to-end multimedia skills. This means you'll need to know a little about audio, video, and graphics technology.

Here are specific tips for working with audio, video and graphics in e-learning courses.

## What Do I Need To Know About Audio

**LEARN THE BASICS OF DIGITAL AUDIO.** There are plenty of resources and websites to visit that will give you the information you need. Wikipedia is a great place to get a basic overview.

You won't need to know this:

$$Q = \frac{E_{FSR}}{2^M - 1}$$

But you should know the difference between 24 kbps and 128 kbps, so take a little bit of time to brush up on the basics.

If you need more specific information, check the user community of the software you use. You can ask other users what they do. They know the tools and have had to work through some of the problem solving issues to get the most out of them.

**CONTROL THE QUALITY OF YOUR AUDIO.** When it comes to audio, start with the best quality you can, because you'll never have better quality than your source file.

**GET A GOOD MICROPHONE.** When it comes to audio quality, you get what you pay for. If you buy a cheap mic, you'll have low quality audio. There are affordable microphones that provide good audio quality.

**RECORD IN A CONTROLLED ENVIRONMENT.** If you do your recording in-house (such as in an empty conference room), the microphone will pick up extraneous noise that you might normally tune out. You'll hear office machines, chatter, and the air conditioner, and this will adversely impact your sound quality.

**THERE ARE SOME THINGS YOU CAN DO TO CONTROL THE ENVIRONMENT.** THE most obvious is to shut down the noisemakers. If that's not feasible, I've even seen simple boxes stuffed with sound proofing material placed behind the microphone to minimize ambient noise.

**NON-PROFESSIONAL NARRATION MIGHT NOT REALLY SAVE YOU TIME AND MONEY.** Finding someone with a nice speaking voice to do your narration might seem like a good, inexpensive alternative to hiring a professional narrator. That's a good assumption if time is an issue. I don't mind sacrificing a little quality to get the product out as soon as possible.

**YOUR AUDIO OPTIONS BOIL DOWN TO THESE TWO:**

**Option 1.** Keep it in-house with non-professional talent and get decent quality audio. However, you'll get what I call "presentation quality" audio. That means you'll hear "popping p's," ambient office noise, and other distractions resulting from non-professionals recording in a non-controlled environment. This is inexpensive and typically satisfactory.

The downside is that when the customers hear the resulting audio quality, they demand a number of retakes or time-consuming edits. In this case, you are not saving time or money. The secret is to make it clear upfront that non-professionals give you non-professional audio quality and you get what they pay for.

Another downside is that when you record the audio in-house, customers may see this as a license to tweak the script and do repeated retakes. Get the customer to agree to the final script before you record to avoid this issue.

**Option 2.** A cost-effective alternative to staying in-house is to use online services like voice123.com. You submit a script and have narrators bid for your work, and they in turn will post samples in response. You simply hire your choice online, and the turnaround time is usually only a few days. You get a very professional final product that can save you dozens of hours at a very competitive price.

Another benefit of outsourcing narration is that it ensures a final script and prevents nitpicky edits. Additional charges for narrative edits present a perfect deterrent to frivolous changes.

## What Do I Need To Know About Video

Video consumes a lot of bandwidth and is a drain on your network. Before you commit to using video, ensure that your organization has the infrastructure and investigate the technology available to your end users. Remember, you're pulling a person away from her job, and it's not productive to sit idle in front of a computer waiting for video to download.

**SHORTER IS BETTER.** Take a cue from services like YouTube. People like quick hit videos, and many people won't watch long videos online at all. If you create a video, find ways to keep it as short as

possible. A good practice is to review TV commercials. Look at how effectively they can convey information in a few seconds, and you'll see that there's always room to cut your video. Make it a habit never to exceed 3-4 minutes on a single video and you'll avoid losing viewers.

If you make screencasting videos such as software demos, keep them as short as possible. In fact, you might want to avoid screencasting altogether. The file is typically large and most of the time is spent watching the mouse fly back and forth. The image to the right shows an alternative to a screencasting. With one annotated screen capture image, you can convey the same information with no video. This keeps the file small and faster to download, and it's easier to create and maintain if you have to update or edit in the future.

The image shows a screenshot of an email composition window with four numbered red circles indicating the steps to create an email:

- 1. Insert email address**: Points to the 'To:' field.
- 2. Insert subject**: Points to the 'Subject:' field.
- 3. Create email text**: Points to the main body of the email.
- 4. Send email**: Points to the 'Send' button.

