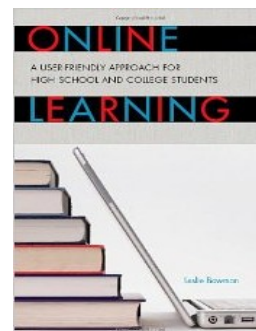


Online Learning

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Introduction

"The primary reasons students fail or drop out of online classes are that they are unprepared for how much time they will need to spend studying each week and they are not organized for online learning." For almost every student, planning and managing time yields good grades; more time well spent yields better grades.

Two major differences between online and on-campus classes. First, online requires more reading and listening, on-campus requires more listening and talking. Reading takes longer and requires more energy. Second, online you work more alone, on-campus you are in a class setting more often. This need not lead to isolation online anymore than on campus unless the student seeks isolation¹.

One significant classroom component is the regular reminder of required progress (dues dates, etc.), but we expect that as students mature they realize that performance is their responsibility².

This book helps you prepare for your first online class, how to get work done on time and well, and keep motivated throughout the course. It will focus on asynchronous courses.

Chapter 1: How Does it Work?

Types of online classes: Independent Study or Correspondance Courses, Synchronous Courses, and Asynchronous Courses³.

Any student can succeed online if committed to spending time, being motivated, and willing to learn good habits. Students can learn to play off the strengths and build up skills in less strong learning styles (visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic, global, analytical, sequential, big-picture)⁴. The successful student must be independent, self-directed. You need to "know how to study, write, manage time, and organize weekly class work effectively."

Chapter 2: Can I Do This?

The largest time commitment for online courses is very similar to that for on campus courses: reading, note taking, preparing for discussions, completing written assignments.

Some schools suggest an expected weekly time commitment [does Plato have suggestions?] In college, the typical 16-week undergraduate class requires about three hours per week for each credit, 48 hours for a three credit course; shorter terms (e.g. summer sessions) require the same amount of work in a shorter time period. Experience with online activities, reading comprehension,

1 Instructors must provide interaction opportunities (forums, chats, etc.) of which students must take advantage.

2 The role of accountability in elementary and secondary grades is to help teach students how to effectively assume that responsibility.

3 Blended courses include scheduled synchronous sessions, typically face to face, and independent or asynchronous activities for most content delivery.

4 A google search for *what's my learning style* returned over 62 million results, including many inventory instruments.

and keyboarding skills will increase or decrease your time requirement.

Set priorities. Do a simple time study of your typical day. If you cannot place and keep education near the top of your priorities, then you will not be successful in your courses. You may need to give up some social or entertainment activities to succeed in your courses, online or not.

Schedule time. Mark your calendar with important personal, family, and work events. Next, review the course syllabus and record due dates, test dates, and any synchronous activities. If you discover conflicts, try to find a work-around on your own; if the conflict is irreconcilable (like a family wedding scheduled at the same time as an exam) then discuss options with the instructor.

Calendars. Keep three calendars: one for the length of the course (a semester), one for the current week, and a daily to-do list. Many learning systems provide calendaring systems which you can customize for this purpose. Other services, like Google Calendars, also permit you to manage your schedule.

Chapter 3: What Do I Do First?

Study Space. The most important factor is a setting to communicate to yourself and those around you that this is "study time."

Essential Materials and Equipment. Computer and internet access. Printer. Traditional materials, such as paper, pens, notebooks, and a calendar or organizer. Plan how to backup your assignments, either on removable media (e.g. A flash drive) or online (e.g. Microsoft SkyDrive or Google Docs).

Technology. You'll need to know at least how to create documents (e.g. In Word or Google Docs), how to save files in a required format (e.g. RTF or PDF), and how to upload a file or send in an email. Your school may have an online orientation course available; if it is not required, be sure to take it yourself before other courses begin, if possible. [Does Plato have such a course?] Check for online helps at the school, the school's tech support service, and remember peers, friends, and family members.

