Instructional Design vs. Course Development: A Detailed Comparison

A guide for understanding the two halves of course creation—what happens first, why it matters, and how each role contributes to the final learning experience.

High-level purpose

Instructional design	Course development
Defines the learning strategy, performance goals, and structure of the course.	Builds the tangible product that delivers the learning experience.
Focuses on thinking, planning, mapping, aligning.	Focuses on building, producing, formatting, packaging.

Primary question

Instructional design	Course development
"What should learners be able to do after completing this course?"	"How will the learner see, hear, and navigate the experience?"

Core responsibilities

Instructional design responsibilities	Development responsibilities
Identify the problem or performance gap.	Set up the course format in the LMS.
Analyze learners, context, and needs.	Create slide decks and apply visual design.
Write measurable learning objectives.	Record or edit audio and video.
Determine required competencies.	Build interactions (clicks, drag-and-drops, branching).
Map content to objectives.	Create animations, illustrations, and graphics.
Design activities that build critical thinking and application.	Program quizzes, knowledge checks, and assessments.
Determine evaluation strategy (quizzes, performance tasks, scenarios).	Format worksheets, job aids, and downloadable materials.
Sequence content for flow and learning impact.	Upload and troubleshoot SCORM, video files, or modules.

Time horizon

Design	Development
Plans what the learner will experience.	Brings learning plan to life.
Happens first.	Happens after design is approved.

Analogy

Instructional design	Development
Blueprint: floor plan, wiring plan, plumbing plan, room function, flow.	**Bricks-and-mortar**: construction, drywall, paint, furniture, lighting.
If the blueprint is wrong, the entire building fails, regardless of how beautiful the construction looks.	If the construction is rushed or sloppy, even the best blueprint can't save the final product.

What the client sees during each phase

Design phase output	Development phase output
Learning objectives and competency map.	Slide deck with branded visuals.
Outline or storyboard of all lessons.	Recorded videos, edited and polished.
Scenario plans and activity descriptions.	Interactions built and functioning.
Evaluation blueprint (types of questions, purpose, placement).	Quiz questions inside the LMS.
Recommended learner materials (workbook, job aids, checklists).	Formatted downloads ready for use.

What success looks like

Design success means:	Development success means:
The course is aligned, purposeful, and tied to real-world performance.	The course looks polished, runs smoothly, and is easy for learners to use.
Learners can apply what they learned to real situations.	Learners can navigate the course without friction.

What happens if this part is skipped or rushed

If design is skipped:	If development is skipped or rushed:
The course will look pretty but fail to change performance.	The course may be well-designed but feel clunky, confusing, or incomplete.
Objectives won't match the content or assessments.	Content may not display properly or meet accessibility needs.
"Pretty slides" become the default instead of meaningful learning.	Learners lose trust because of technical frustrations.

Who is typically responsible

Instructional design is done by:	Development is done by:
Instructional designers, learning strategists, education specialists.	Developers, multimedia specialists, LMS technicians, graphic designers.

Summary

Instructional design creates the plan — development builds the product. Both are required. The order matters. And neither substitutes for the other.