

SUCCEEDING IN ONLINE COURSES

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The perks of taking online courses are numerous. They offer additional flexibility for busy students, especially for those balancing school with work and family, as well as those taking a course from a remote location. Plus, many courses let you work comfortably at your own direction.

If you've never taken one before, you may not know what to expect. How do online courses work? Are online courses harder? What are some tips for taking online courses? Here are some points to consider before embarking on your online learning journey, and to succeed if you decide to take that route.

Are Online Courses for You? What you should consider beforehand

1. Online courses are not the 'easy' route

If you're looking for less work, online courses are not the answer. While it's true that they offer you the flexibility to learn in your own time and space, that doesn't change the amount of work you put in. You still have the same amount of work—just without the formal classroom setting.

2. Online courses require you to be disciplined and self-directed

The flexibility of online courses can be extremely helpful to busy students, but that same freedom also creates additional pressures. The ball is in your court—meaning it's up to you to avoid distractions and keep yourself on track. Many students underestimate the amount of time they'll spend studying for class. You should expect online courses to take about the same amount of time as traditional courses, and sometimes even more, as you have to "teach yourself" the subject and still submit projects within specific deadlines.

3. Confirm technical requirements

Find out what the technical requirements are. Make sure before the course starts that your computer will work with all the online tools, and that you know how to navigate them so that you don't have to spend time during the course, trying to figure out the technology.

4. Don't think you are exempt from group projects

Just because your course is online doesn't mean that you'll be exempt from group projects. This staple of the traditional classroom is becoming easier and easier for distance learners to tackle too. Although collaborative tools like Google Documents are making it easier for groups to work together, it may be challenging to work with a group of people remotely.

5. Highly developed written skills are a must

The bulk of interactions with instructors and classmates are written in online courses. This means you will need to be able to articulate your thoughts and questions, which can be challenging when having difficulty with course content.

Making a Plan for Success

1. Be realistic about your expectations

Before you pay for an online course, you should be realistic about your ability to manage your time and to follow a structured schedule for the course. Ensure that you have enough time to dedicate to studying, finishing your assignments, and passing the class, as well that you have enough academic foundations to take the course. This is particularly needed if the course is a math or quantitative one, e.g. ACC100, FIN401, etc.

2. Carefully read course requirements and the syllabus

Your course outline, also known as the syllabus, is a road map for the term and contains valuable information to succeed, such as learning objectives, assignments, methods of evaluation, textbook names, topic sequences, deadlines and the professor's contact information and office hours.

3. Manage your time wisely and stay organized

Creating a consistent study schedule, as well as managing deadlines is a must for distance education. For detailed tips and resources on this, please review the ASC *Managing your Time* tip sheet.

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Arrange a dedicated workspace where you can consistently study without distractions. This way your brain will get used to it and it will put you into working mode faster than if you pick up a different location every time.

Also, if you have children at home, arrange childcare before the course begins. It can be very difficult to focus on online coursework if you are caring for children at the same time. Arrange for consistent childcare during the times you know you will be doing coursework and studying.

4. Seek in-person support on campus

Ryerson and TRSM have a myriad of resources to make sure you are fully supported. Make sure to get the appropriate support in person, so that you can keep up with course content demands.

TRSM offers free individual tutoring for courses, via the Academic Success Centre (ASC), where you can also consult with a Peer Academic Coach (PAC) or the Learning Strategist. They can demonstrate how to read your textbooks and provide you with strategies to help you study and retain information for your quizzes. Additionally, Student Learning Support, at the Student Learning Centre, can help you with your liberals and courses that require presentations and written assignments.

Communicating Appropriately

1. Keep in touch with your Professor

Maintain your relationship with your professor throughout the course by communicating with them about assignments and exams. Do not hesitate to reach out to the professor by email if you are struggling to understand a class concept or if you have questions. Make sure to attend their office hours if available. Attending office hours can give you valuable time to better understand your class content and your professor's expectations, and can have a big impact on your academic success.

Preferably, visit early in the semester, not a few days before the exam. Visiting early and often rather than waiting until the last minute will enable you to benefit more from office hours, better understand content, and prepare better for exams.

2. Participate in online discussions

Posts on a discussion board often count as participation marks and are an important part of your grade. Consistently post your responses or assignments to the discussion board on time and make meaningful additions to the discussion. Class discussions are also a great way to connect with your online classmates.

3. Reach out to other online students; don't isolate yourself!

Online learning can feel isolating, thus connecting with other online learners can foster a sense of community. If you find that you can meet with another online classmate in person, take this opportunity to get to know them and arrange for a group study session.

References

This article was adapted from the following resources:

- Ericksen, K. (2017, December 4). What I wish someone told me before taking online classes. Retrieved from: <https://www.rasmussen.edu/student-experience/college-life/what-i-wish-someone-told-me-before-taking-online-classes/>
- Taylor, C. (2019, March 29). How to do well in an online college course. Retrieved from: <https://www.wikihow.com/Do-Well-in-an-Online-College-Course#references>