

Nine Habits for Successful Course Completion

GET AN EARLY START

This habit is listed first because if you get an early start, you pave the way for the next two habits. Log into your course the day it becomes available. Scan through the various sites that make up your course and read any announcements posted by your instructor. Print the course syllabus and the page listing assignments. Read the biography or profile posted by your instructor, as well as any welcome messages.

Make sure you know how to contact your instructor as well as the campus support services for online learning provided by your institution. Your instructor may ask you to post an introduction, so it's a good idea to draw one up and save it as a word processing document. You are getting an early start, so you should have plenty of time to organize your class materials and develop your strategy for completing all of the class readings, discussion responses, and assignments on time.

ORGANIZE

Organization is an essential aspect of successful course completion. The successful online learner begins with a designated work area within his or her living space, which includes a desk or table that can hold a computer and printer, as well as space to set a book or notebook. This space should also include a place to store or file articles, papers, and office supplies. Good lighting proves helpful as well.

Students should manage course materials in a manner that allows for easy access; a binder provides an excellent solution. Students can divide the binder into sections for lectures, assignments, and other printed materials. Be sure to include contact information for your instructor, technical help, the library, and other student support services.

PLAN

Once you have reviewed all of the course materials, create a plan of attack. Consider how you will manage the myriad tasks of that make up your first course. Planning is an essential habit for success as an online learner. Plans are not etched in stone, but a plan will provide you with a tangible structure that will help you complete the necessary tasks for any given course. Students do well to secure a calendar or planner in which to schedule both long-term and short-term assignments activities.

Short-term assignments often include weekly reading assignments and discussion responses. Decide when you will complete this reading and writing. Consider chunking your notes for more efficient recall. Avoid putting yourself in a situation in which you must complete a week's worth of reading and writing in one day. Break your work down into manageable chunks and use your planner to designate the tasks that you must accomplish each day. For example, break a week's worth of reading down into manageable steps. If you must write a research paper, break the project down into units of activity that you can complete over the allotted time. Not only will you produce higher quality work, but you will also prevent that stressful feeling that comes with procrastination.

STICK TO YOUR PLAN. DO NOT PROCRASTINATE.

People procrastinate when they feel they are overwhelmed and unsure where to start—and it's easy to become overwhelmed when looking at the requirements for an online course. You may only

see the “forest,” which looks like a huge, confusing mass, so your inclination might be avoidance, or procrastination. Procrastination is stressful, even more so than breaking the “forest” down into “trees” that can be dealt with one at a time. It’s much easier to think about what you need to accomplish one particular week than it is to attempt to digest all that you must accomplish throughout the duration of the course all at once.

Students may also procrastinate with schoolwork because they are not particularly interested in the material. Again, if you approach the material in manageable chunks and approach assignments in manageable steps, you are more likely to successfully negotiate any course, regardless of its subject matter. Also, you might find yourself more interested in the material as a result of this strategy. Give the course, your instructor, and yourself the benefit of the doubt. Look for meaning in your course work; find ways to relate what you are studying to your life and your chosen career.

STAY IN TOUCH AND ASK FOR HELP

Always ask for help when you need it. This piece of advice cannot be stressed enough. If you need help understanding an assignment, ask your instructor for clarification. He or she may have provided students with guidelines for where and how to ask for assistance. Instructors often set up areas within their online courses specifically for this purpose. Do not hesitate to ask questions because you are afraid of appearing dumb. All questions are valid, and it’s very likely that if something is not completely clear to you, some of your classmates also need an answer to your question.

If an area within the course has not been dedicated to student questions, contact your instructor via e-mail. Your instructor will provide all students with an e-mail address on the syllabus, which would be advisable to print a copy for ready reference. If you have a question or concern that you prefer not to share with the class, it also proves helpful to contact your instructor personally via e-mail. Your instructor may ask to schedule a phone call to discuss your concern in greater detail.

Your question or concern may have to do with your program of study. If so, contact the appropriate person or department at your school. Your school may also have a Student Services department that provides assistance with such aspects as writing skills and library access. Familiarize yourself with the services available to you as an online student.

COMMUNICATE CLEARLY

Strive to communicate clearly in your writing. If you find yourself struggling with college writing, contact your instructor, advisor, or campus writing center. Take advantage of all the services offered. You may wish to take a writing refresher course through a local community college. Discuss your options with an advisor or student services representative.

When communicating online, be sure to follow the rules of *netiquette*. You do not have the benefit of visual cues (e.g., body language, facial expressions) or auditory cues (e.g., voice inflection) when communicating online, so it is possible to inadvertently offend a fellow student or instructor with written words. Differences of opinion will and should occur in classroom discussions; however, students can disagree with one another’s viewpoints while demonstrating kindness and respect.

KEEP GOOD RECORDS

Maintain copies of all assignments. Flash or jump drives with at least 2 GB are beneficial due to their portability and storage capacity, and you can purchase them at your nearest office supply store. Store one semester of class work on one flash or jump drive. You can take your drive wherever you go and have ready access to your coursework or important school documents (e.g., program academic plans, transcripts, graduation requirements, credentialing requirements).

Save copies of your e-mail communications with your instructors, advisors, and other institutional departments (e.g., Financial Aid) on your flash or jump drive. Not only will you have ready access to these records, you will eliminate the clutter of paper files. If you use campus, public, or work computers, save documents using your flash or jump drive, not on the computer hard drive. Most students do not realize that documents saved on general computers in public areas are deleted on a daily basis, usually at night. Furthermore, you do not want other people to have access to your private documents.

KNOW YOUR PROGRAM OF STUDY AND THE FACULTY AND STAFF INVOLVED

Do you have a school catalog? Do you truly understand your program of study and how each course fits into that program? Do you know who to contact with questions, concerns, or if you need clarification? Do you have an advisor, and if so, have you spoken with him or her? Bottom-line: Know how to contact those members of your school community who can provide you with support.

It is essential for you to feel connected to your school, especially because you are a virtual student. Don't allow yourself to feel lost in cyberspace. Find ways to connect with your school, your department, and your advisor, as well as the faculty and staff. Develop a sense of community with your peers as well. Online programs often offer designated areas for students and faculty to communicate with one another; look for chat rooms or discussion areas on your school's Web site. Reach out to classmates, and remember that everyone is in the same boat.

BELIEVE IN YOURSELF

Try to keep in mind the reason why you decided to attend this university. What are your goals in life and for your career? Why are you willing to work diligently toward meeting those goals? Trust in your abilities because you can and will succeed.