

## TIPS FOR BEING SUCCESSFUL IN ONLINE COURSES

Online learning is a great way to get an education—for some people—under some circumstances. It is often convenient, but it isn't necessarily easy. These tips should start you down the path toward being a successful online learner.

- **Read completely through any course “rules” documents as soon as the course is accessible.** These may include the syllabus, schedule, and course expectations. These types of documents form the contract between the learner and the instructor/institution for the course. At a minimum, they should give you guidance on course policies and procedures, assignment criteria including evaluation, instructor expectations of quality, quantity, and timing. It is essential that you understand these documents; ask for clarification if anything isn't clear.
- **Scan all other course files and course tools early in the course.** It's important that you take the time early in the course to scan each page of content and each tool in the course. This will give you the “big picture” of how your instructor has chosen to organize the course and will help you orient yourself to where to find important components such as assignment details and supplemental resources, and to think about preliminary plans for tackling the course content.
- **Install required software and know how to use it BEFORE the required assignment.** For an online course, yes, you do need a computer that meets the minimum configuration requirements—at least access to one at your home, work, library, or other location. You also need an Internet connection and software that meets the minimum requirements. Courses that use video or video/Web conferencing have different and usually higher minimum requirements than courses that rely mostly on text and discussion. Staff at the IUSON have culled through many resources to prepare a list of technology resources for you; find this resource at <http://nursing.iupui.edu/students/tools.shtml>
- **Don't procrastinate.** In an online course where you are not required to show up in a classroom at a designated time, it's easy to find yourself doing all the other things in your life that *need to be done now*, putting off doing course work until a more convenient time. Remember, you ARE in school. Set up a schedule, map out a plan, and do the work. Don't plan to submit a paper that's due at midnight at 11:45; remember technology glitches do occur and seem to occur most frequently when you've procrastinated until the latest possible moment.
- **Plan on working independently.** Instructors in online courses are more likely to be facilitators than “sages on the stage” of your learning. You are an adult learner; you are responsible for your planning, doing, and learning at this point. You must be a self-starter, self-motivated independent learner in order to be successful.
- **Read, read, read.** In an online course, you can't rely on the professor telling you the important points to read in your text. Most people can't expect to fully understand a new topic the first time it is read so: Scan. Read. Annotate. Review. (then probably read some more!)

- **Possess adequate computer and Web skills.** After you enroll in an online course is not the time to learn keyboarding skills or to understand what a Web browser is. Online learning tends to be somewhat fast-paced, and when you are trying to learn new course content, you will quickly become overwhelmed if you're learning new foundation-level technology skills at the same time. Don't think you have to be an expert on everything; everyone learns together. These university resources are free for students and can be accessed to get your skills up-to-speed in no time:
  - Lynda.com:  
<https://shib.lynda.com/Shibboleth.sso/InCommon?providerId=urn:mace:incommo:iu.edu&target=https://shib.lynda.com/InCommon> (yes, it's a long URL, but it identifies you as a member of the IU community, giving you access to the courses for free 😊) — Lynda has thousands of video tutorials on a huge variety of topics. This is one resource you don't want to by-pass if you need technology remediation!
  - IT Training: <http://ittraining.iu.edu/> — access self-paced training or sign-up for a hands-on face-to-face workshop
- **Cultivate self-motivation.** Online learning requires self-motivation because there are not regular face-to-face meetings in a classroom or in-office physical meetings with the instructor. You may not often get “way to go!” “smiley faces” on submitted work or other extrinsic motivators; you need to find the intrinsic motivators to get you over the hump when you're bogged down in a writing assignment in the middle of the night.
- **Express yourself well in written communication.** Your “voice” in the online classroom is your written communication. Although frequently things like typos or less than perfect grammar aren't requirements, particularly in the less formal communication venues such as chats, learners must keep in mind that the only way that others will know you is by how you present yourself in writing. If your peers also include those with a different native language than your own, a language barrier exists to a certain point. Develop your skills in writing clearly, succinctly, and correctly.
- **Schedule your course dates.** Your course may have a course calendar to which you can refer, but if you're taking multiple classes, you don't need several schedules to keep track of. You probably already have some method of organizing your busy life and keeping track of activities, doctor's appointments, kids soccer games, and Mom's bridge night; add your course due dates to the same calendar so that you have a one-stop place to know what deadlines are approaching. Consider adding “touch-point” deadlines to remind yourself of those requirements that are little more fluid (such as something that needs to be done by the end of the semester or “post twice each week”), and building in milestone deadlines for projects that are more lengthy.
- **Pace yourself.** Reading online is tiring. Reading for hours on end to absorb new information is also tiring. Library research is time-consuming. Writing is intense. All of the activities you need to do for online courses can be draining. Pace yourself. Break tasks into manageable components. Plan on taking a five minute break for every half hour or 45 minutes of reading online – at least get up and walk around the room and rest your eyes, if nothing else.

