

Distance Education Student Primer:

Skills for Being a Successful Online Learner

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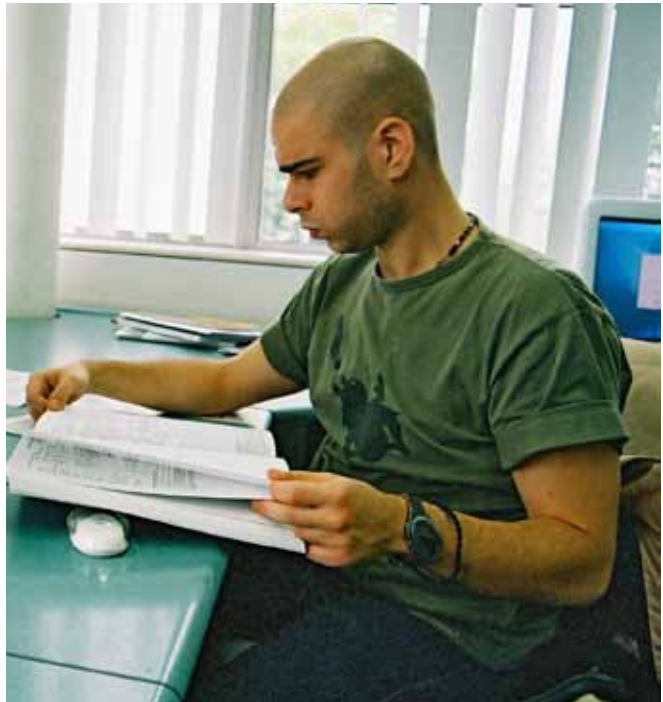
Introduction

This document is intended to give students who are new to an online learning environment a brief introduction to issues and skills involved in becoming successful as an online learner.

Online learning may be referred to by several different titles, including:

- Distance education
- Distributed education
- Online education
- Online learning
- E-learning
- Web-based education

However you or your instructors choose to refer to it, this environment offers unique challenges and unique opportunities. As you read through this introduction, begin to anticipate how these issues may impact you and how you learn. These ideas are not "magic bullets" that can transform you into a model student overnight. Rather, they help to point out common situations faced by online learners. Some may help you formulate your own strategies and practices. Others may not be relevant to your situation. Some will introduce you to the unique environment of online learning through Indiana University. Our hope is that this guide will make you more aware of the experience you are about to have, and provide some guidance on how you can best adjust to it.





No matter how convenient or flexible online education may be billed, taking a course online takes time. You might be saved commuting time in an online course, but you might also spend more time dealing with technology concerns. Whether the time you spend on course-related work is more or less than you might experience in a traditional, classroom-based course, it is still time you need to reserve and manage carefully. When evaluating your online course options, consider how much time you have to dedicate to coursework every week during the term, and investigate or estimate the time commitment the course will require from you.

Managing Time

Online learners often benefit from carefully structuring what time they have available. Identify what time of day or night you do your best work, and when you are able to access the Internet and your course materials. Set aside a certain time each day, or a few days during each week, to work on your course, and stick to this schedule. Be aware at the start of the course whether you are required to participate in activities at any specific times, and plan for these well ahead of time. Bear in mind also that you could enroll in an online course based anywhere in the world, which can mean that course-related activities are scheduled in a time zone other than yours.

Balancing Responsibilities and Setting Priorities

Vital to a successful online learning experience is the ability to balance your responsibilities, both within and beyond your course. Knowing how to set priorities is key to getting the greatest benefit from your online education experience. Find out before or as the course begins exactly what work is required of you, and do your best to plan ahead. Inevitably you will have more tasks to accomplish than you have time in which to complete them. At times like these, do your best to determine which course activities are most vital, and concentrate on those. Do not hesitate to ask for advice or help from your instructor.