The email composition window includes fields for 'To:', 'Subject:', and 'Add Cc | Add Bcc'. It also has a toolbar with various formatting options (bold, italic, underline, font color, background color, link, unlink, list, indent, outdent, quote, unquote, print, and a 'Plain text' link) and buttons for 'Send', 'Save Now', and 'Discard'. An 'Attach a file' link is also present.

**CONTROL THE QUALITY OF YOUR VIDEO.** You no longer need expensive equipment to shoot good video. In fact, many digital cameras do a good job with video.

Go to the shop floor, shoot video of a few simple steps on safe machine operation, edit in a free tool like Windows Moviemaker and drop it in your course. This can be done in less than an hour with an inexpensive digital camera, and allows you to do on-the-fly training and make adjustments as the need arises. The trade off is that some of the video quality might suffer, but whether that matters depends on the context.

#### **HERE ARE FIVE SIMPLE TIPS TO HELP YOU SHOOT GOOD QUALITY VIDEO**

**1. USE GOOD LIGHTING.** You don't need anything fancy. You just need to flood the area you're shooting with as much light as possible. Buy shop lights from Home Depot for big areas, and use simple tabletop lights for close-up objects. Old overhead projectors are also a great light source.

**2. YOU DON'T NEED TO RECORD THE AUDIO AT THE SAME TIME.** If you're recording a scene with narration, don't record the audio at the same time. Record the narration later in a more controlled environment. If you do record live audio, the mic must be as close to the narrator as possible.

**3. IF YOU RECORD A TALKING HEAD, TRY TO KEEP THE BACKGROUND STILL.** If you have a still background, the image will look a lot nicer when it's compressed. If you don't need motion in the background, don't shoot it. Use a wall or curtain to keep the background from moving around.



**4. ALWAYS GET AS CLOSE AS YOU CAN.** Try using a three shot approach and avoid zooming in and out. Create a quick establishing shot to show where you're at; then go in a little closer to show more information; and then even closer to focus on something specific.

**5. USE A TRIPOD.** A tripod will help you have a nice steady image and keep the camera from shaking. It's also nice when you have to pan or zoom in and out.

## What Do I Need To Know About Graphics

There is a lot to know about graphics in multimedia, and it's not possible to cover everything. So I'll focus on those things I'm asked about the most.

**BECOME FAMILIAR WITH FLASH AND ITS FILE OUTPUTS.** Many rapid e-learning tools output to flash format (.swf), and allow you to incorporate other Flash elements. To keep it simple, there are .swf (animations and interactions) and .flv (video) files.

Some flash animations are self-contained and play by themselves, while others are dependent on getting information from external folders. Thus, if you want to use the .swf file format, make sure that all required supporting files are in the right location.

Flash videos require a special player to view them, although some rapid e-learning tools will play .flv files without a player. Typically, you're better off converting your videos to .flv than .swf.

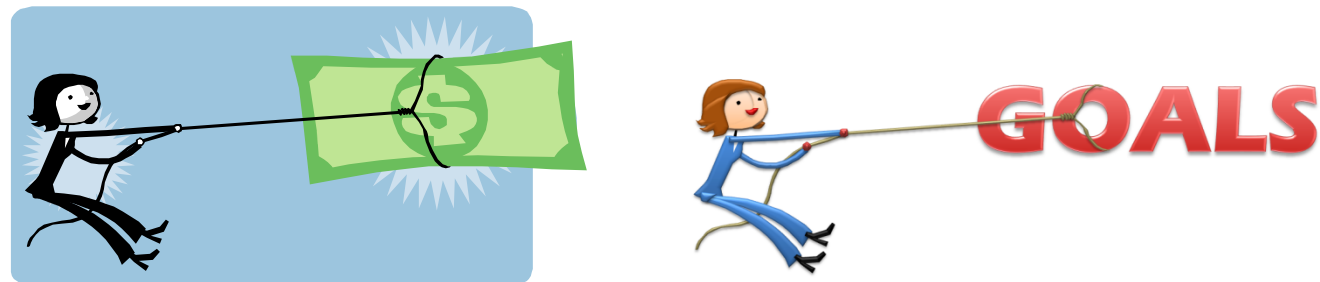
**LEARN THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN VARIOUS GRAPHIC FORMATS.** There are a number of graphic formats that you can use, and they each have their pros and cons. Some allow for transparent

backgrounds and others allow for better color distribution. Wikipedia has some good information on the different graphic formats.

