

STARTING STRONG:

Tips for Becoming a Top Online Student

Education is no longer confined to the classroom. More and more students are taking the learning experience beyond classroom walls, through online courses offered by distance-learning programs. Online learners enjoy the advantages of anytime, anywhere learning — including greater flexibility to balance personal and professional commitments. But with these advantages, come a number of challenges unique to the virtual classroom.

You want to get the most from your online learning experience. Your success as an online student begins well before you log on to that first class. Here are a few practical and proven steps to get your online education off to a strong start.

Tip #1 - Identify Your Support Team

Your school offers a wealth of support resources available to help you before, during, and after your online classes begin. During the enrollment process, you've probably been in contact with your Admissions Advisor. Now's the time to identify and reach out to other critical support staff, including your academic and financial aid advisors, IT support team, and professors.

"It's vitally important to build a strong connection with at least one individual, preferably two or three, who can answer your questions and offer advice," suggests Kristian Olsen, a professional coach who's worked with distance learners at Westwood College Online. Olsen goes on to recommend emailing or calling your support team and introducing yourself.

Take the opportunity to learn more about the role of each staff member that you contact, and ask them what you can do to be more prepared for the beginning of school. If you have any questions or concerns, now's the time to bring them up. Making initial contact, before you find yourself in a stressful situation, helps you establish relationships that will support you during your entire online learning experience.

Once you've identified and contacted your support team, be sure to collect and organize your list of contact names, email addresses, phone numbers, the best time to reach each person. Then stick it to the refrigerator, computer monitor, or other readily accessible place. When you do have a question or need help, remember to allow at least 48 hours for a response.

Tip #2 - Set Up Your Space

Successfully completing an online course takes a lot of personal dedication, and a dedicated space. Setting up the proper physical work area should be one of the first priorities on your checklist of things to get done before class begins.

Give yourself plenty of time to find and set up the ideal spot where you can attend online classes and do your homework — without distractions or interruptions. Organize your space with all the supplies and equipment you'll need to stay productive. You'll also want to stay comfortable, especially after three solid hours of squinting at your computer screen. Make sure your keyboard and chair are ergonomically designed, and your monitor is positioned at a comfortable eye-level. You may even want to look into applications that enlarge the type on your screen.

While you're setting up your space, make a checklist of all the technical requirements that you'll need to satisfy: software, hardware, and Internet connection. Your school's IT department will be able to help you identify and meet these requirements. Also, be sure to have a "Plan B" in the event of technical problems. Know where you will go if your regular Internet connection is down. That way, should your computer crash at a critical time, you'll be prepared.

Tip #3 - Manage Your Time

Along with the proper space and technical requirements, online learning requires substantial self-discipline. You can start strengthening this skill in the few weeks leading up to school. Create a daily schedule and start following it. "Act like you're already in class," recommends distance-learning coach Ernest Courant. "Treat your study time like a real appointment. This will help you condition yourself."

To develop your schedule, begin with a list of your current commitments — to family, work, and community — then build in your online class and study times around them. Be realistic about the time you'll need to dedicate to your studies. Expect to spend two to three hours doing homework for every hour of class. Most classes take about three hours per week, plus homework, for a total of nine to twelve hours. This may sound daunting, but with proper scheduling and discipline it's manageable.

Courant also recommends setting aside some hours in your schedule for personal rejuvenation. "Allow yourself time to go see a movie, play racquetball, whatever you do to relax and unwind." A little downtime will go a long way in keeping you focused and motivated.

Tip #4 - Get To Know Your Online Classroom

It may not have four walls, but your online classroom is a very real environment — one that's probably new to you. Much like touring a physical campus, you'll want to get online and learn your way around your virtual class as soon as possible.

Learn how to navigate and interact with the classroom interface. Familiarize yourself with how it works. If they're available, complete any online tutorials and demos, taking them as seriously as you would a real class. By the time class begins, you'll be ready to get to work instead of spending valuable time finding your way around.