Managing Stress

Just because a course is delivered in an online format does not necessarily increase or reduce the stress you may experience taking it. Consider your own sources of education-related stress when choosing to take courses online. If you feel high stress from giving in-class presentations, then an

online course would probably save you from that kind of stress. On the other hand, if using computers and related technology makes you experience excessive stress, you might reconsider taking a course online, since most online courses rely exclusively on computer technology.

Strategies for managing course-related stress include:

- Know your deadlines. These include course deadlines as well as important events occurring elsewhere in your life while you are enrolled in the course.
- Plan ahead. If you know that your time will be consumed by a non-course-related activity during a particular week, do your course-related activities ahead of time.
- Ask for help resources, especially technological resources, and have them at hand when you are working on your coursework.
- Keep in touch with your instructor. If you do fall behind, let your instructor know immediately, and ask him/her for assistance in planning how you will catch up.



Student Accountability

The further you progress in higher and continuing education, the more responsibility you will need to take for your own learning. You will begin to define and prioritize what you need to know, how you will learn it, and how you will assess your progress. Outside direction and measures of your learning will continue to be a part of your education, but these will serve more to guide and direct you in your exploration of knowledge.

Self-Directed Learning

As you explore the many avenues of learning available and begin to define your individual path, you will still need to work with your instructors to make sure you are meeting the requirements of the individual courses. It is important that you understand the subject matter and can apply what is taught.

Understand Expectations

In order to meet and exceed course requirements and instructor expectations, you'll need a clear understanding of exactly what those requirements and expectations are. The course syllabus acts

as a contract between you as the learner and the instructor. It outlines what will be taught, what you will need to do to show your understanding of the content, and how you will be assessed. Read through the syllabus early and carefully. Do your best to develop a sense of the “big picture” of the course - what will be due, and when. Then concentrate on the individual pieces, such as assignments and assessments.

Proactively Seek Clarification

If something about the course or the material is not clear, don't wait for your instructor to make it clear. Especially in an online environment, instructors have fewer cues to alert them to your confusion. They cannot see your puzzled expression or hear you ask, “What?” When you are unclear about an aspect of the course, ask your instructor. Use very specific questions, seeking exactly what something means, what you will be



expected to produce, etc. If an instructor does not hear from students, he/she may well conclude that students are grasping the material and do not need further assistance. If something is unclear to you, it may very well be unclear to the rest of the students in the class. Your questions may help others in the learning process as well. So ask, early and as often as necessary.

Become an “Active Learner”

In a traditional classroom, you may have sat through lectures or presentations, took some notes and waited to understand what the instructor thinks about the subject. This passive reception of information does not work well in an online environment. The subject matter will likely be presented to you in many different media, including text, still images and visuals, audio, video, and live or off-line conversations that use text or audio. You will need to become more actively involved with these materials, pulling them together in a way that makes sense to you.

To be successful in this environment, actively seek ways you can best understand the course material. Read, listen to, and watch the course materials more than once. Take notes as you do so. Interact with your instructor and classmates. Become involved in discussing and defining course topics. By creating your own definitions and models to represent the topic, or working with others to create shared definitions and models, you take ownership in the final product which can help you in understanding and internalizing the subject. Do not simply accept and memorize. Question everything, particularly if it doesn't make sense or seem to fit with what you already

know. Critically evaluate the information you receive. Everyone stands to benefit from your active learning, including the instructor and your peers as well as you.

Develop Self-Discipline

This may seem fairly obvious, but without self-discipline, you cannot be a successful online learner. In residential classes, you have an instructor and peers with whom you interact on a regular basis. You also typically meet at a certain time and place each week. This interaction and schedule help to keep you on task in your coursework. In an online learning environment, especially if you do not meet at specific times, it's much easier to put off assignments, discussion, and responsibilities. In this context, self-discipline means motivating yourself to pay regular and consistent attention to the work that needs to be done, and doing it without delay or procrastination. Even more than in a residential course, falling behind in an online class can jeopardize your likelihood of completing the course and earning the credit.