School Email Accounts. If your school provides an email address, check it first thing every day. The school may require assignments to be submitted through only that email. If you need to use a personal email address, consider an account name with your name and your school's name, separated by an underscore or period.

Access to School Information. Print a list of important school phone numbers and email addresses so you have access to these if your computer becomes unavailable.

Access to Class Information. Review the syllabus before registering for electives. Read the course information before the first day of class. Record dates from the syllabus on your calendar or scheduler. Confirm that you have the necessary technology available, such as special hardware (e.g. a webcam) or software (e.g. Audacity).

Chapter 4: Study Habits

Establish a study schedule with a time buffer for unanticipated events. Keeping up is easier than catching up.

Check with your school for help with reading and writing. These also get easier with practice.

Draft your course calendar. If extra time appears, either work further ahead or dig deeper into the material. Every moment you are anticipating study, engaged in study, or completing study.

Keyboarding skills will be very important, both for the time needed to complete written assignments and to participate in synchronous class chat sessions. Typing speed increases with practice; online courses (free and fee-based) or school courses can also help.

Reading skills will also be important. Always read the introduction, conclusion, and summary first, to get the big-picture, then read the entire assignment in depth. Understand all key words, and find definitions for any which are unfamiliar. Identify key points in each paragraph. Read an article abstract first, if available.

Notes and outlines. Notes help you outline what you need to know or use later, such as thoughts about possible paper topics. Memorization can be effective with old-fashioned 3x5 flash cards; you can review them yourself or easily ask someone else to review with you⁵.

Following directions. Be sure you understand the requirements of an assignment before you begin. If something seems unclear, ask the instructor. List the requirements as a checklist, and double check before turning it in.

Organization. Your workspace must be adequately organized so your don't waste time or effort in your studies. This includes the physical space (your desk) and your virtual space (computer). Consider organizing a ten-week course in a binder with eleven dividers: one for the course syllabus and general information, and one for each week.

Time management is key. Budget your time to keep a few days ahead of deadlines. This extra time can be used if available to put extra effort into an assignment, or to help cover unexpected events⁶.

Backup your work. Keep contingencies in mind; where can you go if you lose internet access?

Chapter 5: Communication

As in the classroom, your communications with instructors and peers need to be professional, knowledgeable, substantive, and always respectful.

Announcements. Find out how announcements will be communicated, and check for updates every time you log in to the course.

Introductions. First impressions really are important, so plan ahead how you'll introduce yourself online to your instructors and peers. Write a short paragraph about yourself, perhaps a current job or the career you'd like to have. List a few current activities or hobbies. If the course is elective, how will it fit into your education, career, or personal plans? If the instructor has asked a question ("what's your favorite animal?") be sure to answer.

5 Before reporting to the Navy's Office Candidate School, my daughter needed to know all of the Navy and Marine insignias. She used both an online flash card system and 3x5 cards to effect this.

6 My first child was born a month earlier than expected, the week before finals one quarter. Even the expected doesn't always arrive as expected.

Privacy. Offer no more information online that you would in front of the class in person. Avoid giving any personal information to any stranger online. If you believe that your personal online information at the course site has been compromised, contact the instructor or the school's tech support immediately.

Forums and chats. Read introductory statements and peer comments carefully before responding. Avoid statements like, "I agree." Keep your comments brief, on-topic, and substantive.

Questions to instructors are typically best raised in email or private chat. Check first to see if the instructor has posted a recent note or has a course FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) document, forum, or wiki; it is bad form to ask a question which has already been answered.

Email should be concise, professional, and appropriate. Proofread before pressing "send." Use the instructor's title (Dr., Mr., Ms., etc.). If you want the instructor to do something, ask for it. If you want to challenge a grade, give reasons why you think it should be changed (don't just ask, "why did I get this grade?"). Avoid making excuses for late or incomplete assignments, just apologize and, if asking for something, give a good reason the instructor can use to give you what you want. Thanks are also appreciated if someone does (or considers doing) something special for you.

