Tips for Being a Successful Online Learner

Online students have the advantage of being able to study at their own pace – and in their location of choice. No matter how convenient or flexible online learning is, however, taking an online course takes time and commitment. In addition to the study skills necessary to be a successful college student, you’ll also need the following skills to be a successful online college student:

**Self Motivated**—Most of online learning happens on your own schedule. You’ll need to be motivated to complete activities on schedule and initiate the communication required to be successful. You’ll be responsible for organizing your study space and structuring your time to meet deadlines and finish your online course. You will need to plan ahead and stick to your plan because it can be really easy as an online learner to put off doing work.

**TOP TIP:** When you are studying online it is really easy to get caught up in surfing the Internet, checking social media or gaming. Instead, use these as time-limited study breaks to reward yourself for completing a portion of your online course work.

**Technical Skills**—Along with having access to a computer and not being overwhelmed by typing, online learners should be comfortable with internet browsing and searching, email, sending and reading attachments, word processing and sometimes installing software plug-ins (this is typically simple but sometimes an intimidating task).

**TOP TIP:** Familiarize yourself with the recommended minimum computer requirements for your course. If you don’t have access to a computer, locate the computers available for you to use on your campus.

**Reading Skills**—Reading can play a large part in any class – especially an online course where you will be reading posts from your professor as well as your classmates in addition to the course material. The ability to read and comprehend subject matter is critical to your online success. Many students find that taking an online course helps them improve their communication skills because working with the written word allows them to clarify thinking and responses to assignments, emails and postings from others.

**TOP TIP:** It’s easier to read when you avoid distractions so find a quiet place and time for reading. When you come across material that you don’t understand, re-read it by breaking it into smaller sections and make notes in your own words. Take short breaks when concentrating becomes difficult.
**Written Communication**—In most cases writing is the primary method of communication in online classes so you should be at ease with writing to express your thoughts, share ideas and ask questions.

**TOP TIP:** Think through your response before posting. It helps to write out your thoughts in a word processing program (like Microsoft Word) first. Re-read to make sure what you wrote makes sense and is grammatically correct. When you are ready, cut and paste from MS Word into Blackboard and post your response.

**Study Regularly**—Like a tradition course, you’ll need to set aside adequate time for studying. You may discover that you need to be online frequently to complete assignments or communicate with classmates and your professor. You can plan to spend at least as much time working on assignments and studying as you would with a traditional face-to-face course. However, you will be setting your own pace in most instances.

**TOP TIP:** Figure out at the start of your course when your assignments are due and when you are required to participate in activities (for instance, do you have mandatory weekly discussion board postings?). Schedule your online course work directly into your weekly calendar.

**Social Interaction**—Interaction with professors and classmates in online learning is an integral part of the learning experience. Absent is the in-person contact – being able to see facial expressions, hear reactions and to speak directly with one another. However, online learning doesn’t mean you are learning alone. You help build a learning community through your online participation.

**TOP TIP:** Be a positive contributor to your online classroom. For instance:
- Treat everyone in your class as you would like to be treated.
- Refrain from using acronyms or shortened words as not everyone may understand what it means.
- Do not use all caps in a posting as it commonly indicates that you are yelling (even if you don’t mean to).
- Avoid using sarcasm in postings as it may not be clear to all readers.

**Ask questions when you need to**—If you typically don’t hesitate to seek help when you need it, you’ll do fine. Since you’ll be in an online environment, it’s important to let your professor and classmates know when you need help. Remember that they won’t be able to see your looks of doubt, confusion or other body language to tell when things aren’t going well.

**TOP TIP:** Keep in touch with your professor. If you do fall behind, let him/her know immediately and ask for assistance in planning how you will catch up.