Set Goals

Goals keep you on target. If you don't set goals for learning, then you may not know if you've achieved something worthwhile. Make sure you have personal goals in mind, both longer-term goals for your program of study and desired degrees or skills, as well as short-term goals for individual courses and assignments. If you have these goals in mind, you'll have a much clearer picture of what you need to do to meet these goals, and thus have deeper motivation to improve your work.

Ask for What You Need

Beyond asking questions of the instructor to clarify course material and expectations, advocate for yourself with the institution offering the program. Additional services, like academic support services or technological assistance, may be available to you as an online learner. If you think of a service that would be helpful to you as a student, and your school does not offer that service, ask whether that service can be created or if special assistance can be provided. If your instructor cannot provide this service or assistance directly, ask him/her to recommend another contact or resource.



Online Communication Skills

Writing Clearly

Have you ever been in a class, group, or meeting and been tempted to ask a peer, “What is your point?” The same thing can happen in an online course when people make contributions that are long, poorly organized, or difficult to read. Becoming a productive part of an online learning community means you must already know how – or be willing to learn – to communicate clearly and concisely when you write.

Of course, basic comfort with typing is essential, but clear written communication begins before the writing takes place. Read all assignments more than once to make sure the task and assessment criteria are clear to you. If your peers have already begun a discussion assignment, “listen” to their ideas. Read their postings carefully and take notes on their ideas. If possible, pay special attention to contributions to which the instructor responds positively.

When you have the necessary background for the task, you are ready to begin writing. Rather than composing a contribution directly in the course environment, however, sketch out your ideas in a word processing program or text editor beforehand. Write “out loud” – that is, type out what you’re thinking. Don’t worry about spelling or grammar at first, and develop shorthand that makes sense to you. Concentrate on expressing your thoughts. You can edit them later.

A few more simple guidelines can help you produce clear, effective written contributions to your course.

- Keep your sentences short. Watch for run-on sentences that don’t provide breaks between ideas.
- Keep your paragraphs short—no more than 4-5 sentences or lines of text.
- Use white space to make your posting more readable. For example, use two hard returns to separate paragraphs or parts of your response.
- Even if correct spelling and grammar are not required, use the spell-check and grammar features of your word processing program to help catch careless errors.
- When you think you are finished composing a response, wait a few minutes. Then read your posting out loud before you submit it. Fix any awkward or unclear spots before you post the final version.

When your writing is ready for the class to see, cut and paste it into the course environment. Ask your instructor for directions if you are unsure how to do this.

As you are writing, you may find you have more questions about the ideas you are reading about and working with. Posting a question to a peer during a discussion is a wonderful way to join a discussion and ensure that your responses are as effective as possible. Likewise, you can always ask your instructor for tips on how to improve your discussion contributions.

Consider Alternative Views

Listening is just as important in an online classroom as it is in a traditional classroom or face-to-face conversation, especially when your peers are presenting views and ideas that are new to you. There are several ways to listen and be considerate of other views in an online learning environment.

Read others' postings and ideas several times, whether or not you are asked to respond. Printing uses paper and encourages you to consume information passively. It is more useful and efficient to open a word-processing program or text editor, and summarize or paraphrase what you are reading. In these notes, recast your peers' ideas in your own words. Include key words and phrases. Be sure to enclose direct quotes in quotation marks and identify the author, so that you do not accidentally plagiarize someone else's words or ideas later in the course.

Ask for clarification if you do not understand a peer's contribution. If you are asking a question for clarification, make a polite statement first, such as "Thank you for your idea" or "I have never thought about this perspective before." Show you have thought through the person's ideas first, and work hard not to make your question sound impolite or hostile.

If appropriate, use emoticons or shorthand to communicate humor or irony. Don't assume that your joking or sarcastic tone will come through when your classmates read your responses.