One of the main considerations is whether the image can scale without losing quality. Those that can are called vector images and are preferred when working with most e-learning tools.

**FIND A GRAPHICS EDITOR FOR BASIC EDITS.** There are many nice graphics programs, some of which are free while others are quite expensive. It's not necessary to become a professional graphic artist, but the more you can do on your own the better.

There are times where you can really add some pizzazz to your course using some simple techniques like drop shadows and beveling. Here's an example of some clip art I modified in a graphics program. As you can see, it adds an extra dimension to your work.



In summary, it's not important to become a multimedia expert. You do need to recognize that rapid e-learning tools allow you to use multimedia, which allows you to add all types of media, especially audio and video, and move beyond click-and-read e-learning.

To get the most out of your authoring tool you need to leverage multimedia to make quality e-learning courses.



*The Insider says:*

“A rapid e-learning pro knows enough about multimedia to know how and when to use it.”

# Pulling It All Together To Become a Rapid E-Learning Pro

Rapid e-learning tools allow you to do your work faster with less cost. In most cases, the positive benefits of using rapid e-learning tools far outweigh the slight gains that come from a totally custom course.

The secret to your success as an e-learning pro is not necessarily brilliant ideas, but rather, the ability to meet learning objectives and satisfy your customer's needs. With that being said, there are three words I like to use:

## Templates, Templates, Templates

In real estate, it's location, location, location—the dirt that you build upon is critical to the success and utility of the resulting structure. With e-learning courses, templates are analogous to location, because they are the foundation upon which you build an effective course in a rapid and cost-effective manner.

**TEMPLATE YOUR PROJECT PLANS.** All projects have the same basic steps, so there's no reason why you shouldn't have a generic plan in place before you start a project. This template helps you systematically knock out necessary steps by acting as a roadmap for both you and your customer. It also helps you understand and discuss your timeline and resource requirements. Remember, this template is just a means to document the steps required to start and complete the course, so it doesn't need to be fancy.

**TEMPLATE YOUR LEARNING PROCESSES.** Learners need information and need to know how to use it. You can create a simple map that outlines a generic learning process that can be as simple as a series of questions.

- What are the objectives?
- How do I know they have been met?
- What is the learner's perspective on this information?

Create a structure that helps you get started designing the learning process for your next project.

There are some good resources to help you do this. At a minimum, there are a number of free PowerPoint templates that already map out a basic training course, which you can then flesh out to be more dynamic and engaging.

**TEMPLATE YOUR PRODUCTION STAFF.** You want to bring the right people into your project right away. You'll likely be the person who does most or all of the following tasks, but regardless, each role has specific responsibilities.

This list should help you think through what those roles need to do, which you can incorporate into your template project plan. Too much detail won't hurt, and you can always omit unnecessary items later, which is a lot less painful than slapping your forehead because you forgot a key step.

- Project manager
- Content expert
- Instructional designer
- Graphic designer
- Flash programmer
- Courseware developer
- LMS expert
- IT support

As you look at the list, you'll note that many of those roles can be merged because some of their tasks are accomplished using rapid e-learning software.

## In Summary

What's going to make you a rapid e-learning pro is both how you do your work and how you work with others. Using rapid e-learning tools, you can save large amounts of time and money. You will remain on the right track if you design learning objectives that are aligned to the organization's needs. Once you've identified the objectives, you need to balance the customer's needs with the learner's needs to create the best e-learning course possible.

I guarantee that if you work hard and bring real value to your organization, you'll always be recognized as a rapid e-learning pro. Go forward with confidence and zeal.

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## About the Author

Tom Kuhlmann is the host of [The Rapid E-Learning Blog](#). He's passionate about learning and technology. He has over 15 years experience in the training industry where he's developed hundreds of hours of elearning and managed elearning projects at Capital One, Washington Mutual, and Weyerhaeuser.



He recently completed his Master's in Education Technology at Pepperdine, where he researched how to cultivate communities of practice through the development of personal expertise. Currently, he runs the user community for Articulate with a focus on building a passionate community of rapid elearning developers.

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