Tips for taking online courses

Taking courses online can be a little like taking courses in a foreign country. Most of us are still learning the norms and expectations of the online environment. Even though the technology is wonderful and exciting, we would never say that this environment is the right learning environment for every student. It works well for some students most of the time. It provides exciting opportunities for people who are constrained by time, place or other factors.

Online courses can work for any student, just as a physical, onsite classroom with face-to-face instruction can work for any student -- but we all know the quality of the "fit" with a particular instructor or a particular class environment varies. Taking an online class requires just as much time and effort as class on campus -- and there are some new twists for most of us.

To see if online classes are right for you, answer these questions:

- Do you like to work independently?
- Are you persistent?
- Do you need convenience and an adjustable schedule?
- Are you comfortable asking for clarification and continuing to ask when you need more information?
- Are you comfortable working at a computer?
- Are you comfortable working primarily with a text-based medium?
- Would you be comfortable contacting your instructor if you had problems with anything in the course?
- Most exams and quizzes release a single question at a time and you cannot return to preview questions once you submit a response. Will this assessment style fit with your approach to exams? [This method can be good practice for online tests you need to take to apply to graduate school!]

If you answered "yes" to most of those questions, then you should do well in the online learning environment. If you hesitated, be certain to keep a very close touch with your progress.

Reading is key. Remember that you won't have all those non-verbal cues that you get in the physical classroom and neither will your instructor. Also, your instructor's role will be much less that of the distributor of information, and much more that of a guide or resource for you in exploring an area of knowledge. Almost all your information will come in the form of words. Words on the screen help the instructor "see" you much more clearly. The teaching style used in online courses may be different from the traditional college model. Taking a class online means you won't be sitting quietly in the classroom; participation is even more essential.
**Communication is key.** As always, effective communication is critical to success. It's even more important in the online environment because your instructor can't see your frown, or hear the question in your voice. Here, you'll be responsible for initiating more contact, for being persistent and vocal when you don't understand something. Your instructor wants to help -- please write your question and send it along, express your confusion, your concern, and be direct! You will save a lot of time, and both you and your instructor will know better what you intend. Be sure and ask about anything and everything that has to do with course content, course procedure and evaluation.

**Do's and Don’ts**

- Many courses begin with an orientation to the course and to the learning management system that is in use. Pay close attention to the information in the orientation.

- Take time to review all the help files available. Put the number to the Help Desk in your phone so that it is easy to get help if you have technological issues.

- Don't read/listen to the material just once. Multiple reading, line-by-line readings are among the keys to understanding.

- Spend some time just navigating your way through the class and making sure you can figure out what the buttons are for. MSU uses D2L as its Learning Management System.

- Don’t expect too much, too soon. Study and then re-study.

- Manage your time. You will find that your time management skills will be critical in an online class. Why? It is very easy to spend either far too little time, or far too much time on the class. Set designated blocks of time to work on the class. This will help you stay up with the assignments and with the interaction required in most online classes.

- Download or print out pages for reference and review away from the computer. Make sure you have the Distance Learning Help number available outside your computer, too!

- Set priorities and pay close attention to what your instructor says about priorities.

- Try hard to solve problems independently before you ask for help. Many courses have FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) to help with questions that may come up late at night!

- Don't give up.

**Rules of the Road**
Participate. In the online environment, it's not enough to show up! We need to hear your voice to feel your presence, and we especially need your comments. Your contributions add to the information, the shared learning, and the sense of community in each class.

Be persistent. If you run into any difficulties, don't wait! Send a note immediately to the instructor of the course listed on the syllabus. Most problems are easily solved, but we have to hear from you before we can help. Check the syllabus to find out how to communicate with your instructor. Many use the D2L private area for discussions and others use e-mail.

Share tips, helps, and questions. For many students, taking online courses is a new frontier. There are no dumb questions, and even if you think your solution is obvious, please share it! Someone in the class will appreciate it.

Think before you push the Send button. Did you say just what you meant? How will the person on the other end read the words? While you can't anticipate all reactions, do read over what you've written before you send it. Make sure that you follow the rules for online etiquette.

Be patient. As much as your instructor will try to be prompt in answering questions, please do not expect instantaneous responses to your queries. Learn how to set break points in your study, so that you can return exactly to the point when your question is answered. Most instructors respond in 24 hours (Mon-Fri). Be patient with yourself as well; give the material a chance to soak in.

Practice academic integrity. Plagiarism, cheating and other violations of ethical student behavior are serious actions in a learning community. Visit our MSU Ombudsperson’s site for useful information. “Academic integrity is the foundation of university success. Learning how to express original ideas, cite sources, work independently, and report results accurately and honestly are skills that carry students beyond their academic career. Academic dishonesty not only cheats the student of valuable learning experiences, but can result in a failing grade on assignments, a failing grade in a course, or even expulsion from the university for the student.” https://www.msu.edu/~ombud/academic-integrity

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