Peer communications are not private in the school email or course learning system online. Furthermore, messages sent to classmates on personal accounts may be deliberately or accidentally copied or forwarded to others. Have you ever clicked on "reply all" when you meant to reply to just the sender?

Instructor communications will typically begin with course announcement areas for the entire class. The course syllabus or class information should indicate the instructor's office hours for telephone calls or real-time chat, and how soon you can expect replies to emails. If the instructor is not responding to your emails after several days, then follow up with another email or phone call. If the instructor doesn't reply for a week or more, then contact the school office.

Chapter 6: Online Classroom Structure

Most online course management systems (CMS), like Moodle and Plato, have similar features. You'll log in with an assigned username and password, then enter a course page. The course page will include announcements, a syllabus and instructor information, lessons and assignments, resources, communication areas, and other course tools.

You'll want to find out how to see your gradebook scores online. Find out if the instructor posts comments with scores, and always read them to see how to improve upcoming submissions.

Find out how to submit projects, whether through a course dropbox or by email to the instructor.

If the course has forums, chat areas, group wikis, journals, or other communication venues, find out what participation is encouraged, and if participation is graded. Add time for participation to your regular study schedule.

Chapter 7: Learning Activities and Assignments

Types of Class Work & Suggestions

Many of the technologies used in online courses are also use in modern on-campus courses. Other technologies are used by many for daily activities.

Blogs, Wikis, and Journals: Read instructions and assignment carefully. Plan what you want to say. Write in word processor and run spell check and grammar check, then copy and paste to post.

Presentations (Powerpoint or Google): Avoid audio and video clips unless specifically required. Cite sources, include reference slide at end of presentation.

Interviews: List questions before interview⁷; make sure you cover assignment requirements. Record the interview if possible. Follow up the interview with a thanks you note to the interviewee.

Group Projects: Communicate with team members early and set a schedule. Meet deadlines and help others.

Tests and Quizzes: Take tests early in the testing window. If any tests are to be proctored, check the details early.

Discussions: Find out the requirements for discussion participation; participate at least once every two days even if required less frequently. Discussions are more informal, but try to avoid spelling and grammar errors. Postings should be reflective, exploratory, and constructive. Like everything else, add discussions to your calendar.

Chapter 8: Writing: Research and Plagiarism

Writing Overview

If your first writing assignment receives a low grade, seek assistance from the school's writing center immediately. "Students who don't make the time to improve their writing skills will eventually fail a class or end up dropping out of school."

Plagiarism. Claiming someone else's paper as your own is cheating. Plagiarism is copying information from a source and passing it off as your own, without citation. The consequences of unintentional plagiarism are the same as if it is intentional. "Plagiarism is using someone else's thoughts or words without giving vredit to the original author or creator." Learn how to correctly cite all resources and consider using an online service to scan your papers for proper attribution.

Research. Search the school's online library for general topics, then narrow subsequent searched to more specific subtopics. This will seed your brainstorming for paper ideas. Evaluate online sources for validity, accuracy, and credibility. Publications over five years old are probably too old to use; some instructors may have other requirements (requiring newer or permitting older sources). Plan on three to five sources for most assignments.

Chapter 9: Writing Papers

Follow a systematic process. Be organized and methodical. Begin early and plan at least five days to complete a writing assignment. Make a checklist of assignment requirements. Take notes during

⁷ See www.StoryCorps.org for National Public Radio's community and family interview project. The Library of Congress and Ken Burns made a guide for interviewing World War II vets on video for the Vets History Project (<http://www.loc.gov/vets/pdf/thewar-fieldkit-2007.pdf>). Both resources include ideas for questions.

research to help you create an outline. Essays may be descriptive, instructive, argumentative, or explanatory; see if your topic fits well with the purpose given in the assignment. Your thesis statement in the introduction will describe the purpose of the essay and the importance of the topic. Several important points will direct the paragraphs of your body.