Make sure you also understand what's expected of you in the class: for example, how — and how often — to submit assignments, and when you'll be expected to join online discussions. As you're exploring your online classroom, take notes and jot down your questions, then contact your professor or other support resource for answers.

Distance-learning coach Chris Early adds this useful tip: "Get used to studying on a computer screen. Practice reading online for a few hours every day, right up until the day class starts."

Tip #5 - Understand Your Motivations

Let's imagine that you've contacted your support team, filled out paperwork, prepared your physical space and explored your online classroom. Now give yourself time to explore your own motivations, expectations, and hesitations. Why are you enrolled in this program? What do you want to get out this experience? How will being in school change and improve your life? Write down your answers in a journal. This journal will become a valuable motivational tool to use and reference as you continue your studies.

Even if you've taken traditional classes before, expect your online course to be a much different experience with an entirely different set of challenges. "A lot of new online students come into the online classroom experience thinking this will be easy," explains distance-learning coach Cynthia Brinkman. "Don't underestimate the amount of time and work you'll need to dedicate to this class." Agrees coach Ernest Courant, "Don't think of it as just getting on the computer. You're going to class. Approach it with the same seriousness as you would if you were on campus." Acknowledging the commitment involved with online learning will help you prepare for it.

While recognizing the challenges you'll be facing, don't let them discourage you before class even begins. Distance-learning coach Chris Early advises new online students to prioritize. Which is more important to you: Making high grades, or learning valuable new skills? "Give yourself room to measure success in terms other than grades," suggests Early. "Many new online students put tremendous pressure on themselves, so when they hit a bump in the road, they're disheartened."

Tip #6 - Enlist Your Family, Friends, and Employer

Most distance learners have family members, friends and employers who make demands on their time. Balancing those commitments with school can be a challenging feat. Address this challenge early on, by letting the people around you contribute to — rather than hinder — your success.

Have an honest, open discussion with your spouse, your kids, your friends, your boss. Let them know what to expect from you as you embark on this important journey in your life. Tell them what hours you'll be online, in class and studying. Establish clear boundaries around your school time and study space, and ask your family, friends, and employer to respect these boundaries. Let them know how they can help you reach your goals. Chances are, you'll find they're more than willing to support you.

Distance-learning coach Bobby Hernandez recommends finding a success partner: "Someone to hold you accountable, to push you, and to listen to your frustrations." This person may be a spouse, a partner, a friend, even a professor — as long as it's someone you admire and respect, and whom you don't want to disappoint.

But while you may rely on your success partner to help keep you focused and on-track, Hernandez also stresses the importance of keeping yourself motivated, especially during those weeks leading up to class. "Create excitement for yourself," he recommends. Get your books and start looking through them. Talk about the upcoming class with others. Visualize yourself doing well in the class, learning and growing from the experience. The momentum and energy you generate now will help carry you through the weeks to come.

Tip #7 - Take Care of Last-Minute Details

Many distance learners have only a few days to prepare for their online classes. Use this valuable time to take care of any last-minute details, so you can begin your studies focused and ready. Start by putting together a check-list of what needs to be done before school starts. Do you have all your paperwork completed and submitted? Do you have the right software and hardware in place? Is your Internet connection running fast enough? Do you have your login and password?

Spend some time on your computer testing for glitches. If you encounter any, contact your school's IT department for help in resolving them; most schools will have technical support available during non-business hours, including the weekend.

Take one last tour of your online classroom. Look for a link to an online orientation; many distance learning programs offer one as a way to introduce students to the experience, the classroom and each other. As Week One approaches, be sure to clear at least three hours in your schedule for the first day of school. You'll need the extra time to orient yourself in a live online classroom situation.

Above all else, recommends coach Cynthia Brinkman, "Take this time to acknowledge that you're in a period of transition. Know that for the next two weeks, you're in learning mode. Be patient with yourself."

With time and experience, you'll continue to become a more confident and skilled online learner. You've already taken the first smart steps to becoming a successful student. Now you're ready for the challenges, discoveries, and rewards of the journey ahead. Onward!