- **Plan for it taking more time.** Learning takes time. There are many indicators that online learning takes even more time than face-to-face classes. Online courses are convenient, but they are not likely to be time-savers. Learners are generally expected to spend a minimum of three hours of self-study for each hour spent in the classroom. When your classroom is online, you have to factor in “class” time, prep time, assignment submission time, reading time – get the idea? It takes time.
- **Ask questions.** When you’re not communicating in an online classroom, you aren’t there. From a pre-recorded podcast the instructor can’t see in that quizzical look on your face. A facilitator can’t know as you’re reading in the local coffee shop that you don’t understand what the author is intending for you to know. Your peer in your group can’t know that you didn’t quite “get” the point of her last posting. When there is doubt in your mind, ask. Ask the instructor. Ask your peers.
- **Don’t read into things or take offense easily.** Human beings have five senses and use all of them when we communicate. In an online course, those indicators are restricted to reading what is typed. Unfortunately – as any non-native English-speaker can tell you – the English language is full ambiguity. We also may use short-cuts (texting “language”), acronyms unique to our profession or region, speed read or quickly scan written words, and multi-task (a LOT of multi-tasking!). Don’t be quick to jump to conclusions when reading others’ posts. Ask for clarification before making assumptions.
- **Don’t post too hastily.** We tend to live fast-paced lives. We tend to respond quickly – especially if something “pushes our button.” Take the time to read carefully. Consider what is written, as well as what you believe was said. Ask for clarification. Don’t be too quick to respond. Take some time, deep breaths, and ask yourself if there could be other interpretations. Ask for clarification (did you notice the repetition?). Don’t be accusatory and add fuel to any smoldering flame. Sometimes if a post is clearly out-of-line, it’s better to simply not respond.
- **Recognize and respect boundaries.** In online learning the boundaries between learner and instructor are blurred. You know your instructor’s first name; he or she may have posted an introduction giving you insight into personal activities, family, professional experiences. Unless instructors ask to be called by their first names, address them by their titles. If a preferred means of communication is requested such as through Oncourse, or through a professional e-mail, use that means to reach them except in the event of an emergency. Recognize that not everyone in an online course keeps the same hours that you do; don’t expect immediate responses if you elect to work on a Sunday afternoon or at 2:00 a.m. — and don’t keep sending e-mails to see if they got previous e-mails.
- **Speak up.** If you need clarification, ask. If you have a question, ask. If you have a point of view, share. In an online course, your presence is only as strong as your participation.
- **Be aware of privacy.** There is a phenomenon in online communication that encourages disclosure—intimate disclosure that would likely never occur in a face-to-face course. Keep in mind that anything that is put into electronic communication can take on a life of its own; messages are saved, can be forwarded, may be printed, or read over someone’s shoulder. Do not provide information that you wouldn’t express verbally in a class. Don’t

share information provided by others in your class. Be judicious in your use of Reply and Reply to All, and copying others.

- **Remember HIPAA.** Nursing students are privy to patient information. You may be asked to participate in group discussions about cases you have seen or are working with in clinicals. Always keep in mind HIPAA regulations. Never share patient information with others outside assigned discussion groups within your course. Never let someone else be your typist during chats or to post forums.
- **Manage your files and messages carefully.** Organization is one of the keys to success in online courses—particularly if you’re in more than one online course simultaneously. Store a copy of all submitted written work with clear file names in locations where you’ll remember where you put it. There is generally not a need to keep a copy of general postings, but you are recommended to keep a copy of anything you spend careful, thoughtful, considerable time developing. Keep your received course messages organized in Oncourse by deleting messages that you no longer need to work on; they will remain in the Deleted Items folder unless you purge that folder. Make sure to mark as read any postings so that you can easily scan the list for unread postings.
- **Don’t rely on technology working perfectly.** Technology glitches happen, usually at the most inopportune time. Technology functionality generally isn’t the fault of your instructor. Plan ahead, make contingency plans, be flexible, and let go of the stress. Keep back-ups in a secure place. Don’t keep all your important documents on a flash drive (portable media tends to fail more often than computer hard drives). Let your instructor know immediately if you encounter technology glitches that impact your ability to communicate in the course or submit assignments or tests. Keep copies of any error messages your system may show you.

You may have noticed that some things were repeated in different words throughout these tips: working independently, communicating effectively, being pro-active, taking responsibility. That’s because these characteristics are what make learners successful in online learning and in professional careers. Communicate to your peers and instructor, learn from them and let them learn from you. Each of us bring different life experiences into learning, and the way we grow as professionals is by sharing in that learning, as well as being mentors and teachers ourselves. If you read of someone struggling with a technology issue and you know the answer — tell them. Keep the learning going!