Responding vs. Reacting

Often you will be required to join in a class discussion and respond to other postings. These discussions may become complex, intense, and even provocative. Before you send off a hastily written, emotionally based reaction to another's contribution, turn to a word-processing program



For More Info...

See the "Online Communication Skills" section on the Distance Education Student Primer Resources page:

<http://DEResources.notlong.com>

and develop your ideas into a less emotional and more reasonable response. Then wait a few minutes and reread what you have written before you make your posting public. Learning how to turn a reaction into a response will make your course contributions more meaningful – and likely earn you a higher mark for participation, if participation counts toward your grade. Pausing and rereading also gives you the opportunity to review your writing for organization, clarity, and correctness.

Synchronous vs. Asynchronous Environments

Communication in online courses is of two different types: synchronous or asynchronous. Synchronous communication takes place in “real-time,” or at the same time. To be online at the same time as your peers and interact with them is to communicate synchronously. Chat and instant messaging are two examples of synchronous communication tools. Chat sessions and instant messaging can have a lively, immediate feel, and may feel casual or conversational in tone.



On the other hand, asynchronous communication takes place over time, not requiring group members to be online simultaneously. Email, discussion forums, and bulletin boards are examples of asynchronous communication often used in online courses. With asynchronous communication tools, you browse, read, and respond at your own pace to what others have already sent or posted.

Your online course may use one or many of these tools. If possible, practice with the tool before the assignment takes place. Ask your instructor for help if you are unsure how a tool works before you need to use it.



Online Community

Building a “Classroom” Environment

Online learning does not mean you are learning alone. You will belong to a class consisting of instructors, fellow students, and perhaps others with whom you will interact. Your instructor will attempt to build a class environment through discussion questions, chats, group projects, and other activities.

You can help build this classroom environment through your participation. Seeing and speaking to others is not a necessary component in getting to know someone. Through your chats and messages, both real-time (synchronous) and delayed (asynchronous), you have the opportunity to develop personal and professional relationships. The classmates you get to know online may come from very diverse situations and can offer a wealth of knowledge and experience. If you are willing to share your thoughts, experiences, and knowledge with your classmates, they may also return the favor.

Building Community Resources

As noted above, your fellow classmates and instructors provide a resource for information and support. An online learning environment can provide several other resources as well. Several of these are discussed in the next section of this document, Research and Resources. Within your online classroom environment, however, you have the opportunity to access and help build resources which can benefit your whole class. Look for areas where you may post reviews for books you have read on pertinent topics, links to online resources, and observations for specific topics. Within your ‘classroom’, you and your fellow classmates can build a collective knowledge base which may become invaluable even after your coursework is completed.



Research and Resources

As an online learner, you may not have immediate access to some of the resources and assistance available on a physical campus. However, there is a plethora of information and help available online and through special service arrangements. To make use of these, you will need to make yourself aware of what services are available. You will also need to pay careful attention to the validity of these services and to some legal and ethical issues concerning research and use of information found for academic purposes.

Library Services

An important part of every academic course involves researching the literature and finding relevant information on the subject. Campus libraries serve as the repository for information, collecting, organizing, and making this body of knowledge available to everyone involved in academic work and research.

Fortunately for online learners, most of the services provided by libraries now can be accessed online. Library catalogs, reference assistance, interlibrary loan, and even some full-text books and periodicals can be searched and accessed. Your institution's library should be the first place you look for additional information beyond your course readings and assignments. Several of the following categories in this section may be made available through your library.



For More Info...

See the "Research and Resources" section on the Distance Education Student Primer Resources page:

<http://DEResources.notlong.com>

Online Databases

Databases online can provide fast and efficient ways to find information pertinent to your topics of interest. They may also provide seamless access to the full-text versions of these articles and other items (though this access may depend on where you are when you are accessing the databases). Each database has a unique interface and search mechanism, so you will often have to experiment and use available help documentation.