Outlines organize and direct your writing, keeping it on topic with a logical flow.

The first draft is the "idea" phase. Follow your outline then add references from your research notes where appropriate.

Return to your first draft after a day and update to clarify with more details, etc. Rewrite the introduction and conclusion for consistency with each other and with the body of the essay. This produces your second draft.

Check your attributions and use the specified form for citations and references.

Proofread the entire essay, reading it aloud; mark but don't correct, looking at content, organization, and flow. Read the paper again, but reverse the order of the paragraphs, looking for writing errors. After this second reading you should correct the items just found.

Publish the final paper in the specified format. Note any formatting requirements such as margins of font type and size.

For short papers schedule one hour a day for five days (five hours total) beginning one week before the assignment is due. Longer papers require starting earlier and spending more time on each of the final few days.

Chapter 10: Common Mistakes to Avoid

Mistake 1: Skipping new student orientation.

Mistake 2: Not calling tech support when needed.

Mistake 3: Not using helpful email subject lines, especially in messages to your instructors.

Mistake 4: Waiting to log in to the course.

Mistake 5: Waiting until midterm to get the textbook.

Mistake 6: Asking redundant questions.

Mistake 7: Not reading and following instructions.

Mistake 8: Not submitting assignments promptly.

Mistake 9: Not submitting assignments on time.

Mistake 10: Participating in discussions only once a week (or less).

Mistake 11: Not reviewing assignment grades and instructor's comments.

Mistake 12: Forgetting to read, reflect, and review helpful tips.

Chapter 11: What Kind of Student do You Want to Be?

Busy. Instructors are busy with their own lives outside of class, but are expected to hold up their end of the course, which may reduce their sympathy for your life events interfering with your course work. Good time management and temporarily setting aside other activities helps you complete all of the course requirements while meeting family and personal needs.

Irritations: Instructors become irritated by excuses, not reading provided material, ignoring

assignment instructions, plagiarizing or cheating, treating the instructor as your personal servant.

If something will interfere with your participation or meeting deadlines, contact the instructor as soon as possible, and try suggesting a possible solution (e.g. turning in an assignment early before a family trip). Do not expect the instructor to suggest what you might do.

Late work almost always is penalized, if it is accepted at all. If there is flexibility in late penalties, it will always be best to contact the instructor as early as possible.

Chapter 12: Maintaining Motivation

School will always introduce stress. If you attend on-campus classes you may be concerned about traffic, parking, how your hair looks, the clothes you're wearing, and other non-academic issues. Online you will have different stresses, such as sticking to your daily schedule and avoiding distractions. Some distractions come from friends and family who assume that you are free since you are at home.

Keep your responsibilities in balance. Plan early when possible, and work on projects early enough to make up time if there is an interruption. Often an adequate assignment on-time is better than an excellent assignment turned in late.

Contact your instructor if a genuine emergency arises. If more than one emergency arises during the term, don't expect accommodations for the later events., even if they are clearly unavoidable. You may feel it is unfair, but it should not be unanticipated.

Regular participation in discussions helps you stay motivated to keep up with your peers, and keeps your name in front of the instructor. Make your participation regular and substantive.

Build your personal support system. Tell friends and family about your classes, why they are important to you, so they will be supportive. Ask advice when needed, or help (such as taking the car in for repairs).

Seek academic support systems. Your classmates may have advice or know of resources which you may not have learned about yet. Your support of peers also builds up you, as you see that you've learned enough to help someone else.

Plan some rewards. A social evening with friends after an assignment is finished, or a weekend away when the course is done can help keep you motivated. Look at your course work as steps toward your rewards.

Remember that your instructor is (probably) a person, too. Instructors like to see students succeed, and want to become better at helping their students. They like to see that you are taking the class seriously, putting in the required work, and are open to suggestions or correction. Like everyone, your instructors expect to be treated with respect.

Additional Resources

Visit *OnlineLearningGuide.blogspot.com* for up-to-date information about online learning.