

Learning Online

Customarily, online learning falls under the broader category of distance education. Distance education is defined by the [United States Distance Learning Association](#) as an "education program whereby students may complete all or part of an educational program in a geographical location apart from the institution hosting the program; the final award given is equivalent in standard and content to an award program completed on campus." Typically, students and instructors reside in different locations; a physical classroom is not necessary. Therefore the teaching and learning process relies on the Internet and a personal computer.

Whether you recognize it or not, students and instructors have benefited from the flexibility of distance learning for decades. Many of us may recall our first distance learning experiences involving television as the instructional medium. For instance, [Sesame Street](#)® has been a powerful means of teaching us social, mathematical, and speaking skills for over forty years. In the past decade, with increasingly widespread access to computers and the Internet, online learning has become a consistent presence at all levels of education.

As businesses, school districts, colleges and universities have become "wired," online learning has evolved beyond pure distance learning. The ability for learners to extend communication and access resources outside of their school or work environments, allows them to supplement - and sometimes fully replace - activities once reserved for the traditional classroom or workplace.

Be Open Minded

When learning online, the possibilities for your potential are limitless! We are no longer confined to learning only within a certain classroom at a certain time in a particular building. We can now go online, on our own time, and review materials, take practice exams, complete assignments, interact with others and so much more! Of course, learning in this way takes some getting used to and requires an open mind. In the process, you may also learn more about yourself and how you prefer to learn.

Many colleges and universities publish tips for being a successful online learner. Type in "Characteristics of a Successful Online Learner" in a search engine for more information. Some sites even have fun online surveys and quizzes that can help you rate your characteristics and preferred learning styles.

Be Flexible and Patient

Because online instruction is so much newer than classroom instruction, everyone is still working out the kinks. You will most likely encounter some bumps along the way with the technology, your instructor's practices, or even with your own learning. For instance, your Internet connection may be dropped unexpectedly, an important Web site may not be available, or you may not be able to find what you are looking for in the online course. No matter what, stay on your toes, know when to bend, roll with the punches and you'll be OK!

In addition, "online" does not mean "instantaneous." When things seem to stick or lag online, keep your cool and have some patience. Some web-based tools take longer to load, some documents may need more time to display, and some communications need more time to send. Remember that clicking too many times to accomplish the same task can have

an adverse effect on what we are trying to do. It's similar to pressing an elevator button multiple times. It does not make the elevator appear faster!

Establish a Routine

At first, learning online may be a dramatic change for you. Some of us find comfort with having to show up at a certain time each day for a class or series of classes. Whether you begin to take a fully online course, or are just visiting an online course for resources, the freedom to accomplish such tasks can be intimidating at first.

As best as possible, establish a routine and avoid procrastination. Try to stick to the recommended or required course deadlines. Set aside some time each day for completing the course readings or activities. As well, plan to spend a good amount of time reviewing messages from your instructor and classmates within the online discussion, along with responding to them. After a short while, you will begin to feel more comfortable and confident as you settle into your routine.

Stay Connected

Learning online will require that you have access to a computer with an Internet connection. That may not always be easy, particularly if you do not own a computer or have an Internet service provider at home. However, there are so many places to connect to the Internet such as school computer labs, public libraries, coffee shops, Internet cafes, or a friend's or relative's place. If you are having difficulty finding a connection, don't give up and avoid making excuses.

Maintain Your Computer and Your Files

Computers are an essential part of your online learning journey. If you own a computer, be sure to maintain the hardware and update the software regularly. As with any important piece of equipment in our lives, such as a cell phone or a car, computers need regular care and attention to operate smoothly. Be sure to regularly organize your electronic files, update operating system software and other supporting systems such as browsers and word processing programs, and protect your computer from electronic viruses.

Lastly, technology can be unstable at times so make sure you back up your important files. One successful strategy is to keep copies of course documents and assignments on a portable "thumb" or "flash" drive. This small device can be carried on a key chain and plugged into another computer when necessary. Losing your work is one lesson you do not want to experience.

Participate

Some students mistake the concept of learning "anytime, anywhere" for not having to participate. In every class, some students always contribute to the discussion, some students participate half the time, and some students are shy and stay rather quiet. Where do you fit in?

In every case, the online environment accommodates all types of learning styles and preferences. If you are shy and don't like to share your thoughts in class, that's okay. Discussing topics online allows you the time to digest the concept, reflect, gather evidence, and post a thoughtful response. You also get to see the responses and perspectives of all of your classmates instead of just the few that always participate. So, what are you waiting for, get in there and participate!

Communicate Clearly

Learning online can be a bit writing intensive. Communicating in writing is much different than communicating in person and the tools we use online to interact can vary. Your instructor may post some requirements as part of the course on how to interact properly with the available tools so be sure to follow those requirements. If not, the following recommendations should help you get started. Similar best practices are often referred to as "netiquette."

1. **Write clearly and concisely.**
Use full sentences, including proper grammar and spelling. In other words, avoid "chat" type text unless requested.
2. **Maintain your personality.**
When expressing opinions and perspectives, find ways to add humor, emotion, empathy, and other elements into your messages.
3. **Avoid plagiarism.**
Always express yourself using your own words. When using someone else's words to help describe or support your point, quote or credit your source.
4. **Create Drafts.**
When composing long messages, emails, or discussion responses, you may want to draft them off-line first to avoid any possibility of losing your work. You can also take advantage of spell and grammar checkers when drafting off-line.
5. **Email Properly.**
Always include a Subject for each email and always sign your name at the end to inform your instructor you are sending the message.