Using Web Search Engines

While library catalogs and online bibliographic databases can provide direction and access to scholarly information, the Web itself is a storehouse for billions of documents. For reasons outlined below, it's usually best when doing academic research to first look for information in books and journals because they go through quality control measures before they are published. Yet the Web can also reveal thousands of potentially useful documents related to your research topics.

Information Literacy and Information Efficacy

Once you find information or research, you must also look critically at what you've found to assess its authenticity and truthfulness. How do you know if information you've found is reliable and based on sound, honest research? This may apply to books and articles found through library catalogs and online bibliographic databases, and even more so for information found on the web. The web has been described as the greatest vanity press in history, allowing almost anyone to publish almost anything. You as the reader should be looking critically at any information you find.

Here are some critical questions to ask of any information you uncover:

- Who is the author of this information?
- Does anyone else, such as a publisher or association, take responsibility for making this information available?
- Has this work been referred or reviewed by subject matter experts?
- Is other important information included with this work such as a date, author's credentials and contact information, or citations for other works referred to in this work?
- Have any other reputable publications cited or referenced this work?

All the topics addressed in this section relate to the idea of information literacy, or the ability to locate information, evaluate that information, and use it in appropriate ways. Being an online student will likely increase your level of information literacy. Becoming aware of the concept of information literacy and its implications on learning can help you as you take courses online.

Copyright

Copyright refers to the rights of an individual or organization that has published a piece of work and is regarded as the owner of that intellectual property. If others use that work in a way which infringes upon the rights of the owner, they may be in violation of copyright law. There are several exceptions to this law, allowing use of portions of copyrighted materials for educational purposes,

for 'fair use', for library use, etc. For students doing academic work, referencing or quoting from existing works is usually permissible under fair use guidelines. However, it is your responsibility to make sure you are not violating copyright law as you make use of others' intellectual property.

Plagiarism

As a student in an online course, you are subject to academic conduct and misconduct rules adopted by your institution. Rules and regulations differ by institution, as do procedures for investigating and disciplining students who commit academic misconduct. You are responsible for learning the rules of your institution.

A common type of academic misconduct is plagiarism. According to the IU Code of Student Rights, Responsibilities, and Conduct,

"A student must not adopt or reproduce ideas, opinions, theories, formulas, graphics, or pictures of another person without acknowledgment.

A student must give credit to the originality of others and acknowledge indebtedness whenever:

1. directly quoting another person's actual words, whether oral or written;
2. using another person's ideas, opinions, or theories;
3. paraphrasing the words, ideas, opinions, or theories of others, whether oral or written;
4. borrowing facts, statistics, or illustrative material; or
5. offering materials assembled or collected by others in the form of projects or collections without acknowledgment"

(retrieved from <http://www.iu.edu/~code/code/responsibilities/academic/index.shtml> on August 19, 2009)

Plagiarism is just as important a concept in an online course as it is in a traditional classroom. Even if your instructor does not address plagiarism in the course syllabus or other material, learn your institution's definition of misconduct and learn ways to prevent it. Ask your instructor for more resources if you need further help understanding and avoiding plagiarism.

Attribution and Style Guides

The simplest way to prevent plagiarism is to maintain proper attribution and citation techniques. As you write academic papers, you will need to conscientiously attribute ideas and quotes you find

from the writings of others. The format in which you refer to others' work will depend on the style guide preferred by the department offering your course. Check with your instructor to verify the style guide you should be using.



Technology Considerations

As an online student, your computer becomes your primary interface to your courses, your instructor, and your fellow students. In order to effectively use this interface, it will need to meet certain minimal requirements. If your computer cannot perform the functions you need to complete a class, you will have to make the effort to appropriately upgrade your computer equipment.

Hardware

Most online courses will allow you to use the operating system of your choice. Windows-based PC's and Macintosh systems are the most popular operating systems on personal computers, and often one or both of these are the only systems supported or endorsed by education providers.

