What Makes a Successful Online Learner?

Two key advantages of online learning are flexibility and convenience. But online learning is a lot more challenging than it may seem.

Are you considering taking some or all of your courses online? Good for you!

But first, make sure you're ready to succeed. Online learning can sound so wonderful that some students start with an unrealistic vision. In reality, online courses require just as much, if not more, time and energy as traditional classroom courses. It also requires specific computer skills and learning strategies in order to succeed.

To see if you're ready, see how many items of the following skills you have:

1. Persistence

Persistence is perhaps the biggest key to success in online learning. Students who succeed are those who are willing to tolerate technical problems, seek help when needed, work daily on every class, and persist through challenges.

When you run into a challenge, keep trying and ask for help.

Set up a manageable study schedule for yourself and stick to it. Students who succeed are those who log in and make progress every day. This is especially important after the novelty of going to school online starts to wear off!

2. Effective Time-Management Skills

You must be able to manage your time well. Most courses are not taught in real time. There are no set times for classes.

This flexibility is one of the great benefits of online learning. It can also be a drawback for a student who procrastinates, is unable to stick to a routine study schedule, or is not able to complete assignments without daily reminders from a teacher.

Effective time-management skills don't just happen. They have to be learned. Once you do, they will benefit you throughout your life. Follow the tips below to develop yours:

Review the syllabus for each of your courses. Develop a long-term plan for completing your major assignments.

Make a daily "To Do" list. Have fun checking things off the list as you complete them.

It takes time to develop good habits, but you'll gain satisfaction from being well-organized and accomplishing your tasks.

3. Effective and Appropriate Communication Skills

Communication skills are vital in online learning because students must seek help when they need it. Teachers are willing to help students, but they are unable to pick up on non-verbal cues, such as a look of confusion on a student's face. Follow these tips:

Use the tools provided by the school to communicate with your teachers. Many online schools and programs provide several ways for students and/or parents to communicate with teachers and staff. These might include e-mail, discussion groups, chat room office hours, cell phones, and even text messaging. Teachers and staff want to help you to succeed in your classes and will answer your questions. It may feel awkward to talk with your teachers this way, but don't worry. If your teacher has chat room or cell phone office hours, don't be shy about using those tools to communicate with your teacher.

Use appropriate style and language for school. When communicating with teachers and other staff, you should write in full, grammatically correct sentences and with a respectful tone. Many students are used to a very informal style of writing in chat rooms, blogs, text messages, and so forth.

Because of the distance, it's tempting for some students to say things out of anger or frustration that they would never say to a teacher in person. Online teachers are professionals. Treat them with respect and courtesy.

4. Basic Technical Skills

Online learners need basic technical skills to succeed. These include the ability to create new documents, use a word processing program, navigate the Internet, and download software.

Most online schools have new student orientation programs. These teach students how to use the school's learning management system and other online tools, but they typically don't cover the basics.

If you lack basic computer skills, you may want to find an online tutorial such as the one available through The Library Network (http://tech.tln.lib.mi.us/tutor/welcome.htm).

You'll also want to check the online school's main website for their hardware and software requirements. Make sure your own computer meets those requirements.

5. Reading and Writing Skills

Reading and writing are the main ways you'll communicate in an online class. Although some hard copies of textbooks might be required, you should be comfortable reading a lot of documents on a computer screen and able to type.

Some tests and quizzes have multiple choice questions, but many of your assignments will involve writing short or long answers.

If you type less than 25-30 words per minute, it may be worth completing a typing software program before beginning online classes.

6. Motivation and Independence

To be successful, an online student has to want to succeed. Online learning requires independence, internal motivation, responsibility, and a certain level of maturity.

Have you given some thought to your own personal reasons for attending school?

Are you determined and self-motivated to succeed in school?

There are many worthwhile reasons to work hard in school. You might want a greater level of personal satisfaction with your future career. Or perhaps it's personal pride in your accomplishments. Or maybe you are seeking a wider range of opportunities available to you with higher education or a higher income.

7. A Good Study Environment

Another critical component of academic success is a good study environment.

Get some peace and quiet. You will need a quiet place to work without distractions from things like television, family, or roommates.

Avoid games. Consider uninstalling any computer games to avoid temptation. Or keep the games on a different computer in the house.

Turn off your cell phone. Let friends and family members know the hours that you will be "at" school.

Beware surfing the black hole of the Internet. It is easy to lose track of the time as you wander from site to site.

Consider ergonomics. Adjust the height of your chair, keyboard, and screen so that you are comfortable. Forearms and thighs should be level and parallel to the floor. Wrists should not be bent while typing.

Set up good lighting and comfortable seating. Lighting in the room should be at least as bright as the computer screen to avoid eye strain.

Source: Minnesota Online High School (http://www.mnohs.org/) and Minnesota Department of Education (http://education.state.mn.us/mde/index.html)

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