Regardless of your preferred platform, most educational providers will have specific minimal requirements for your hardware. Be sure your system meets these requirements before you enroll in the course.

Software

Similarly, certain software may be required to access course information, retrieve course components, work collaboratively, or interact with instructors and other students. These software requirements will almost always be made explicit to you at the beginning of your course. If you are not given specific software requirements, be sure to ask what software and version you will need to obtain, install, or learn during a given course.

A current Web browser will almost always be a requirement for accessing course materials.



For More Info...

See the "Technology Considerations" section on the Distance Education Student Primer Resources page:

<http://DEResources.notlong.com>

Internet Connection

As an online learner, you'll be doing a lot of work using the Internet, including reading course materials, research, and interacting with fellow students and instructors. The speed at which you connect to the Internet can affect how productive you are, how well you are able to fulfill your assignments, and how satisfied you will be with your online course experience.

This connection speed is measured and commonly referred to as bandwidth (though the label is technically inaccurate). The theory is simple: the higher your bandwidth, the quicker you will receive and send data over the Internet. Whether you are using a dial-up modem, cable modem, DSL connection, or fiber optic network, it's helpful to know how fast your connection is and whether your course will require a minimum connection speed.



Study Habits and Skills

Know Yourself and Your Learning Style

When it comes to learning, everyone is different. Everyone has their own preferred approaches to new material and their own preferred style of learning. The same studying and learning techniques that work for your friends and peers may not be the best styles and techniques for you, and vice versa.

To understand what style of learning best suits you best, you should first try to understand your own strengths and weaknesses and how you approach new learning situations. Assessing your skills and preferences will help you select the type of learning strategies – and perhaps the online courses – that are most likely to keep you interested and motivated and help you reach your learning goals.



For More Info...

See the "Learning Styles" section on the Distance Education Student Primer Resources page:

<http://DEResources.notlong.com>

Recognize Others' Learning Styles

In addition to evaluating how you learn best, as you work with others in groups, realize that they also have their own preferred methods and styles for learning and completing tasks. These differences can cause conflict if you don't recognize why others are not seeing things the same way

that you do. Through open sharing about learning styles and preferences, and mutual respect for different approaches and ways of thinking, your team may be able to capitalize on differences by integrating them in unique ways. This may lead to unique insights into your course material and to producing distinctive course work projects.

Identifying Study Skills

Having identified how you and your classmates best learn, you can begin to look at specific study strategies and evaluate how well they may work for you in your online course. These techniques may address strategies for reading informational content, taking notes, memorizing information, exploring new concepts, and taking tests to name a few.



Special Student Rights and Responsibilities

Accessibility Issues

Federal law requires post-secondary schools to make their programs and services available to all students, including students with disabilities. Online technologies can make many more resources and educational opportunities available to students who would not otherwise be able to participate. These same technologies can also pose other limitations that must be overcome.

At Indiana University, there are several resources available to assist students with special requirements. See "For More Info...", right, for details.

Privacy Issues

Student records and information are considered private and Indiana University goes to great lengths to protect student data. This applies to all aspects of student information from grades to library borrowing practices. A student's educational records are, in fact, protected under federal law with the Family



For More Info...

See the "Special Student Rights & Responsibilities" section on the Distance Education Student Primer Resources page:

<http://DEResources.notlong.com>

Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) legislation. Passed by Congress in 1974, the act grants four specific rights to the student:

1. The right to see the information that the institution is keeping on the student'
2. The right to seek amendment to those records and in certain cases append a statement to the record
3. The right to consent to disclosure of his/her records
4. The right to file a complaint with the FERPA Office in Washington

Security Issues

Even if you do not use computers on any IU campus, you'll still be making use of accounts and services provided by Indiana University. The policies that regulate appropriate computing practice include selecting good passwords for your computer accounts and making sure your use of IU computing accounts and other resources is legal and ethical. These policies help to provide a secure and safe environment for all computer users associated with Indiana University.



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